

Battle of Thraben

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When we last saw Jace, he had just laid eyes on the third Eldrazi titan, Emrakul. Realizing the enormity of the situation, he planeswalked to Zendikar to rally the Gatewatch; it would take all of them to destroy the eldritch monstrosity.

Jace shuddered involuntarily as he opened his eyes on Innistrad. The air was quite a bit colder here. It had a different smell, too, a different feel. The scent was strange, almost metallic, and when he exhaled his last breath of Zendikar's air and breathed in Innistrad, he felt it. There was a thickness to the air here. That first breath hurt, just a little.

The sky was tearing itself apart. Storm clouds swirled, as if there were a gale in every direction, and no sunlight escaped the horizon. The plane's eternal dusk had given way to a purplish glow. His eyes didn't want to adjust to the dark; they fought him every moment of the way. He squinted toward the horizon, toward the hole in reality, and tried to focus. Focus. Focus. His mind felt heavy, here. Like a sack of wet rice on top of his neck. Sloshing, grinding, sliding away...

There was a chime in his mind. Or the memory of a chime. A reminder of himself, and his eyes cleared. He stood atop a hill, looking down on the rolling fields that surrounded Thraben. He could see the city now, and half of it was ablaze. There were battles raging in the streets. Torches. Shouting. Screaming. He wasn't sure whether he was hearing the screams from this distance, or feeling them. And above it all, up in the sky...he couldn't bring himself to focus there. Not yet.

A second set of sounds brought Jace's focus to a more clear and present issue. Growling. Snarling. Eyes glowing a sickly green in the dark.

"Werewolves again," Jace muttered to himself. He reached out into the darkness and lightly touched the minds that he found there. Three of them, ravaged by madness and changed into something he could barely recognize. As they crept out of the shadows, he saw the werewolves clearly. Their fur was patchy, their skin infused with the same latticework pattern that he had seen all over the organic matter of Innistrad.

Jace made a call. There wasn't enough left of these minds to be saved. There was no subtlety in his mental assault; he grabbed ahold of their senses and overloaded each one—blinding light, deafening sound, smells so intense they choked on them. It wasn't pretty, but he needed to establish a foothold here for when the others arrived.



Contingency Plan | Art by Ryan Yee

Two of the werewolves whimpered and fell; they twitched, and then went still. The last of the three... laughed? He could feel its mind changing, adapting, growing in response to the assault. The mental connection broke, and he watched as the creature's skin rippled, its limbs lengthened, its claws elongated, and its skin oozed. Jace stumbled backward. Whatever he had done had triggered some sort of reflexive mutation. Now, he wasn't even sure what he was looking at.

With a quick gesture, he split into a dozen reflections, and the monster spent a moment sniffing the air before focusing in on his real body, the illusions ignored. Jace looked around for an escape route and found none. Options raced through his mind, and were discarded one by one. Jace's illusions, semi-substantial, tried to crowd the beast, buying him more time, until...

...a flash of light, the sound of a whipping blade and tearing flesh. The horror dropped into a mangled, whimpering pile. Gideon.

"It's fine, Jace. I've got your back."

Jace straightened his coat. "Did you get lost on the way? Make a stopover in Ravnica for snacks?"

"It's not easy following you to a place I've never been. Hmm." Gideon stared down the hill toward Thraben. If he was having a hard time with his senses, he wasn't showing it. "Bigger than the other two. And it's got quite the force between us and it. What's the plan?"

A heat shimmer appeared in the air, and a woman stepped out of it.

Chandra rubbed her hands together. "Same plan as last time, right? Fire? I guess that wasn't the plan at the time, but it did the trick. Usually does." She put her hands on her hips as she looked down at the chaotic scene below.

The hill rumbled slightly, the only herald of Nissa's arrival. She frowned as she knelt down, placing her palm against the ground. "The mana here is dark. Twisted. It's in the soil, the trees...Emrakul did some of this, but..."

