

The Guardian

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From set *Dragons of Tarkir*

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In the original timeline of Khans of Tarkir, Anafenza was khan of the Abzan, the stalwart ruler of an enduringly loyal clan. In the alternative timeline of Dragons of Tarkir, her fate has been less kind, but no less grand...

It was the same in every military camp—or that's how it seemed to Oret for the past year.

He was a cartographer for Commander Faiso, one of the few humans Dragonlord Dromoka and her scalelords respected enough to consult in matters of war. As such, Oret had leave to come and go as he needed. He had ridden through the night, and as he passed through the camp, he was being tugged in opposing directions by hunger and weariness. There were pockets of soldiers huddled around cookfires, and the smell of meat cooking in fat tipped the odds in favor of hunger.



Salt Road Quartermasters | Art by Anthony Polumbo

He dismounted at one such cookfire, where the soldiers were engaged in a lively discussion Oret had no intention of interrupting. He knew what they were discussing anyway: the Guardian.

He filled an amber bowl with water and took a seat.

"I've seen spirits. Fought them, even," said a stern-faced ainok. When he spoke, Oret noticed he was missing several teeth. "They're malicious and spiteful. Unnatural."

"Then explain what they saw," said a youthful soldier.

"I'm not sure that I can, no matter how many times you go over it." The old ainok shrugged. "I wasn't there, and neither were you."

The younger soldier turned to her comrade on her left. "Yeffa! *You* were there!"

"You know I was," said Yeffa, a broad woman who flashed a broad grin at seeing her friend's exasperation.

"Explain to Khurz here what you saw."

"We shouldn't be talking about this, Ajuf," said a fourth soldier. He was a gaunt man, the skin of his face bronzed by the sun. He didn't look at the others as he spoke.

Yeffa waved a hand dismissively at him. To Oret, it seemed a practiced gesture, and he watched as the veteran leaned in closer to the others. Yeffa was whispering, clearly reveling in the thrill of the forbidden. "Though I was across the battlefield, I know what I saw. From nowhere, their shrieks came, followed by riders beyond count, all charging into our left flank."



Pitiless Horde | Art by Viktor Titov

This one's a storyteller, Oret thought.

"Before our forces could do more than face the charge," said Yeffa, "the Kolaghan were into their slaughter. The line began to crumble beneath the hooves of their horses. And that's when it happened." She paused to look her comrades in the eye, each in turn. "A great wave of sand rose up behind the line. It surged past our soldiers to crash down upon the enemy."

Khurz raised both hands to protest, but before he could speak, Yeffa continued, "But we have sand-bringers that could accomplish such feats, you may say. And to that I would add that at the front this

great wave of sand was the form of a woman, armed and armored as a Dromoka soldier. This was no sandbringer's trick. This was the Guardian."

"And you saw this detail from across the battlefield?" Khurz clicked his tongue. "Taram is right, we shouldn't be wasting our time talking about this."

"She saved us, whatever you may say," said Yeffa.

"There are others who saw the same thing," said Ajuf. "In other battles too. I've even heard talk that she has healed wounded soldiers and freed captured prisoners."

Khurz let out a hollow chuckle. "And I suppose she makes the wastes bloom, and the tempests subside, too. Who, then, is this spirit who watches over us?"

There was silence among them. All but Taram seemed to contemplate a plausible answer, and if not plausible, then at least clever. Finding neither, Yeffa stirred the wood of the cookfire with a stick. "Who can say?" she said at last.

Oret knew these stories. He'd heard them in every camp on his travels. They had warmed him more than the fire before him.

"I can tell you who she is." He did not whisper. The words came out crisp and heavy with authority. The way the soldiers turned to him as he spoke told him they had forgotten he was sitting there. To him it was a bit silly, the thought of himself as the mysterious stranger. But that's exactly what he'd become in the past year, drifting across Dromoka territory.

"And who are you, stranger?" asked Khurz, at last.

"I'm the one who killed that spirit in life."

The soldiers clung to every one of Oret's words that followed.



