

Stories and Endings

Nik Davidson

From set *Shadows Over Innistrad*

Jace Beleren's time on Innistrad has been spent chasing a mystery, from Liliana's home to Markov Manor to the Drownyard Temple, then back to Liliana, and finally to Thraben Cathedral. His guide on this journey has been a journal—a bound collection of research notes he found at Markov Manor.

As it happens, the journal's author, the moonfolk Planeswalker called Tamiyo, is several steps ahead of him....

Despite the fact that her feet never touched the stone floor, Tamiyo thought about tiptoeing as she slowly drifted through the chantry of Thraben Cathedral. Across dozens of planes, she found reference to bipeds tiptoeing, often in an exaggerated or theatrical style, as a method of indicating the intent to behave in a stealthy fashion. Yet, to stand on tiptoe concentrated a creature's weight on a smaller total area; on a wooden floor (a flooring surface common to a plurality of the planes she had surveyed), walking tiptoe would in fact *increase* the likelihood that the floorboards would creak, which was by far the most common form of inadvertent noise to reveal the presence of the tiptoer. Illogic of this nature was something she attributed most commonly to humans, and she took some consistent amusement from documenting it. But there was nothing amusing about Innistrad. The evidence immediately demonstrated something much deeper and more dangerous than illogic. She had already been here longer than she had intended. She had already taken on far too many risks. But this was a world entirely off its axis, and she needed to know why.

Several logical lines of inquiry had proven to be dead ends. Some had been promising, but inconclusive. Her astronomical work was near-definitive, but the cause—the first cause—still eluded her. This was a puzzle box with a thousand panels, a riddle of ten thousand lies. She had never solved anything more challenging than this.

She had also never quit before finishing her work.



Tamiyo, the Moon Sage | Art by Eric Deschamps

Her latest line of research had brought her to the cathedral, where the humans of Innistrad housed their oldest histories of Avacyn. The stories she had collected to date, individually, were fragmented and obscured, but she knew the music of stories. She knew which threads to tug upon, which leads to follow, to bring herself—gliding step by gliding step—to a shred of truth. She did not expect to simply discover what she needed written plainly in an old tome. She had heard many stories like that, but never lived one. Still, the oldest histories had the fewest opportunities for distortion; the fewest hands had been given the chance to twist the words toward their own purpose and effect. Avacyn. The world was off its axis, and she was Innistrad's core. The metaphor fit well enough.

She whispered a small prayer to the kami. She knew, of course, that there were no kami here—that spirits manifested themselves very differently from plane to plane and that the geists of Innistrad bore no resemblance to the small gods of her home. None of her experiments had indicated that the kami could hear her prayers across the boundaries of planes. But the mere fact of their local immeasurability was no excuse to be rude.

Armed cathars patrolled the halls, stoic and vigilant, on the lookout for intruders like her. She had already made more contact with the local population than she was comfortable with, and she was pushing up against the limits of her natural silence and stealth. To penetrate the inner libraries, she would need a story—a story to tell the world around her.

An old scroll, one of her first and favorites, floated open from her side. It was a story from her home, and it was precisely the story she needed.

He Who Frightens the Sun

This is the story of the world gone dark, and He Who Frightens the Sun. His shadow brought night to those in his wake, and his hunger was never sated. The akki knew what the oni concealed, a lifetime of loot and of plunder. But none dared risk the oni's wrath, save one who felt no fear.

When that akki came upon a long flat stone, she held it above her head. From high up above, when the oni looked down, she seemed no more than such a stone. And so disguised she went to his cave, assured that she was safe.



But the oni was curious.

"It is strange, little stone, the way that you move! Are you here to steal my riches?"

"I have never heard, great one," the stone replied, "of a stone stealing riches, have you? I promise that if I see any thieves, I will let you know!"

The oni heard truth in the akki's words, and decided that all was well. He went to sleep, and the akki proceeded to take as much as she could carry. Gold, jewels, and a shining platter, in which her reflection grinned.

The next day, the akki returned, and the oni confronted the stone.

“Little stone, little stone! Someone has stolen my treasure! Did you see the thief?”

Remembering her promise, the akki replied, “Yes! I saw the thief, a clever little akki! Perhaps you should go and search for her, and punish her for her wicked ways!”

The oni agreed, and went off in search, and while he was gone, the akki once more made off with more stolen treasure.

If she had only ended there!