“This is your first time to Innistrad, right? ‘Dark and twisted’ is kind of a regular feature.” Jace continued, “So, we’ve basically got the same scenario as last time, with a couple minor wrinkles. Emrakul is moving on Thraben, and we need to get there first. Nissa will use her planar glyph to tap into the leyline network. Gideon will clear us a path to get close. We channel the plane’s energy through Chandra, and she does her thing.”

Nissa shook her head. “It’s not going to work. The leylines have already been redirected. Into that.”

Jace tried to force a grin. “Well, yes. The cryptolith network. They’re focusing all the leylines toward Thraben now. That, plus the fact that Thraben is the densest population of life on Innistrad, will mean that Emrakul will almost certainly be drawn there. That center point should amplify the glyph’s effects. Quite similar to the hedron network, actually.”

“If we can get close enough to it. But if we get that close, Emrakul will destroy us.” Nissa’s voice was quiet, but firm. “And if we don’t get that close, I’ll be able to tap into one or two leylines from any other vantage point. Three at most. It won’t be enough.”

Chandra put her hand on Nissa’s shoulder. “Hey. One leyline or twenty, you tap me in, and we’ll make it enough.”

Gideon sighed. “Nissa, do you believe you can do this? We’re not going to try a plan that we’re not all committed to.”

Nissa picked up a handful of dirt and sifted it between her fingers. She glanced up to the faces of her companions. Gideon, concerned. Jace, impassive. Chandra, excited. She closed her eyes and listened for several long seconds. To her heartbeat, to the blighted soil beneath her, to her memories.

“Yes.”

“Look at it, Gared. Pretty, in a way. Your world is ending.” Liliana watched as Thraben began to burn and tentacles reached down from the storms to rake the earth below. The sky swarmed with angels, and the ground beneath the titan just swarmed. From this distance, she could make out only the movement, an unending, writhing mass of creatures, pressing as close to the source of the world’s end as they could.

“Yes, mistress. S’what it does around here, mostly.” The geistmage’s apprentice, with his bulging eye, looked forlornly down at the chaos.

“Ah, there they are. See the fire and the flashes of light? Those must be Jace’s little friends. Looks like they’re headed straight toward the center of it all.”

Gared tilted his head, an interesting effect atop his already asymmetrical body. “Yes, mistress. I couldn’t help but notice, you’ve raised this lovely little army to help, but we’re staying up here, and the others are down there.”

“Hmm. I suppose that’s true.”

Chandra was screaming. The others couldn’t tell whether they were screams of pain or joy or rage, they just heard the screams and felt the overwhelming heat. She was incandescent, an inferno that walked, and she projected fire in every direction, scorching her friends but charring wave after wave of the mutated remains of what had been the people of Thraben, just days ago.



Spreading Flames | Art by Chase Stone

The screaming stopped, and the fires went out. Chandra dropped to her hands and knees, and Gideon leapt forward to cover her. They were trapped in what had been a market square, two of the four entrances blocked by rubble and fallen buildings. A dilapidated, lattice-scarred tower leaned tenuously over the cobblestone road that led farther into the heart of the city—but both it and the road they had entered on were blocked by rank after rank of Emrakul's legion.

Some of them were still recognizably human. Their voices were a screeching whirl of screams and gibberish. Some of them were what remained of beasts, of angels, of things unrecognizable. Some moved with purpose, others merely lumbered and moaned, their limbs limp and their flesh melting like candle wax.

And behind them loomed the storm.

The body of the titan was still mostly hidden from view, but its presence was everywhere. Emrakul. The storm raged, and impossible forking lightning thrashed and slashed the city below. Tentacles would emerge from the black clouds, scraping low along the ground, rumbling as city blocks were reduced to ash and stone.



Emrakul, the Promised End | Art by Jaime Jones

“Options. I need options.” Gideon surveyed the square, sural unfurled. “Nissa. Elementals?”

The elf shook her head. “I could call, but we wouldn’t like what would answer.”

Gideon grunted his frustration. “Chandra? You ready to go another round?”

Chandra was doubled over, hands on her knees, breathing hard. She raised a hand and gave a weak thumbs-up gesture. “Sure thing, boss. Just getting started.” She coughed and straightened up—her face was covered in soot and ash, but her smile seemed genuine enough.

