

Faith in Birds

Marcus Terrell Smith

From set *Dominaria United*

17. 08. 2022

The leonin's fur was the color of sunset over the Great Desert—tawny with winding stripes of chestnut—and it was smooth and pleasant to the touch. The fascia underneath was warm, very warm, which meant the life growing just beneath the skin was healthy and strong. Niambi caressed it with knowing, continuing her delicate examination of the mother-to-be's pregnant belly. Then, she felt a kick.

"Oh, that was a strong one," she exclaimed, her attentive human eyes lifting to meet her patient's feline ones.

The expecting mother's whiskers quivered happily at the declaration, and the nostrils of her pink tiger nose flared. Her name was Pallar.

"Does that mean it's a boy?" Pallar asked, her jowls stretching to a wide simper, exposing a gleaming row of white canines.

"Hm. Could be." Niambi replied coolly. She felt another kick. They both did. Even harder this time. "But girls have a bit more tenacity." She winked, and the two of them laughed. "The child will be here any day now. Have you settled on a name yet?"

Pallar shook her head bashfully. Niambi gave her belly a brush of her hand.

"My daughter was a kicker, too," said Niambi. "Kequia. It means 'fighter.' That's what she was before she was born—a fighter. She was unhappy being stuck in such a tight space. When she arrived, *early* I will add, she gave such a stretch I thought she was ready to run down the street. I knew right then, if she ever put her mind to something, she could never be held back."

Pallar smiled. "Her mother's child."

As Pallar spoke, she placed her hand on Niambi's and gave it a small squeeze. Her palm was rough—the tiger pads that covered it were calloused from a life spent outdoors, a nomadic existence, as the many refugees had—but her five nimble digits, humanlike, curled delicately. Her sharp claws remained retracted. It was a sign of deep gratitude.

"You have been such a friend to the Efravan," Pallar began softly, "when so many of your kind have not. You bring us food and medicines. Provide healing to our wounds. Give us words of hope that we will soon be safe behind the city walls. For that, we are so very grateful." She paused a moment, as her voice began to quiver with emotion. Then, she asked, "Are you not afraid the magistrate will shun you along with us outsiders?"

Outsiders, Niambi repeated in her mind. The word carried such negative connotation. The Efravan had been wandering the Great Desert for weeks, hoping to escape the conflicts spreading throughout their homeland. The southern nations were at war, and they sought to escape the violence and the bloodshed. The aggressions were sparked by fears of invasion from an evil once thought to have been expelled from Dominaria—the Phyrexians. These outsiders were just trying to survive.

Niambi smiled at Pallar's question, then turned her hand over to take it fully in hers. She held it tenderly, allowing the thumb to gently comb over her soft fur. Her other hand remained on Pallar's swollen belly, as she stared into the dark, amber-ringed well of Pallar's watering eyes.

"There is no need to worry about me," she replied simply, but paused a moment as if processing a sad thought. Then, she continued, "I still hold sway with him. I still have his ear." Niambi said the words with fervency, trying to convince herself that this were still true. He had not called for her in three days now.

"Is it because you can read dreams?"

Niambi chuckled softly at the oversimplified notion and to mask her apprehension. "Well, not so much *read*," she replied. "I find the patterns—connections—hidden within them that become clear in time. Clarity calms the troubled heart. And in these times of trouble, we all need clarity."

Pallar's eyes were wide, quivering with tears that beckoned for more.

"For instance, in a recent dream, I saw a flock of birds searching for a home over a vast ocean. They were exhausted, having flown for days with no rest until they came upon an island. And on that island was a single tree. They were so thankful to have found a place to rest, but when they came to land on it, they saw it was sick with disease. Deadly insects were ravaging its bark and withering its fruit. With nowhere else to go, all hope seemed lost. But then the smallest of the flock dove into the bevy of branches, where it disappeared."

"And what happened?" asked Pallar in a whisper.

"Several followed the little bird, and they found it eating the insects!" Niambi gave a small laugh. "They all followed suit, devouring every bug until the tree was clear. Now the fruit could grow, and the tree could bloom."

"What does it mean?"

"The birds are you, and this city is the tree. You are meant to be here because there is something incredible within you."