The greedy little akki came back to the oni’s cave a third time, stone overhead and greed in her heart. The oni’s heart held only rage.

“Little stone! It has happened again! I could not find the thief, but once more my treasures vanish! I do not know what to do, except to go to the akki warrens to the west, and devour them all, just to be sure I get the right one!”

Fearing for her home and friends, the akki replied, “Great one! Akki are tough and bitter, not at all delicious! It is best to leave them be, and continue your search for the thief!”

But while the oni did not know a stone, he knew a lie quite well. He scooped up the little akki, stone and all, and swallowed her in one bite.

The akki tell this tale to remember that the truth is a better deception than any lie ever told.

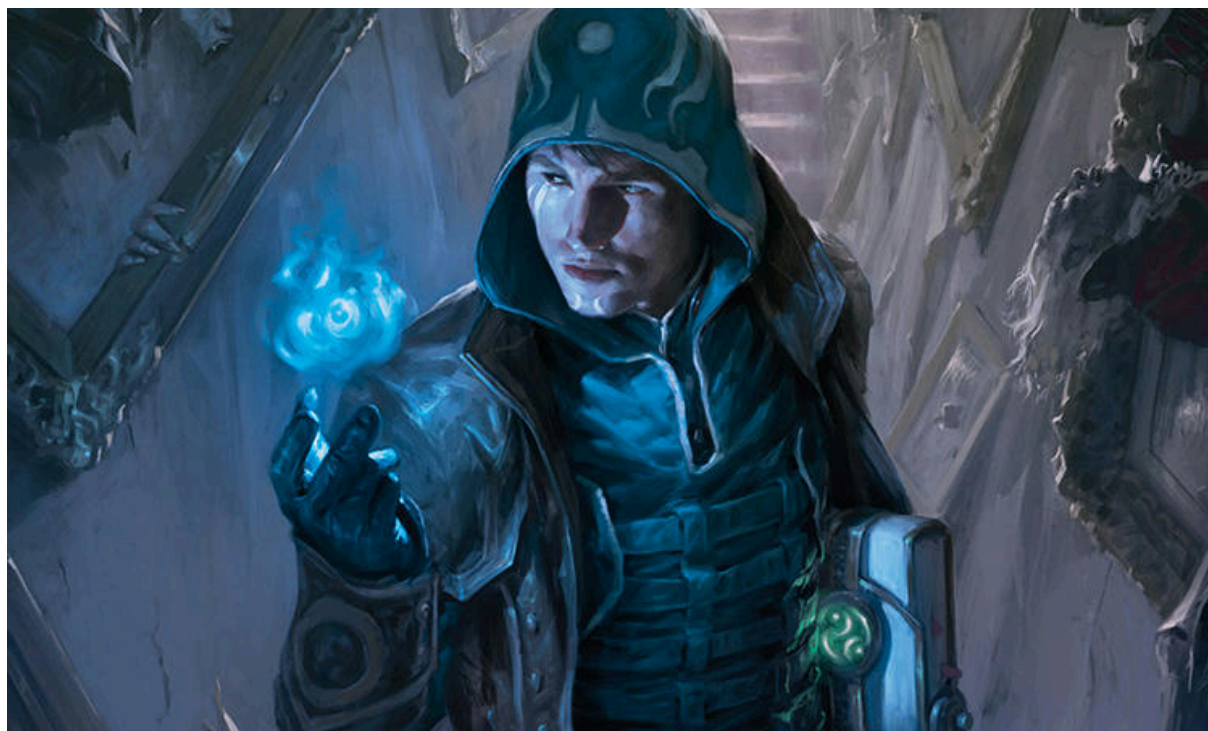
The story invoked, its magic became real, and Tamiyo faded from view. To any who saw her now, she would appear to be something that belonged there—another cathar, or a decorative vase—up until the moment she told a lie, or no longer desired deception. It was a very useful story, but as she did every time with every story, she whispered an apology for using it in this way. Stories were sacred, and to use them as tools felt just a little bit blasphemous every time.

She carried twenty-nine story scrolls with her this day, not including the three in iron bands—the ones that must never be used.

She walked (feet touching the stones now, quite cold) with purpose past a pair of cathars, who offered a crisp salute. She returned the gesture with less efficiency, and all saw what they needed to see. The central library was just ahead. She started mentally cataloguing the stories she brought with her, trying to determine how best to deal with the locks that would likely be up ahead, when she noticed something amiss. The door was already opened a crack, and candlelight flickered from within.