“Jace. What have you got?”

Jace scanned the area again. “We’re not going forward. We’ve got a defensible open space to work with. I say we use the glyph here.”

Gideon nodded. “Nissa, can you do it?”

Nissa knelt down, putting both of her palms on the ground. A green glow snaked up from the ground, wrapping her arms in a verdant light. “Two leylines. Three if I push.”

“Do it.” Gideon’s voice held the slightest hesitation. “The rest of us, we need to cover her. The resistance we’ve faced this far has been incidental. I’m not even sure it’s noticed us yet.”

Jace gestured toward the tower that overlooked one of the entrances to the square. Two illusory marks appeared on it. “Chandra, I need you to hit the tower here and here. When the lattice transforms stone, it is quite resistant to damage, but expands when exposed to extreme heat. That should topple the tower and block off the street.”

“What?” Chandra glanced back, hands already ablaze.

“I read it in a book. Trust me.”

Chandra thrust her fists toward the tower, and two arcing fireballs struck precisely where Jace had marked. Seconds later, the entire structure collapsed, blocking off most of the street as it crashed into the inn on the other side.

The market square came alive—new growth sprang from the packed dirt and cobblestones, and the air, sour and foul, cleared slightly. Nissa stood motionless in the center of it, as glowing runes appeared on the ground around her, snaking their way from her feet until the complex glyph was complete.

There was a shrieking sound from the hordes around them. As one, they turned and charged toward Nissa—and Gideon charged to intercept them. He hit the line with powerful vertical slashes, and drove his body into their ranks, golden sparks lifting into the night air as blows deflected off his body. He roared a challenge as he slashed in a wide circle, trying to inflict as much damage as possible and draw as much attention to himself as he could.



Give No Ground | Art by Tyler Jacobson

But the creatures did not fall easily, and those that fell did not stay down. Even fully dismembered creatures stayed still for only a moment; they grew new hideous limbs from each fresh wound, and walked, crawled and skittered past, drawn directly to Nissa and the glyph.

“Nissa, are we ready? Because I really, really think now is a good time.” Chandra paced at the edge of the flaring glyph, as Nissa muttered incomprehensible syllables, eyes firmly shut. Chandra gave a yell of warning to Gideon before washing the entire street in a wave of flames. She looked back over her shoulder to see Nissa reaching down into the earth and pulling up what looked to be a spectral thorned vine, wide around as a tree trunk. She strained to pull it up from the earth, and she gasped in shock as those spectral thorns cut into her arms.

Nissa grunted through gritted teeth. “Get...ready. Almost...there.” She reached down again, and raised a second vine. This one pulled and buckled, thrashing back and forth in her grasp like a serpent. With a pained effort, she managed to wrap it around her waist as an anchor, and reach down to the ground for a third.

Chandra paced, not sure what to do next. There was nothing she could do for Nissa, and Gideon was doing what he could to stop a flowing mass of creatures moving their way. She glanced up, and immediately regretted it. Limbs, tentacles, and other lattice-wracked extremities were starting to climb up over the buildings and rubble, in every direction. Hundreds of them. She glanced back to Nissa, and watched her fall to her knees.

The third spectral vine was darker than the other two, the barbs more cruel, its motion more sinuous and chaotic. Nissa was trying to get it under control, but it had managed to wrap itself around her neck, and it looked as if it was trying to drag her down into the ground.

“Life cannot stop...even when it knows it must...even when it knows it is wrong! Alone and discordant! Even when it knows!” Nissa’s voice echoed, her eyes glowed a sickly purple, and then she dropped limp onto the ground. The vines were gone. The glyph went instantly dark. And the hordes of creatures continued their approach.

“Fall back!” Chandra yelled as she rushed to Nissa’s side, scooping up her head as gently as she could. “Come on, come on, you need to wake up!”

“There’s nowhere to fall back to, Chandra!” Jace took up position next to the two, and reached down to touch Nissa’s forehead. “She’s still in there. Just a bit stunned. She’ll be fine in a couple minutes.”