"Really?" asked Pallar, a hopeful gleam in her eye. "What do we have in us?"

"Well, I am still working through the pattern. But eventually all eyes will be open to the truth."

Pallar's gaze left Niambi's.

"*Eventually*," Pallar muttered with disappointment, as she knew, like Niambi, that time was of the essence. A dangerous, ancient enemy was steadily approaching from over the horizon, one that would destroy anyone and everyone she held dear if they could not get behind the city walls.

Niambi gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. "*Eventually* is taking a bit longer than expected but "

"We are ready," came a stern voice from behind them.

Niambi turned over her shoulder and Pallar sat up from her relaxed position on her cot to behold a tall figure standing in the doorway of Pallar's makeshift tent. Against the setting sun, the cat ears and pronounced whiskers gave the newcomer away as an Efravan, but more than that, the muscular build and suit of armor showed them to be a strong warrior among the tribe. Niambi knew her. The wilderness had hardened her, made her single-minded. She was fiercely loyal to her people, and their safety was paramount. She stepped forward into the tent, and the shadows on her tough face fell away, exposing the wear of battle.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Zar Ojanen," said Niambi, standing and bowing her head in respect.



Art by: Justine Cruz

“Please, Niambi,” Pallar groaned, her mood lifting instantly with her arrival, “we are past pleasantries. You are our family now.”

“Even still, history looks kindly on descendants of the great Jaeger and Jedit Ojanen, true champions of Jamuraa.” Niambi replied with a smile. “Our greatest generals have studied their paths. They forever deserve our deference.”

Zar moved forward and placed her hands warmly on her shoulders. “And thanks to you, his legacy will be preserved,” she said.

“Sister,” Pallar whispered, beckoning her to come.

Zar hurried past Niambi and knelt beside Pallar, falling into her open arms. With the utmost tenderness, the two touched their foreheads together and purred into one another. They were two inseparable siblings who had endured so many hardships and heartbreaks, the most painful of which came directly from the magistrate.

Three days prior, Niambi held audience with him and the Council of Voices in the Great Chamber to protest a decree handed down to the people of Femeref that forbade them from donating food, medical aid, or the daily necessities one might need to survive in the harsh desert to the Efravan caravan.

The Council was comprised of ten people who sat in three levels above the ground in the circular great hall, each seat separated by an ivory pillar. Four of them sat on the first level, three were on the second, two on the first, and across from them, seated upon a raised, embroidered throne of sorts, a hard-faced man of a ripe age and cloudy eyes, was Sidar Teshunda. Sidar was the title given to him, as he was one of the highest-ranking generals and military tacticians in Femeref’s history. His brilliance in battle came from studying ancient wars and battles throughout Jamuraa, and he held a deep reverence for leaders who overcame insurmountable odds.

Scholars, judicial and religious leaders, economists, and army generals, both of human and dwarven birth, made up the Council of Voices. Each member was draped in flowing robes of orange, white, and gold, with textured hoods draping their shoulders. Despite the occasional squabble over the allocation

of certain resources and methods for expansion, the group consorted harmoniously, especially on the issue of the Efravan caravan.

A throat cleared loudly, calling for attention.

“When their supplies run out,” began one of the councilors, a hint of arrogance in her voice, “and they understand that we will not replenish them, these tribes will do what they have done for years—just move on.”

“How is that, Councilor Gbega?” Niambi asked the short-haired, small-faced woman seated at the center of the second level. “How will they *move on* without water or food? There are those who are old and infirm. Pregnant mothers, too.”

Another figure leaned forward from a rather blithe, comfortable position—his hands clasped over his large belly. His name was Councilor Jabras, and he joined the dialogue.

“In the midst of conflict, dear woman, tough decisions must be made,” he asserted. “We are unified on ours.”

“But there is no conflict. We have one common enemy “

“The Phyrexian machine,” Jabras exclaimed, nodding vigorously. There came a fearful grumble from the other Council members.

Its awakening was felt three weeks ago, as an earthquake in the ground. Femeref scouts returned to the city in a panic with reports that a terrifying mechanical creature of gargantuan size and strength had emerged from beneath the sand, and it was steadily making its way to Femeref.