She gestured, and a slight push of wind opened the heavy door a few degrees more. She stepped into a deeper stance, her feet now gripping the stone evenly (though she still *thought* of tiptoeing, for reasons she could not explain), and crept toward the door, equally ready to flee or to pounce.

The well-oiled hinges parted further as she heard an unmistakable sound, a moment before her eyes confirmed it: a slumping body striking the ground, as if suddenly asleep. A librarian, aged, unarmed, and unarmored. And standing over him...a Planeswalker.



Jace, Unraveler of Secrets | Art by Tyler Jacobson

She took in as much information as she could in the moments before she needed to decide to fight or flee. Planeswalkers were to be avoided in her work, almost at all costs. They were brash and unpredictable, and could carry the biases of any unknown world or means of thinking—they were, in short, a liability to a truth-seeker. This one appeared human, male, young, though the wisps of mana that surrounded him smelled of deception. He had acquired some local clothing, but decorated them with sigils that were clearly not of Innistrad—a curiously poor disguise. His eyes glowed, panicked, wild, possibly afflicted (a thought she had not considered—if a Planeswalker contracted this plane’s madness, could they spread it to other worlds?!), and in his hands...her field notes. Another complication. She waited two more heartbeats and resolved to let him make the first move, though a scroll had already drifted from her belt and begun to unfurl.

His eyes were confused. Furious, terrified, curious, then they settled on something like recognition and relief.

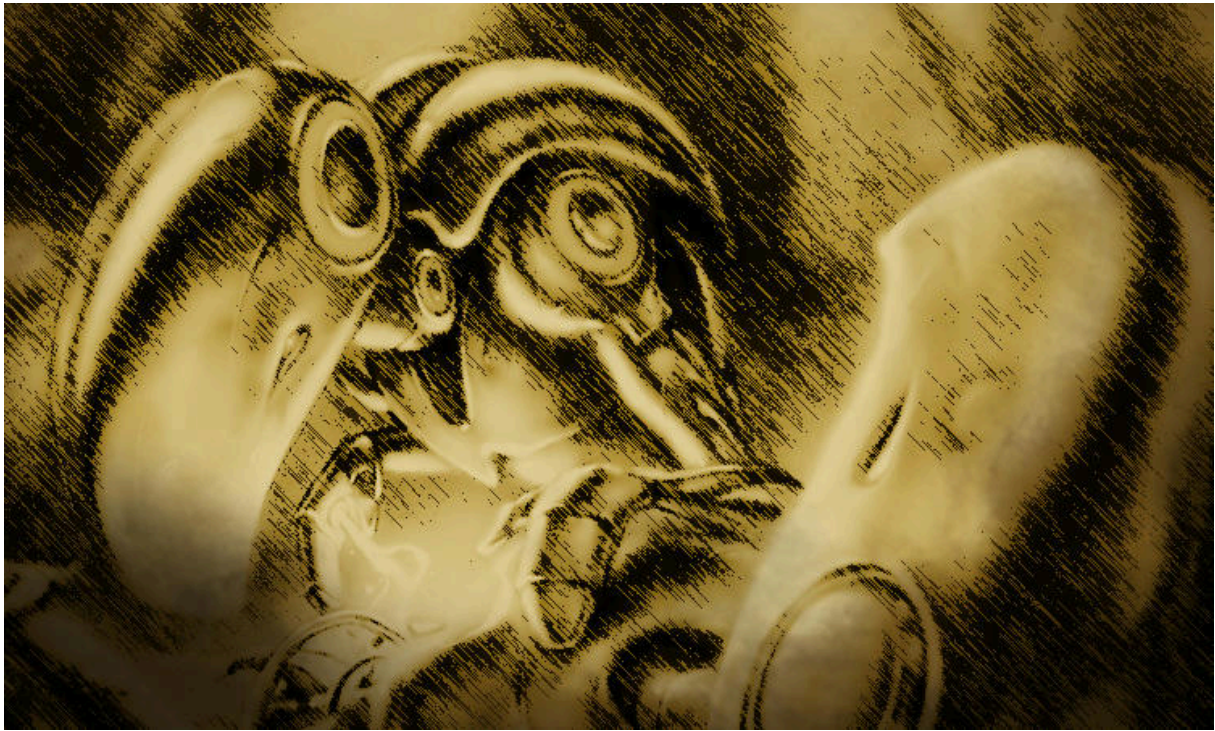
“You! It’s you! You brought me here. No, not you, this, this journal. Your journal! You brought me here to meet? No, but how could you?” He trailed off, his eyes drifted toward the ground again, then snapped back to her, accusing. “You were watching me? You knew!” Then they softened again, now sad, pleading. “Help me. Can you? I think...can you help me? *Help me.*” The last words were not a plea at all. A command, oppressively powerful, battering at her mind like wind at the shutters. But her mind withdrew to a far-off castle, and the winds could not reach her. Four more heartbeats to think, then she smiled as peacefully as she could manage. With a thought, she covered the Planeswalker in her veiling spell and removed a different scroll from her satchel. She slipped into the library and closed the door quietly behind her. She had never used this story in precisely this way, but a mad planeswalking telepath was a danger of the sort she had never contemplated. The story was one she gathered many, many years ago, from a world with five moons and gleaming metal as far as the eye could see.