Mountain | Art by Noah Bradley

Two trails of dust merged into one behind the pair of ibexes that raced at full gallop, carrying their armored riders along the canyon floor. Anafenza, the lead rider, risked a glance over her shoulder to scan for the crush of enemies they both were expecting to overtake them.

“Captain! Did we lose them?” called Oret, his voice cracking with strain. “I think we lost them.”

The captain’s head tilted skyward to where dark, roiling clouds were gathering. “Not likely,” she said more to herself than to the other rider. The walls of the canyon closed in around them, and the captain spurred her ibex on.

“We should wait for our scalelord. He will break their offensive.”

The captain wheeled about so suddenly that Oret was almost thrown from his saddle in his effort to halt his mount. “Our lord is occupied with other things at the moment.” She pointed up toward the mountains that rose on the eastern edge of the canyon. “On the outcrop, see?”

Oret saw him, his scalelord, the dragon to whom he was bonded. The scalelord had a smaller, four-winged dragon pinned beneath his massive arms. As Oret watched, lightning erupted from the smaller dragon’s mouth. His scalelord tumbled backward as the other dragon flew away.



Stormwing Dragon | Art by Svetlin Velinov

“Is he in trouble?” asked Oret.

“He’s occupied. *We’re* in trouble.”

“Then we’re alone.”

“Not quite. Follow me.” And the captain was off again.

Oret stared a moment longer at his scalelord, locked in an exchange of power he would never fully understand. Behind him came the rumble of horses, and the taunts of their riders, and he too was off. He followed his captain, who drove her ibex through the twisting path that brought the pair deeper into the canyon. It proved to be difficult to keep pace with her, as she would all but disappear around a

bend, or suddenly change directions to dart down one of the canyon's countless labyrinthine branches. Wherever she was leading them, if nothing else, it was away from the Kolaghan warriors. Oret had served with his captain for several years, and he had never seen her act rashly. There was always a plan, always some contingency that proved that she had considered the threats and made the correct preparations. But here they were, their fortress lost and their lines broken, fleeing for their lives before the bulk of a Kolaghan horde.

More twists. More narrow paths. The Kolaghan war-shrieks at their heels soon became scattered and confused shouts that echoed off the canyon walls. A smile crept in at the corner of Oret's mouth. He realized what his captain was doing. At best, the Kolaghan would lose track of their quarry and overshoot their position entirely. At worst, the captain would have forced the Kolaghan to divide their forces to find them. In the narrow corridors of the canyon, the two of them may actually be able to fight their way out.

The captain made another abrupt turn into a gap in the canyon wall. Oret missed it, and rode past before slowing to wheel about. He opened his mouth to call after his leader, but before words emerged, he was struck by the sudden taste of metal on his tongue. The air became unnaturally dry, and a crackling hum drowned out all noise, except the panicked bleating of Oret's ibex. He struggled with the reins in a vain attempt to maintain control over the animal.

"Captain!" Oret yelled, desperate to leave. "Anafenza!" He dug his heels into his mount's flanks, and it bolted.

A pop broke over the air. After only three steps, the ibex lurched and crumpled mid-stride. Oret fell hard from his saddle and his jaw slammed closed when the ground rose up to meet it. He tasted blood as he scrambled for cover behind his ibex, which lay lifeless with a spear jutting from its back. All along the shaft, electrical energy still danced, curling and blackening the surrounding fur.

Another echo boomed through the canyon. This one, the growling, guttural bellow of a hunter after a kill. Oret found a Kolaghan orc perched above him at the edge of a flat rock that poked out part way up the canyon wall. He was adorned with a metal mantle that rose from a harness on his back. A web of lightning fanned out from the mantle to complete the impression of formidable wings, bright against the dark, churning clouds above.

The orc roared once more, this time forming a sound that Oret could discern. "Gvar!"

Oret knew the name. Gvar, the orc who led the attack on Sandsteppe Gateway. Beneath the shadow of Kolaghan dragons, Gvar stormed the walls, dislodged its Dromoka defenders, and drove the survivors into the wilderness.



Warbringer | Art by Raymond Swanland

The warrior's call would summon Gvar to finish the two remaining soldiers of the garrison.