Art by: Marc Simonetti

It was on a mission of destruction, and it would reach the walls in just a few days’ time.

“We are all on the same side,” Niambi announced to the members.

“Who is to say *that* is the case?” The third opposing voice, a seasoned one, resonated clearly through the rotunda, although the one who spoke, a man of rough, dark skin and white, braided hair, had his face buried in a large book. The haughtiness in his tone came through just as clear.

Niambi stared up at the man, who was seated in the highest row. She almost had to squint to make him out. Though the sunlight was beaming through the many skylights spanning the ceiling, it was blocked by his head, which cast his face in shadow. But several thin, raised scars, laid vertical on his forehead, running into his braids, took Niambi's eye; he was one of the few who kept the more superstitious traditions of the ancients.

"I can," Niambi replied firmly, refusing to bend to his airs.

"You?" the councilman stung, nonchalantly turning another page in his book. "The outsiders have only been here two weeks now. There's no way to know what they're truly capable of."

"I apologize," Niambi said sharply, her jaw tightening and eyes narrowing, "but I do not believe I have met you before."

"Well, public servants, like yourself, are seldom invited to High Council meetings," the councilman replied, ignoring Niambi's bristles. "Speakers are relegated to their provinces, as you always have been, but our most honorable magistrate, *for some uncertain reason*, urged us to hear your complaint."

"To which I, and the *outsiders*, very much appreciate," Niambi fired back with a thin smile.

"She is a friend and loyal citizen of Femeref," announced Teshunda heartily. His voice was husky and his phrases terminated with a croak. "I take her counsel very seriously. It has been a great help over these many years, councilman"

"Councilman?" Niambi urged, almost demanding to know his name.

"Awateh." The man slammed his book closed with a sound that echoed through the hall as he spoke. "Grand Historian of Femeref."

A tense silence fell over the room, as the historian and Niambi eyed one another. His face was now exposed, and he appeared somewhat familiar. He was nearly the same age as the magistrate; the wrinkled skin about the eyes was similar to his. It was the long, shaggy white beard, however, that struck a chord in her. She had only seen the man up close once—at a burial ceremony for the previous magistrate. His beard was black then. Niambi was a novice-in-training at the time and shadowing a speaker for the ceremony. Speakers played an integral role in reciting the rights and rituals of the dead, ensuring the spirits of those who had passed on were blessed properly and solace was brought to their loved ones. Those who recorded the success of the ceremony, ensuring the rights were upheld, were the historians. Awateh was at that ceremony, tediously documenting what had transpired there.

Teshunda cleared his throat, bringing Niambi's focus back to him and severing the line of scrutiny between Niambi and the historian. Then, he spoke, "Historian Awateh brought some disturbing information about the Efravan to my attention."

"Oh?" Niambi replied, turning over her shoulder to meet the magistrate's gaze.

"The Efravan tribes have had a rather sordid past I'm told," he went on. "They were aligned with Yawgmooth at one time and may be still." Niambi almost let out a laugh at the absurdity of the remark. Teshunda continued, "Believe me, I had the same response: how could a people who had their homelands destroyed by that vile being and his decrepit offspring be consorts with evil?" He paused to take a breath, then, "The answer" His eyes motioned to the historian.

"They just don't know it yet," said Awateh with a smile, rising to his feet.

"I don't—understand," said Niambi, appalled that he was entertaining the notion.

"Yawgmooth's descendants are many, and they delight in the torture of our world's varied creatures," Awateh began. "Especially those on the outskirts—those of the scattered tribes of Jamuraa. These tribes,

you see, have little holding them together; no leader and no homeland to tie themselves to, so it can be assured “

“Assumed “

“*Assured* that many a tribesmen would have wandered off alone far from the little safety of the group. These individuals would indeed find themselves in such precarious situations, captured in a deadly Phyrexian hold. Their bodies would then be exploited; their innards replaced by such wicked machinery.”