Original

With their creator gone, the creatures known as the myr were lost.

Some continued with their last known instructions, repeating their tasks without direction or purpose, while others simply shut down to await commands that would never come. The loss of Memnarch did not kill them, but with no true consciousness within them, their continued life was scarcely life at all.

Some of the myr had been tasked to monitor the myr population, and create new myr to replace those that had been damaged or destroyed. One of those had been in hibernation for months when its instructions demanded that it act—myr of its kind were too few, and it needed to make another.



However, without its maker to guide it, it did not have clear instructions as to how to proceed. It did what it knew to do—it gathered the proper materials, took those materials to the crafting chamber, a small spherical room, and assembled a myr, completely identical to itself.

This was the point in the process when the Master would gift the new myr with life and a mind, such as it was. But the Master was not there. Still, his instructions persisted. The myr decided to use his own mind as a template, and copied itself into the new myr, creating a being completely identical to itself in every way. Its instructions satisfied, the myr went to leave the chamber...and found itself blocked by its duplicate.

The myr tried to let its duplicate go first—but the duplicate had the same thought at the same time. They waited an identical length of time, and then tried to go again, each colliding into its other self once more. The myr and its duplicate tried everything they could to break this impossible symmetry, but nothing worked. Eventually, in frustration, the two destroyed each other.

A third myr arrived some time later, being tasked with repair, and restored one of the myr—the restored myr stopped the repair myr before it could repair the duplicate and start the whole problem all over again. Instead, it decided to try something different, and copied its mind over again, but this time left it incomplete.

The newly awakened myr was able to create others in the same way, and these new myr, created with minds partially unformed, were able to multiply and modify themselves, act autonomously, and ultimately took the myriad forms that they have today.

The myr celebrate this story as their creation myth, but the reason they celebrate it is curious. There are three theories as to which of the myr in this story was actually the first myr of their kind. Was it the first myr who created another without a specific instruction from their creator? Did the repair myr actually repair the newly created myr first, and thus it was the second myr who made the critical leap that marked the creation of their race? Or was it the first of the myr with an incomplete imprint that was truly the first of their kind? The myr disagree on this point, and they celebrate the disagreement itself—the fact that they can have disagreements on issues of such a fundamental nature, yet still remain in unison, is at the core of what it means to be myr.

The young human's eyes closed, and he took several deep, slow breaths. When his eyes opened again, they were calm.

"Thank you. Wow. I...oh. Oh dear. Liliana..." He rubbed his head as if it had been struck, then looked sheepishly up at her. "I'm Jace. And you're Tamiyo, right? Your journal..."

He offered it to her with both hands; she raised a thin palm, a gesture of polite refusal.

"It led me here. Your calculations, your studies, the moon, it all made sense...or at least it felt like it did. I was affected and you...you fixed it. Somehow. I'm rambling. Probably sound almost as mad as I did before, I just...thank you."

Tamiyo smiled serenely. "My field notes. I gave them to someone trustworthy, and now you carry them. Did you bring Jenrik to harm, Jace?"

The human shook his head. "No. But whatever happened to Markov Manor, he didn't survive it."

She spent a moment in silent remembrance, but let no sorrow show on her face. "You need to leave, Jace. This place is dangerous, but far more so for one like you. Your telepathic powers carry with them a responsibility. If driven mad, the damage you could do across the planes would be immense, and it would be irresponsible of me to allow that."