Gideon came running back to the others, as the crowd of creatures slowly pressed closer. “I’ll watch over her until she wakes up. You two planeswalk back to safety.”

Chandra stood, hands ablaze. “Not gonna happen. We’re all walking out of here together, or...” Her bravado faded with her trailing words.

“Or not at all,” Jace supplied. “Together or not at all?”

Chandra opened her mouth to respond, then cocked her head to the side. “Wait...what is that?”

The Planeswalkers heard them before they saw them—growling, moaning, crunching, and tearing, as ranks of the undead spilled into the square. They moved in tight formations, throwing themselves, biting and clawing into the mutated creatures that surrounded the Planeswalkers, ripping them apart with terrible strength.



Liliana’s Elite | Art by Deruchenko Alexander

Necrotic flesh met mutated limbs in an explosive clash, both sides heedless of pain or losses. But the zombies moved with precision and purpose. When their ranks were shredded, they were immediately

replenished. And when they reached the Planeswalkers, they parted, formed a defensive perimeter around them, and started pushing outward.

Then, their general appeared.



Dark Salvation | Art by Cynthia Sheppard

Liliana floated forth, arms spread wide, the Chain Veil hovering just beyond her fingertips. Her tattoos blazed with light and dripped with blood. At a casual flick of her wrist, bolts of necromantic energy swept in wide arcs, reducing the corpses of the mutated creatures to ash. All the cancerous growth, all the twisted vibrancy was simply snuffed out. In a field of unending, unnatural life, a sphere of stillness and death arrived, and there it reigned.

Liliana's expression softened from exultant fury to a demure smile in an instant, as she dropped gracefully to the ground. Her tattoos faded, and the Veil seemed to diminish. "Oh, Jace. I got here as soon as I could."

"What are you doing here?" Gideon was still in a combat stance, his sural flowing with imbued power.



Collective Effort | Art by Eric Deschamps

“The nice lady with the uncomfortable dress just saved our butts, Gideon. Calm down a second.” Chandra turned her back to Liliana and stepped between them.

Nissa stirred and struggled to her feet. “That...thing she carries. It’s an abomination.” Nissa flinched from the Veil, refusing to look anywhere near it.

Liliana’s smile curved its way across her face. “That’s a strange way of saying ‘thank you, Liliana, you saved my life, and I’ll always be in your debt.’”

Gideon grunted, and his sural retracted.

“Liliana, I’m...I didn’t think I’d see you again. But you’re here.” Jace pulled back his hood, the glow gone from his eyes. The dark circles underneath them were plain to see.

“Eloquent as ever. Yes. You’re rescued, you owe me, and now you should really planeswalk somewhere safe.”

Jace shook his head. “We can’t do that. We need to finish this. We’re so close. And with you covering us, I think we can do this. I know we can.”

Liliana rubbed her forehead. “This is not the time to be ridiculous, Jace. What we need to do is leave.”

“What you need to do is take that cursed thing and go.” Nissa stood unsteadily, but her sword was in hand. “I’ll not fight alongside it.”

Gideon raised a hand in warning. “You fought at Sea Gate alongside vampires, pirates, and worse, Nissa. We take the allies we can get, if they can be trusted.”

“Ah, the meat can reason!” Liliana beamed.

“But I don’t know if you *can* be trusted. Nissa’s instincts are rarely wrong, and I’m inclined to agree with her. That object is...a problem. But I don’t know you. He does.” Gideon turned to Jace. “So you’ll decide. Tell me, Jace. Can she be trusted?”

Liliana laughed, high and clear, before Jace could answer. “That’s a ridiculous question, and you know it. Look around you. I snap my fingers, and you’re all overrun. You are trusting me, right now. But if you won’t leave, I can’t force you. So tell me, brave heroes, what’s your plan now?”

She looked to each of their faces. Gideon, exasperated. Chandra, exhausted. Nissa, furious. And Jace, pained.

“Oh, wonderful.” Liliana smiled for lack of a better expression. “I’m sure this will end well.”