“Yawgmoth is dead,” asserted Niambi. “Basing your decisions on old fears is folly “

“His legacy lives on nonetheless,” Awateh replied. He widened his address to the rest of the Council. “Who’s to say one of these Efravan, whom you so ardently protect, is not a possessed wanderer who later rejoined the cat tribe? Who’s to say there aren’t ten of these among them? Twenty? A hundred even?”

“You would condemn hundreds for fear of the *possibility* that one or two among them are sleeper agents? We can root them out *after* the Efravans are safe.” Niambi retorted.

“Not if their minds have been wiped,” spoke Gbega. “I’ve been told by numerous, completely credible sources that the enemy can steal your memories. You wouldn’t know if you were infected until it was too late!”

“The Phyrexians!” Jabras exclaimed. The phrase was again followed by grumbles of the other Council members, which were gradually growing into angry shouts. They were indeed unified in their rebuke. Awateh continued to stoke the fire.

“There are Phyrexians out there, hiding in plain sight behind the wall!” he seethed. “And they wear the skin of cats!”

“Sleeper agents, Niambi,” added Teshunda, slowly standing to his feet, gripping his embroidered, wooden cane. He too had been stirred by Awateh’s words. “We cannot take the risk!”

Niambi stared back to the magistrate, outraged. “You are all basing your prejudice on rumor and hearsay?!”

“Of all people, you should know hearsay is subjective, daughter of Teferi,” hissed Awateh. “We speak truth.” Niambi gritted her teeth at the attack.

Jabras and Gbega both sprang to their feet. “The—Phyrexians!”

“WILL YOU SHUT UP!” Niambi shouted. Her voice boomed with the strike of thirty drums at once. It was a power she, as a Speaker, had learned to call upon when addressing large crowds in open spaces. But these were confined quarters, which made the command that more intense. The room immediately fell silent.

Niambi looked about the Council, at their angry, scrunched faces. Her eyes climbed the rows until they met an enormous ivory bust of Asmira, the Holy Avenger, affixed to the largest pillar. She was a prophet whose wisdom and guidance had saved the city from destruction in the Mirage War, when the wizard Kaervek tried to conquer Northern Jamuraa. The bust was adorned with a bejeweled hood and royal head-dressing, surrounded by a halo of golden spears. The depiction was breathtaking, as the artist had captured her legendary beauty and fierceness perfectly. Her eyes looked down upon Niambi standing in the middle of that room, amid so much aggression, and they seemed to smile with approval, urging her to continue the fight.

Niambi rushed to the foot of the magistrate's seat, falling to one knee. "Magistrate *Teshunda*, please do not be swayed by so much fear! I beg you! Come see the Efravan! Talk to them!"

"How dare you—how dare you speak to the Council of Voices in that way!" shouted another member of the Council suddenly.

"She—she must be removed, magistrate!" asserted a second. "Have her removed now!"

The full Council erupted in protest to Niambi's presence, every member stomping their feet and shaking their fists.

Niambi leaned into Teshunda, aiming her words directly at his heart. "Remember your dream? The birds. The tree. The pattern is getting clearer. We cannot be on the wrong side of it"

Teshunda raised his hand, silencing her and the irate councilmembers. He took a long moment to consider her before he spoke. "The Council of Voices is united," he said with a forceful tone. "Our decision to protect this city and rebuke those who cluster outside our walls is final and for the greater good."

"Teshunda, please don't!" Niambi pleaded.

"Guards!" Teshunda averted his eyes as Niambi tried to meet them. "Escort our Esteemed Speaker out. We have other matters to attend to."

"Nothing is more pressing than this!"

"Out!" Teshunda shouted, driving Niambi back on her heels.

"We made great progress today," said Zar with pride, bringing Niambi back to the present. "The tunnel to the abandoned mine is complete."

"Good news," Niambi replied softly, although with a slight reluctance. "But it is my hope the Council will finally realize their error, and we will not have to go that route."

"It is easier to ask forgiveness than permission," she quickly responded. Zar spoke simply and pointedly, never wasting a breath. Her eyes narrowed, as he looked upon Pallar's belly. "Especially when there are so many lives on the line."

Niambi nodded, hearing her urgency and understanding it. A large part of her was afraid for them and what would happen next—afraid the Phyrexians would murder and devour them; and even more afraid the Council's forces would stop them from making it to the safe place—an abandoned gold mine—she had found for them beyond the wall. The latter was something she dreaded to risk.