"No, I understand, but..." Jace stopped suddenly. It had taken him a few moments to realize that she had just threatened him. He raised his palms, and took a step back.

"Tamiyo, I just want to help. We can save this place. Me and my friends, we can help you solve what's happening here, and help fix it. We've done it before...sort of."

Tamiyo raised one white eyebrow and said nothing.

"Listen, you and I both know that Avacyn is at the heart of what's happening here. Well, she has a mind, like any other being, and I can find out what's afflicting her. I can stop her, if it comes to that. And then we can move on to the next step in fixing this."



Pieces of the Puzzle | Art by Magali Villeneuve

Tamiyo's smile disappeared.

"You *know* nothing, Jace. You suspect. You theorize. You have evidence, but it is far from conclusive. How much do you really know about Avacyn? Her purpose? You have no idea what would happen if Avacyn were destroyed. She wards the entire plane—have you ever heard of a planebound being interacting in such a way with the Multiverse? I will tell you this plainly, Jace: you know less than you are ignorant of, and I am not here to fix this world's problem. I am here to understand it. To chronicle it. To know the truth of it, and record that truth for all time. But this plane is likely doomed, and I have no intention of stopping it. It is sad, perhaps, to lose a thing of beauty, but, like the blossoms of an orchard in springtime, it is a temporary beauty. It is just one plane among countless. Planes are lost and renewed all the time. Your premises are flawed."

Jace flinched as if struck. "But the people here—there are millions of them! You'd just leave them to their fate? Madness and worse? We have the power, here, to make a difference. You have that power. Will you help me?"

Tamiyo's expression was unchanged, but her voice held a little more ice. "I *have* helped you, Jace. I will offer a compromise. I will share my research with you, and you and your friends can use that information to help avert similar disasters on other planes, if it suits you. But I have recorded ten thousand stories about heroes, and a hero is merely a disaster with a point of view."

The young human persisted. "Without conclusive insights from Avacyn herself, your research will be incomplete. Inconclusive. With my help, you will have the story in its entirety. And if I manage to stop Avacyn in the process, it wouldn't harm your work, and it could save countless lives."

Curiosity. Just a touch of it. "A definitive understanding of Avacyn's current state would certainly be helpful, but I suspect that even if you were capable of entering such an alien mind..."

"I can do it."

Tamiyo found the human's arrogance equal parts charming and irritating. "If you try, her madness will consume you, as it did before. But...in theory, I could anchor you. Tether you to your sanity. But

if I decide that we are in too much danger, you will break off the connection immediately, and we will retreat. It will also require that we connect minds on a very fundamental level. I will understand you, and you will understand me. And if I do not like what I come to understand, I will alter the terms of this arrangement again. You, for your part, will come to know precisely what I am capable of. Is this acceptable to you?"

"I accept."

Jace felt something like a chime ringing in his mind. A tone that was clear, serene, and pure.

It was an invitation.

In an instant, she knew him. But it was not a simple thing to know this human. His mind was powerful, but broken. Shattered into a thousand shards, each of them a different man, many of them trying to work together, but some of them...



Fact or Fiction | Art by Matt Cavotta

He had erased his own memories. He had destroyed his own truth. He had invaded the minds of the innocent, he had killed in anger, he had used his power for petty and selfish ends.

Yet.

He was capable of sacrifice, of bravery, and of understanding. He was willing to take on responsibilities. Too many responsibilities, perhaps, for one so young. Younger still, if you accounted for the years of his own life that he so roughly erased. His desire for truth was earnest, and his pledge to help the people of this place was pure.

And he was about seventy percent certain he could manage to do what he had told her that he could.

In an instant, he knew her. But knowing is not understanding. Jace had always held the soratami of Kamigawa in high esteem, their minds powerful and disciplined. He saw her life, and the contrast

with his own was physically painful. Where he was untethered, she was safely anchored by family, tradition, and home.

Home. An endless library, high in the clouds; the place she loved more than any other. The smiles and sweet familiarity of her family. Children. They could not fully understand the places she went when she left them, but their faces lit up so brightly when she brought them stories, impossible stories, told in the voice of truth from places they could never see.

He saw her burden. The terrible burden of *knowing*, and the need to protect truths too dangerous to be spoken aloud, yet too important to be forgotten. Three iron-bound scrolls, each with a power...