But the orc did not wait for his leader, and instead he leapt for Oret.

There was time for Oret to scramble to his feet or draw his sword, not both. Oret rose, and the raider was on him. A powerful downward cut punctuated his war cry, but Oret shifted so the blow glanced off a pauldron. He closed the distance between them, and before his attacker could recover, Oret threw his armor-clad bulk forward, bringing both of them the ground in a cloud of dust and curses.

The Kolaghan raider maneuvered until his elbow pressed in on Oret's throat. The blood in his mouth welled, but Oret could not swallow it. Instead, he let it fly at the orc in a spray of red. It was enough for Oret to wrench free. And it was then that he heard his captain's voice.

"Oret, move," said Anafenza.

The command was a simple one, and Oret complied. He broke away from the raider, but the orc refused to relent. Anafenza stepped forward, wreathed in shimmering golden-white light, and the sand around her feet rippled as though alive. Anafenza held out a hand, and the swirling light curled around her arm and spiraled out toward the orc. It passed through him, pulling something unseen but vital from him as it passed, leaving him lifeless in the dust.

No sooner than the body collapsed than were the walls of the canyon again awakened by the sounds of war. Hoofbeats and warshouts boomed out, growing louder with each passing moment.

"Captain?"

"This way," said Anafenza, indicating the narrow path behind her. "Gvar and his horde will be here soon. We must be ready for them."

The pair was on foot, running flat out, careful enough only to avoid rolling an ankle on the loose, stony ground. Behind Anafenza, Oret emerged in an oblong chamber that was hemmed in almost entirely by the sheer face of the canyon wall. The only way out was the way they had come.

“A dead end,” said Oret.

“It’s a good thing, too,” said Anafenza. She was unlacing her boots. “It will be harder for them to flee.”

Nervously, Oret paced the perimeter of the chamber. He found Anafenza’s ibex tied to a small, twisted tree, drinking water from an amber bowl. The humble tree was half hidden in the shadow of the wall. Scattered all around tree, Oret saw shards of amber. To his eye, many of the shards had once fit together to form an untold number of containers, figurines, or ornaments. Oret knelt and scooped up a shard, this one a remnant of some ancient intricately crafted pitcher.

“What are these, Captain?”

“Amber is a special substance, Oret. The broken vessels at your feet served two functions. Like any vessel, they carried water. But made from amber, a substance of trees, these vessels could also carry spirits.”

Oret dropped the amber shard as though it burned. “Captain, please. We should not be here.”

“I want to show you something,” said Anafenza, calmly talking past him. She was standing at the tree, and Oret cautiously obliged. She took his hand and placed it on the bare trunk. “Now look closer.” Oret leaned in. His eyes strained in the growing darkness, but there, carved into the surface of the trunk were dozens, if not hundreds of names.

Oret recoiled. “Cursed names?”

“That was my first thought as well, but I’ve come to believe otherwise. Many people went to great lengths to bring these here. Spirits can be carried in amber, but I believe the tree is their anchor.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Many times.”

Anafenza crouched at the base of trunk, brushing sand away until the arches of roots were revealed. She rose, and placed her bare feet upon the roots. “Now, Oret, get behind me. You’re going to see something amazing.” She flashed him a smile, the first one he’d seen since the attack on Sandsteppe Gateway.

“I can’t do that, Captain.” Oret smiled back. It was a sad smile. His captain—his cousin—was going to die there. *He* was going to die there. But not easily. He drew his sword.

It wasn’t long before the Kolaghan caught up. The taunts resumed as they closed in, even before they could be seen.

“Let’s hope all that running has left enough strength for a fight.” By the time the words were uttered, Gvar’s hulking frame entered the chamber. “I am Gvar Barzeel, who shattered your gates, and toppled your walls.”

Anafenza unsheathed the curved two-handed sword that hung in a scabbard across her back. “It’s because you are Gvar Barzeel, who shattered our gates, and toppled our walls, that you will not leave this place.”