"I have told the caravan to prepare," Zar went on with a determined vigor. "Only take what we can carry. When night falls and the first stars shine, we will move."

"That is the plan," Niambi affirmed.

"And your husband?"

"Denik has assured me that every warrior has been called to the walls to defend the city. There will be no patrols where we are taking you. He's there now, setting the rest of your stores of food, wood, water" She paused a moment.

"What is it, Niambi?" asked Pallar.

Niambi took a breath, then spoke: "I want to meet with the magistrate one last time." Zar's eyes widened with anger and surprise. "Alone this time. I'm sure *I believe* speaking with him, sitting down with him, without *certain* voices present, will change his mind"

“You have tried your best to advocate for us too many times already!” Zar shot back at her, rising to her feet. “The Phyrexian machine will be here at tomorrow’s sunrise!”

“Exactly why I must try again while there is still time. The punishment you face if we are found out will be severe.”

“The Efravan have faced far worse and survived!”

“I know. But I refuse to accept that you—any of you—could be put in prison, your sister left to give birth in a dungeon—without exhausting every effort “

“Phyrexian scum!” came a sudden, distant shout, cutting through their dialogue. It was followed by a bout of laughter—the laughter of several men. Neither Niambi, Zar, or Pallar had to exit to know who was firing the curses. It was the soldiers on the wall. “You’ll die before you ever enter this city!”

Then, the loud weeping of several elderly Efravan women slowly passing the tent took their attention. Niambi turned her head slightly over her shoulder in acknowledgment, allowing the women’s cries to fulfill their full arc. Her heart broke for them.

“We will not wait!” Zar roared with frustration, baring her sharp teeth. Her tail whipped the air. “They think we are monsters, Niambi!”

Unbeknownst to her and Pallar both, the palms of Niambi’s hands began to take on a soft glow, turning the skin from a light blush to a quiet, simmering saffron. The eyes of Asmira flashed in Niambi’s mind.

“The magistrate will see reason,” Niambi pushed. “He will see truth.”

Pallar, who had been laying on her back on a small grass cot, shifted with extreme uncertainty.

“But will he accept it?” she asked.

Niambi crossed over to her and placed her glowing hands on her belly. “It is by instinct and faith my people have survived as well,” she began. “Since the disappearance of Zhalfir, our ancestors have instilled a nature of wariness in us—an unspoken vigilance to maintain our way of life against the unknown. That is true. But we have not forgotten that hundreds of years before—when Kaervek sought to destroy us all—*faith* in Asmira, our great prophet, who interpreted the visions and dreams of my father, who thought *outside* of what was deemed the only path forward, brought us victory and life. Faith saved us then, and it will save you now.”

“Your hands,” Pallar whispered, the glaze of worry slowly melting from her eyes, “they feel like the sun.” The baby gave another kick but allowed its paw to remain outstretched, to linger in the warmth of Niambi’s hand.

“Fear,” Niambi continued, “is like an icy wind that can turn the kindest heart cold. The magistrate is afraid of what he does not know, but a warm touch from a trusted friend can melt the ice away.”

“Asmira.” Pallar’s eyes, brimming with tears, were now back on Niambi. Hope was burning in them. “We know the stories. You’re like her, aren’t you? You’re the one we must put our faith in.”

Pallar turned to her sister who still had her back to both. Her fists were clenched tight, and he quaked with frustration.

“Sister,” she said gently. “Let her try one more time.”

The simple sound of Pallar’s voice seemed to calm her. Her shoulders settled.

“You have till the moon is at its highest point in the sky,” she said with a grumble. “Then we go.”

Niambi immediately set off. She arrived at the magistrate’s home just as the sun was beginning to set. It was a massive structure with a tile roof, surrounded by orchards and gardens of blooming acacia trees.

The guards standing outside knew her, she had been to his villa many times for dream interpretation, and they greeted her with a simple nod, which she exchanged.

However, as she went to pass them, they crossed their spears in her path.

“What are you doing?” Niambi asked.