Jace.

The connection changed, and the two Planeswalkers focused their consciousnesses back to the world they stood in.

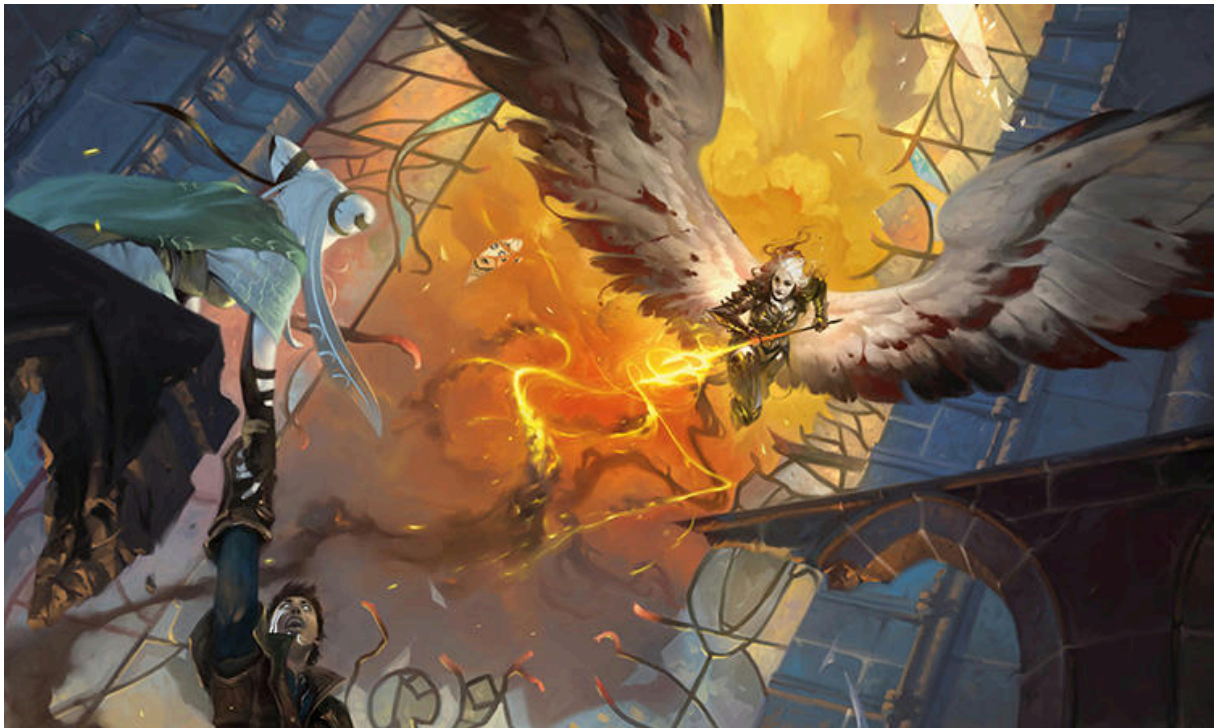
“Jace, my veiling spell has been pierced. And there is a powerful presence moving this way.”

The human nodded, and the two Planeswalkers hurried down the hallway into the cathedral’s central chapel.

“I will attempt to communicate with Avacyn. Distract her. *Emphatically* distract her if I must. You will not have long to stop her before she kills us both.”

Jace opened his mouth to reply, as the world became a symphony of howling winds and shattering glass.

The angel hovered, her massive wings stained with fresh blood, her spear molten and ablaze. The look on her face was one of restrained amusement. Tamiyo floated up to meet her gaze. The angel’s wings displaced a gale; when the moonfolk rose, the air did not so much as whisper.



Avacyn’s Judgment | Art by Victor Adame Minguez

“Avacyn. I am a visitor to your world, and I have been as respectful a guest as I have been able. I want nothing but peace and wellness for those you protect. As an angel, you can hear the truth of my words. How do you respond?”

The angel's face twitched into the poorest mockery of any smile Tamiyo had ever known, and a clicking sort of laughter emanated from her, lips unmoving. Her voice was a pained scratch that brought to mind insects and fingernails.

"How...do I respond? I am...to protect. From you. Intruder. Invader. Rotmonger. Impure! IMPURE!"

"I see," replied Tamiyo, a waiting scroll unfurling. "That is unfortunate."