Dozens of Kolaghan warriors piled into the chamber behind Gvar. Shamans were among them, and they began summoning lightning, which crackled into being among them.

Ever calm, Anafenza removed her helmet and reached up to touch a gnarled branch with her hand. “Spirits of this tree, ancestors of my people, your descendants need you.” It was not the first time she said the words, Oret was certain, and at their utterance, the still air of the chamber began to stir. Dust rose, and tiny golden flecks of amber rose with it. For the moment, the gathered warriors at the opposite end of the chamber halted their taunts.

Although Anafenza was barely visible through the maelstrom of dust, Oret could still hear his captain, who said, “Oret, get behind me.” And Oret moved to the other side of the tree, shielding his face as best he could.

He was pulling Anafenza’s ibex over to him when he saw impressions of human shapes take form in the dust. They were not solid forms, although some appeared to be armored in the manner of the ancients. Oret’s eyes widened.

Spirits.

The revelation stole the remaining moisture from this mouth.

Necromancy.

Anafenza inhaled deeply. Her lungs filled with dust and amber, and the spirits swirled in toward her. They merged with her, until she became a blur of amber light. She stepped off the roots, took another step forward, and an instant later, she was among the Kolaghan.

She was a horrifying mass of spirit limbs, angry and vengeful. Sand and dust moved in great billowing sheets, fed by an endless stream of furious spirits that continued to surge from the tree. Among the tumult, Oret was able to track Anafenza by the flashes of her blade and the cries she extracted from the Kolaghan as she went.

Gvar, the shamans, all of the Kolaghan raiders—they didn’t stand a chance.

During the carnage, the storm clouds overhead swelled. As Anafenza caught, and cut down the last of Gvar’s warriors, lightning split the sky, thunder shook the canyon, and the clouds spilled out their contents. Dragons of Kolaghan’s brood descended from the sky.



Dragon Tempest | Art by Willian Murai

Oret was stuck between the horror composed of spirits and death before him, and the horrors borne on four wings above him.

The lead dragon tucked its four feathered wings back and fell into a dive at Oret's spirit-shrouded captain. There was no hesitation, no moment of panic or fear. Anafenza simply looked skyward, and all at once, the spirits within her streaked up toward the clouds to meet the dragon. They moved as a massive bolt of golden light, and at its advance the dragon tried to reverse course. Too late, though, for the bolt tore through scales and flesh and bone.



Radiant Purge | Art by Igor Kieryluk

Oret saw spirits splinter off to devour the rest of the monster, and the remaining dragons scattered back into the safety of the clouds.

The dust and sand in the chambers settled back to earth. Utterly exhausted, Anafenza collapsed.

It took Oret a long moment to realize that the sequence of threats had ceased. Slowly, he made his way to where his captain lay, motionless. Air rattled in her lungs. It was a sound that both unsettled and relieved Oret. Anafenza's eyes hung open, but her pupils had rolled back in her head, leaving only a pair of glassy, white fields in their place.

"Anafenza," Oret whispered.

More air passed through her lungs, weak and ragged.

Oret put his hand on her shoulder, and gently shook her. "Anafenza," he said again. And again, louder, "Captain!" He desperately wanted to help her, and lacking another course of action, he looked for some wound, some physical evidence of harm he could bind or mend. But there was nothing. This wasn't a slash from a sword, or a puncture from an arrow.

"Oret." The word came as a hoarse whisper.

Oret's face broke into a smile. He looked down to find Anafenza staring up at him.

"You see?" she asked.

"Don't strain yourself, Captain."

"I'm okay," she said, propping herself on her elbows. "Really. I just needed a moment."