“We are under attack, Esteemed Speaker,” the tallest of the two soldiers spoke. “We suggest you return to your home for your safety.”

“I will be only a moment,” Niambi responded. “I come with new—dire news—about the Phyrexian machine approaching. He is expecting me.”

“Apologies,” spoke the second. “There is no admittance into the estate. We have orders.”

“Orders.” Niambi began but halted her speech for half a moment, an idea forming. The eyes of the soldiers did not appear hardened; their hearts were not immovable stones. They just needed some convincing. She shifted her focus back to the tall one.

“Your name is Esbo, is it not?”

“It is,” Esbo replied.

“Understand, I have not come here only for the sake of the magistrate but out of concern for the subjects of this house—you, in particular.”

“Me?” Esbo asked with fearful curiosity.

Niambi nodded back at him. “Yes—you and your role in the battle to save our city.” Her hands had begun to glow. “You see, I was plagued by such terrible dreams last night: I saw a doe trapped in a bed of mud. She called desperately to the fawn she was meant to protect to stay away, promising she would soon be free, and they could leave together. With each step she took, she sank deeper into the quagmire, her window of escape closing—not an escape from the earth meant to swallow her, but from an enormous beast that approached from the shadows. The fawn jumped about the perimeter of the muddy patch, unsure of what to do to save her and unaware of the beast that had its eyes fixed upon him.” She paused a moment. “Do you know who you are in my dream, Esbo?”

Esbo shook his head with concern.

“The fawn,” the second soldier chimed. Niambi placed her glowing hands upon the hands that gripped the crossed spears. At the same time, the two inhaled, being filled with the light of the sun.

“You are the mud,” said Niambi. “I am the doe; the magistrate is the fawn I am trying to protect from the danger that will soon fall upon us. I am here to protect our dear magistrate; I only want to share with him the knowledge he needs to know before it is too late. Please, release me.”

Touched by her words and the sun magic running through them, the guards allowed her through.

Slipping through the front doorway, Niambi bounded down a long hall toward a large golden door at the end—the magistrate’s chambers. Two servants in white robes were lighting torches along the hall—a young man and a young woman. They greeted her with a nod like the others, but as she passed, seeing the determination in her face, one of them spoke up.

“The magistrate is not here, Esteemed Speaker,” said the young woman.

Niambi halted and turned to them.

“No?” she asked, confused as to why the old man was gone at this hour. “The sun is nearly set.”

“He has not slept in his room for several days now.”

“He’s not slept at all, really,” the young man chimed. “Fear of the Phyrexian’s return, I suppose.”

Fear. The wheels in Niambi’s mind began to turn. Perhaps, it was a pang of conscience—the guilt one might feel if they were to let a nation of innocent people perish—that kept him awake. She couldn’t help but feel a bit of satisfaction at the notion. All of them should be ashamed for turning a blind eye to suffering. But then the feeling changed to a fear of her own. If the magistrate was indeed filled with shame, why had he not reversed his decision? His moments of sleeplessness were often triggered by bad dreams from the previous night. If it was this bad, why hadn’t he summoned her? Someone else was in his ear.

“Where is he now?” Niambi asked.

“The Great Chamber,” answered the young woman. “That is where he stays now. Even after Council meetings have ended, he remains there talking to himself a great deal.”

“Alone?” asked Niambi.

“To start,” the man responded. “Then Councilmembers Gbega, Jabras, and Awateh usually join his company.”

Indeed.

“Is it true that Phyrexians are hiding among the cat people outside the walls, Esteemed Speaker?” asked the woman. “There are rumors “

Niambi, burning with fury, rushed toward the door without giving an answer.

She exited down the stone steps and entered the street. Where she would have normally found a bustling scene of people heading to and fro, she found it empty—the people sheltered in their homes for fear of the invasion. However, at the end of the street was a single carriage and driver, awaiting a potential fare. She ran to the driver and climbed in.

“To the Great Chamber, please,” she said, and the driver cracked the reins to set them.

A short time later, Niambi arrived at the Great Chamber to find the magistrate seated upon a fountain in the courtyard. The carriage waited in the front. The guards about the perimeter, each one familiar with her gift, having felt her warmth, saw her as a welcomed comfort for the ailing magistrate and did not impede her march toward him. The feeble man was staring into the water, trembling beneath the weight of his heart.