She did not need to do more than glance at the words on the scroll. It was a lament, a song from an ancient world, where the cold and ice were as dangerous as any beast. A song of loss and regret. She knew each line of the song by heart.

Winter's Howl

A young man took a step through mountain door,

A short trip to tend to his fence and farm,

The winter's chill and ice beneath the snow,

Did bring him to both swift and final harm.



His wife, a beauty who loved him so dear,

Went through her day not knowing awful truth,

That just a hundred yards from mountain door,

Her love's own blood did freeze despite his youth.

When widow did suspect that she might be,

She called with terror's breath from mountain door,

The truest cold had risen from the sea.

Only his howl of anguish echoed more.

Avacyn lunged forward with a massive beat of her wings, and Tamiyo slipped through the air, barely clearing the reach of the angel's burning spear. As Avacyn wheeled around in the eaves of the cathedral, Tamiyo let loose precisely targeted blasts of icy gale; a patch of feathers froze and shattered, white and red, falling like snow to the stone floors below.

The angel dove through the air, faster this time, her spear swinging in a wide arc. Tamiyo glided forward, baiting the attack, then tumbled in the opposite direction, more freezing blasts pushing her clear of the spear's tip. She targeted the angel's right wrist, then the joint of the left wing. As she passed behind, again, the spot where the wing met the shoulder. Avacyn was faster, and a single strike of her spear would likely mean Tamiyo's end, but the angel fought enraged, and the soratami moved with deftly calculated precision—Avacyn's face showed no pain, no frustration, but her maneuverability began to suffer. She slowed, and as she did so, the cathedral shook with that impossible laughter, the chattering of dry bones and the clawing of a thousand rats.

Tamiyo sent an urgent thought to Jace, hidden down below.

She's adapting. We don't have long.

Avacyn raised her spear, and for a moment, Tamiyo recognized the guardian from the stories, the Avacyn that had been a beacon to the people of Innistrad. A blinding light shone from her, illuminating every corner of the cathedral, and Tamiyo recoiled from its power. The light burned on, pressing on the two Planeswalkers like a physical force, driving Tamiyo back to the ground, driving Jace to his knees. The angel slowly descended, spear lowered at Tamiyo's chest, all her previous rage seemingly vanished—she was the picture of deadly grace.

Almost there...

And then she froze. The light persisted, but her motion stopped—she stood just feet from Tamiyo's motionless form, spear extended...and there she stayed. No breath, no fluttering of feathers, complete stillness. But the immobilizing light kept pressing down upon them.

"It's done, Tamiyo. She's, well, not sleeping exactly, but it's the closest thing I could manage."

"Jace, perhaps it's slipped your attention..."

"Working on that. But listen. She's the source of the madness among the angels. They synchronize with her somehow. And through her, the church. But...she's not the origin. She's being affected by something else, and—you were right! She's still holding something else at bay. I can't see it, but I think if I push a little deeper..."

"Jace, that's enough."

"Wait. No. That's..."

The air filled with the smell of rotting meat. Avacyn's light did not dim, but the sense of glory vanished from it; the light was cold, sickening, oily, and cruel. The angel rounded on Jace, Tamiyo seemingly forgotten, and she walked with purpose over to his crumpled form.

"Defiler," she whispered, her voice the sound of skin crackling away to ash in the flame. "Thief. Pustule of corruption." She reached down and placed her hand on his chest. Anything else she might have whispered to him was drowned out by his screams.



Avacyn, the Purifier | Art by James Ryman

Tamiyo focused on the link between their minds, tried to offer him solace, any relief from the pain before the end came. Layers of his consciousness had already been peeled away, flayed into insensate misery by the angel's agonizing grasp. But his mind was layered, protected, and the pain had not yet penetrated his deepest thoughts.

Tamiyo. The scroll. The iron scroll. You showed it to me. An old story. A powerful story. The survivors of a place that was lost...Serra's realm. That cataclysm, that power...the story fits. You know it does. You can stop this.

Even as she felt his agony, even as she felt him starting to die, with the knowledge that she would be next, she did not hesitate in the slightest in her reply.

And then? She is still defending this world, Jace, despite her madness. Did you ever make a promise, Jace? I made one, long ago. And promises aren't just to be kept when the keeping of them is easy. We make promises for times like this, when we desperately want to break them. No, Jace. The scroll stays closed.

Disbelief. Anger.

I'm sorry, Jace. Sometimes, our stories have to end.