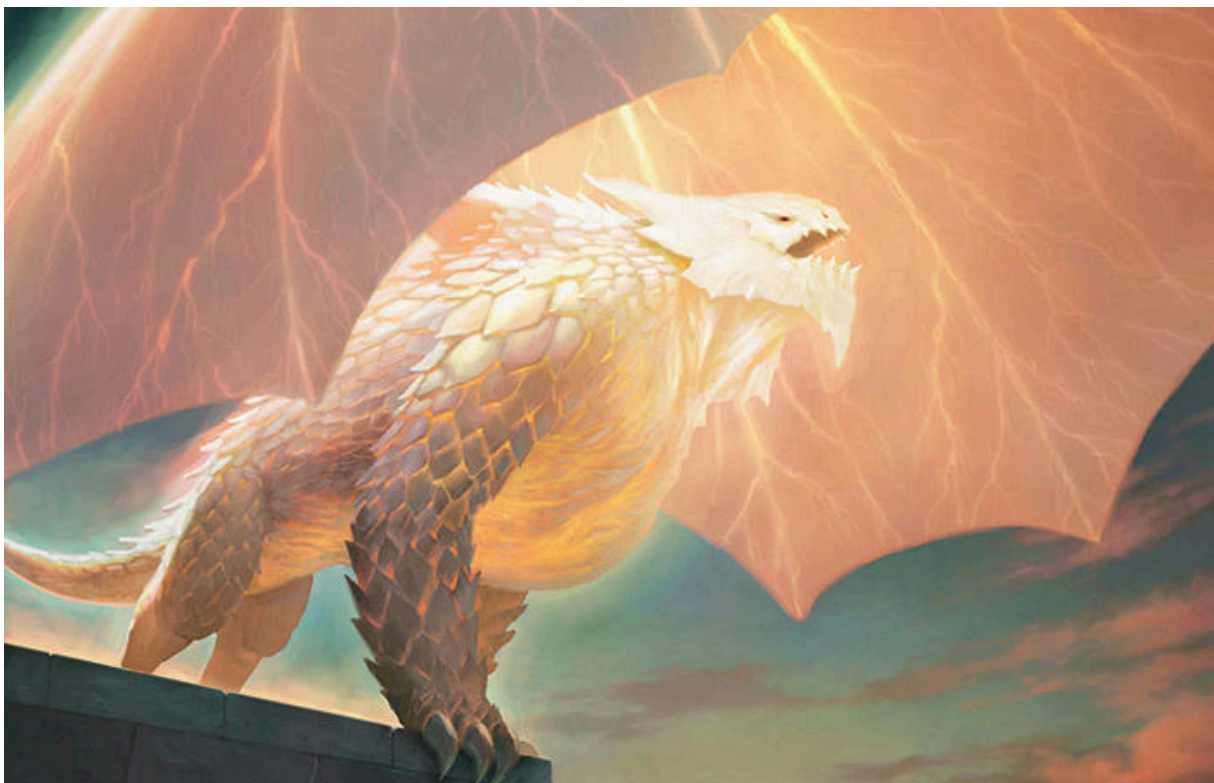
"Captain, I've never seen anything like that."

"Me neither. I've never *felt* anything like it." The fullness of her voice was returning, and she began to speak rapidly. "Oret, so many ancestors, all bound by common purpose—to protect their descendants, their people. There was nothing political about it. There was no maneuvering for the favor of a dragon. It was pure, and it was powerful."

A sudden gust riled the sand, and they felt the air in their ears compress. Wing beats. If there were no clouds, a massive shadow would have filled the oblong canyon chamber. But there was no shadow, only a series of sickening cracks, as their scalelord descended into the chamber where, beneath its great weight, the ancient tree fell to splinters. And with it, Anafenza's last shred of obedience.

"He saw," Anafenza said through gritted teeth. Even as Oret bowed his head, she stared directly into the dragon's eyes.

"Captain, please," Oret said. "Not now." But Oret knew, as he was sure Anafenza knew. The cost of calling upon spirits, of practicing necromancy, was death. Their scalelord would open his mouth, and out would pour a blast of scouring light that would peel away all the layers of her being until there was nothing remaining. Not even a spirit.



Enduring Scalelord | Art by Clint Cearley

The dragon reared its head back, and Oret stepped between his scalelord and his captain.

"This is the way of it, Oret," Anafenza said, "get out of the way. There's no getting out of it. My life is forfeit for what I've done."

Oret remained. "Sovereign of mine," he said, dropping to one knee before the dragon, "I ask you, with all the respect of one of your humble children, to grant a single request."