“You have not been sleeping, magistrate,” said Niambi, as she approached.

The magistrate slammed his staff on the stone-tiled ground more to silence her than to stabilize himself.

“And *you* have been with them,” he scolded, though his breathing was labored, his body hunched over. “You have been consorting with the cat tribes, when you are needed here, with your people, to quiet their spirits and convince them that the danger advancing on our borders is a mild one!”

He shot her a daggered glare over his shoulder as he spoke. It was a glare Niambi parried with a stern grimace of her own.

“A *mild* one?” said Niambi. “Hundreds will die.”

“I know but “ His resolve seemed to be crumbling in that moment. “But “

“Whose spirit is the one that truly needs quieting?” Niambi asked, studying him.

Teshunda’s eyes suddenly softened. He turned his face back to the fountain. Niambi could sense a yearning to express some deep truth, a biting anxiety he was holding in, and the need to speak was

wafting off him like waves of heat rising from the sand. There was such fear. Her hands began to pulse with soft gold light.

“Magistrate, when those of us who love and can love, think on the preciousness of life, something will inevitably rise up to meet us. We love and can love, so we cannot ignore misery or turn a blind eye to suffering, especially when it is right at our doorstep.”

She placed her hand upon his, and the two of them sat in silence for a long moment. Teshunda turned his face to the heavens. The moon was near its highest point in the sky.

“Why have you not been sleeping?” Niambi asked a second time.

“The night after you came to Council,” Teshunda began after a moment. “I had the same dream about the wandering birds. Except this time the tree was me. I saw my arms withered and full of holes. The insects were eating me alive, making their way inside my bones, my heart. I have never felt pain in a dream, but in this one, I could feel everything. It was a pain that lingered when I opened my eyes. It has been inescapable. And the strangest part of it all, in the dream, the little bird who came to me asked if I needed its help. I did need its help, desperately. I was dying. But I refused. I said, ‘I don’t know you.’ And it flew away. I have not been able to sleep since, Niambi. Tell me what it means.”

Niambi looked upon him with empathy, saddened by how this champion of Femeref had been sun-dered by nightmares and cruel gossip. Then a thought came to her. *It’s better to ask forgiveness than permission.* She stared up at the moon with him, sure Zar and her people would be on the move.

“I would like you to come somewhere with me,” she said softly.

“Where?” he asked, looking to her.

She turned to him as well and smiled.

“To meet your bird.”

Moments later, when the two of them had settled into the seats of the carriage and the horses were readying to move, Niambi saw the doors to the Great Chamber open. Awateh, Gbega, and Jabras exited. Awateh’s book was open, and the three were engaged in fervent conversation, probably deciding which new piece of history they could recite to further quiet the magistrate’s conscience. The crack of the reins stole their attention.

“Magistrate?!” called Gbega, pointing at the carriage which was now on the move.

“Niambi?!” followed Jabras. Niambi straightened.

“You’ll kill us all!” screamed Awateh, bounding toward his horse. The others quickly followed.

The ride to the mine was long, and Niambi kept her hand in the magistrate’s the entire time. With the warmth of the sun filling him, Teshunda dozed off to sleep. Niambi was thankful for this. With some welcomed reprieve from his troubled thoughts—a good dream—the old man could look on this situation with more compassionate eyes.

The carriage jolted to a stop at the entrance of the mine, stirring the magistrate awake. He looked around, confused, unfamiliar with this section of the city—a secluded place, surrounded by dust and high rocks. He did not panic, however. Niambi’s hand was still glowing in his. The sound of a baby’s cry stole their attention, bringing it to the dark opening of the mine, where the glow of torchlight was slowly penetrating the blackness.

“Is that a child I hear?” Teshunda asked bemusedly.

“We can love and do love, dear magistrate,” Niambi replied, tears in her eyes. Pallar had had her child. “Let us go meet her.”