Dragons didn't debase themselves with the language of people. When they spoke, their draconic words first passed through speakers. There, in the canyon, there was no one to translate, and the only indi-

cation of understanding Oret would have would be the dragon's actions. It was a prospect that clawed at his stomach.

"My captain has practiced necromancy," he continued. "An affront that must be punished." Oret swallowed. "Please, my scalelord, allow me to be the one to execute her."

The dragon's gaze shifted from Oret to Anafenza, and finally back to Oret, to whom he dipped his head. It was a gesture Oret took to be a nod. His request was granted.

Anafenza made no motion to escape, and Oret allowed himself a momentary glance in her direction. She was calm, as always. She knelt to receive her judgment, and as he bent to scoop up her two-handed sword, she turned to smile at him.

The leather hilt of Anafenza's sword was coated in dust, making it difficult to grip.

Anafenza had called forth spirits from the tree to protect them. She called the spirits ancestors, and from across the ages, these ancestors found a common bond, and they emerged to fight the enemies of their people. Anafenza had discovered this bond. She was driven by the same cause.

Oret raised the blade over his head. "This is not the end," he whispered to his captain. A moment later, it was done.

Taram spat into the fire. "Justice served. Now I've heard enough. If you're going go on about necromancy all day, then I'm off." He rose and walked off into the dim light of the morning.

"I don't understand," said Ajuf, still transfixed. "Those spirits saved you. She saved you. And you killed her for it."

"I did," Oret said, "and I was honored for it. Blood was pooling around my captain's lifeless body, and I knelt before my scalelord to receive his favor."



Scale Blessing | Art by Matt Stewart

He continued. “Upon my arrival at the city of Kavah, I was greeted as a hero. I was raised to the rank of scout captain, honored with the title of cartographer and, with it, a life in exile. But I put my exile to use, and soon my wanderings brought me back to the canyon. Nothing remained of Anafenza’s body. The wilderness saw to that. But that’s not what I went there for. Among the remnants of the tree were all those pieces of amber that had carried the spirits of ancestors to the site. In those I placed my hope, and I scoured the sand for every bit of amber I could find.”

Oret drained the last of his water. “The cartographer of Commander Faiso has the distinguished honor of maintaining the official maps of the territory, and from such maps, I found my destination. Months of travel brought me to a stretch of cracked, arid land. At the horizon, I spotted the ruins of a crumbling fortress that I knew I would find. Between myself and the fortress, reaching up from the highest point of a low hill, was an ancient tree. I compared the tree in the distance to the equivalent notation on my map. All trees in Dromoka territory are noted on maps as an indicator of water, but the leafless limbs of that tree could never provide such comfort for travelers. There was nothing there. It was perfect.

“When I reached the tree, I emptied my bags of all the amber pieces I brought from the canyon and spread them around the trunk in a ring. I had no idea if I was doing it correctly, but if amber truly was a vessel for spirits, then Anafenza’s had to be in one of the pieces.

“Where the trunk disappeared into the sand, I shoveled the sand away. With my knife, I carved her name into the living wood, and when I finished, I pushed the sand back into place. It was to be Anafenza’s tree. One that would not be splintered, or burned, or uprooted. It would be her anchor.”



Anafenza, Kin-Tree Spirit | Art by Ryan Yee

“Unbelievable!” said Ajuf.

“Agreed. I’m not sure I believe a thing you’ve said,” said Khurz. It was his turn to rise to leave. But before he left, “Where is this tree, then?”

“My answer won’t convince you of the truth of it,” Oret said through a smile, “because all records of that tree, on every official map have been destroyed.”

“Of course they have.” Khurz let out a sharp hiss of disgust. “And now you travel through our lands sharing this story?”

“Believe what you will. The success of my journey did not become apparent to me until tales like Yeffa’s began to crop up. For Anafenza, it had always been about the clan. In death, her fervor has refused to wane. I now travel our territory to share the truth. She is, as Yeffa said, a guardian.”



Echoes of the Kin Tree | Art by Ryan Alexander Lee