The two of them entered the mine and began a slow trek down the tunnel, Niambi's heart beaming with pride. The plan had worked. The Efravan would live. As they came closer to their destination, the sounds of laughter could be heard, some gentle humming and the vocal hoisting of the last Efravan into safety. Light from the torches on the walls showed figures hugging one another and dancing with joy.

"Who are they?" asked Teshunda.

"They are a people who needed someone to speak for them because they are not allowed to speak for themselves. They are a people who needed someone to stand up for what is right and good and just, even though it might be hard."

Teshunda looked at her. "Who have you brought here?"

"Birds in search of rest upon an embittered tree." The magistrate's eyes widened. "Fear is a corrupting emotion that withers the fruit we are meant to give. That is what your dream means. The fruit you are meant to give is "

"Salvation," Teshunda whispered softly. Niambi gave his hand a squeeze.

"Mother," came a small voice from the shadows, as a man holding the hand of a teenage girl and a torch approached.

"Kequia, my darling girl," Niambi smiled, she and the magistrate meeting them halfway.

The young girl was the spitting image of Niambi. She wore a golden headband that pushed her thick tufts of dark curls back. Denik, her father and Niambi's husband, was a handsome man of around fifty years. His hair was dreadlocked, fixed in a loose bun atop his head and adorned with rings of gold.

With a small smile, Niambi brushed a glowing hand on her daughter's cheek, which made her smile. Kequia leaned into the hand, accepting the warmth it provided, just as Pallar's child had done.

"And our son, Mabutho?" Niambi asked her husband.

"He and his wife are pouring water and giving blankets to " Denik gasped suddenly, bowing his head. He eyed Niambi. "Why is the magistrate *here* ?"

Niambi took the torch from him and placed it in Teshunda's hand. "To see the truth," she said.

With a gentle touch to Teshunda's back, she allowed him to now lead the journey around the bend to the dancing Efravan.

Almost immediately, he was brought face to face with Zar, who stood holding her crying niece. Pallar stood beside her, one hand on her back and the other resting upon her daughter's head. The revelry ceased in that moment, and all went quiet as they beheld the newcomer in their midst.

Teshunda stared at all of them, taking in the scene of mothers hugging their children to them, husbands shielding their wives, the entirety of a forlorn people silently praying for the right to exist. His eyes moved back to Zar, whose face remained hard as stone. The armor on the Efravan's body and the great sword sheathed upon her back told Teshunda all he needed to know about the woman.

"You are Ojanen," he said. "Descendant of Jaeger and Jedit, champions of Jamuraa?"

"I am," Zar replied firmly, standing taller, allowing the pride of her past to shine out of her.

"I revere them," said Teshunda softly. "They were warriors who never wavered in their loyalty to their people, who fought the great fight to the very end. They truly inspired me. *Helped* me. Leaders like them are the reason I am who I am today."

"I can say the same," Zar replied.

Teshunda's took in the child cradled in Zar's arm, swaddled in a blanket. His heart seemed to melt at the sight.

"And this—is your child?"

"*Lark* is her name," Pallar replied. "Like a little bird, she soared into this world, settled upon a dying tree meant to do something wonderful."

Niambi smiled as she held her own daughter. Her eyes met Pallar's, and the two of them nodded with thankfulness to one another.

Teshunda looked back up at Zar, straightening. "Zar Ojanen, what will you do when the Phyrexian abomination has been defeated? Where will you go?"

"When the threat has passed, we will do what we have always done—move on."

"No, you will not," said the magistrate sternly. "The arrival of that machine is only the beginning, and in the wars to come, we will need loyal allies at our side. You will stay here. You will stay here with us."

"Magistrate, no! You can't!" came shouts from Awateh, Jabras, and Gbega, who had suddenly entered the mine and were now violently pushing their way through the crowd that had gathered around the magistrate.

"Sleeper agents! Sleeper agents are among them!" they shouted together.

"Stop," said Teshunda to the Council members, who obeyed immediately. While looking back at Niambi, he spoke again. "We can no longer let our fear corrupt us. If an enemy finds his way in our midst, we must have faith that champions who stand among us will rise up and defeat them." Then, he turned back, taking in the sea of hopeful, tear-filled eyes staring back at him and said, "Welcome to Femeref."



Art by: Julia Metzger