

Ravnica: One and the Same

Alison Lührs

From set *March of the Machine*

Phyresis hurt, of course, but as soon as my throat turned to metal and my tendrils hardened to wire and coils, I felt the part I knew to be myself descend, tuck away, become small and curled like a fiddlehead fern. The sensation of falling into darkness, the memory of an endless and empty void. I feel my faraway body tense at the memory of *nothingness* and panic, desperately afraid, and try to claw my way back to the surface of light and color with all my might. The rest of me screamed, charged my gaze, and turned a half-dozen around me to stone. I writhed and arched my back as Phyrexian oil rushed past my teeth.

“Unhand me! You’ll pay! You’ll die for this a thousand times over!” is what I tried to snarl, but all that came out was the scrape and clank of aluminum dragged over iron. The Phyrexian agents that I had turned to stone above me were shoved out of the way by more metal bodies, whom I quickly turned to stone, who were knocked over and replaced by more metal bodies, whom I then turned to stone. The growing pile of statues of former enemies crumbled and fell on my leg, but I did not feel it, because my leg had turned to living iron.

I am not one to retreat, but all I can do was sink. Fall and collapse into the depths of myself. I am desperately afraid. I sink into the walls of my mind, and as I descend, as the metal leeches into every vein, I find something untouched in the walls of my mind.

Like my body knew where to put my mind, like it would be safe here.

It had put part of me here before.

I fled into that private little place, that secret door behind a metaphorical bookcase, and as what was left of me dove in to flick the latch and vanish into my dreams. It would be safer if I did not wake.

I’m gone. I’m asleep. Dreams are where skin and flesh belong.

Something happens, on the surface.

A lure.

A familiar face.

There’s a moment I feel my body kiss, but not the way I want, and the dream turns sour. I dive deeper to forget the sensation, the fear that my body had done what my heart would never want.

Now, I watch what we do through the haze of memory and dream. Watching us now, riding a cold and inorganic branch of a strange and alien tree, leading the destruction of the city I love so much, feels like sleepwalking. I am having a challenging time discerning the difference between the nightmares we are enacting and the pleasant memories I recall. It feels as if I cannot tell if I got out of bed or not. And yet still I feel awake and alive and glorious, charged with purpose by Elesh Norn herself. Surrounded by the majesty of Phyrexia I come to the city of Ravnica to envelop it in our embrace.

I sit side-saddle on a great branch of the greatest tree, a gleaming limb of the mighty Realmbreaker, guiding it through Ravnica's slate-gray sky, descending the branches like a claw of slow-moving lightning. From up here I can hear the public panic, see clusters of flesh skitter like rats through the streets. The trifold structure of the Azorius Senate looms ahead and I smile, so many reasons to flatten it, so many methods. I choose the simplest one and order a branch to dive straight through its center. What dust and clouds arise in the impact are softened by the rain, and we can see the branch probe the insides of the Senate like a finger in a wound. We are delighted.



Art by: Leon Tukker

There is a building that catches my eye, to the side of the pool where one fountain used to spill, its appearance is unremarkable, but its gravity draws us close.

"Make landfall here," I call out. Dozens answer our command, and Realmbreaker continues to plunge downward. Realmbreaker's great limbs dive into the cobblestones and lift it to the sky, but we order caution amid the chaos—I want to enter that one building but am not sure why. It is the prison I was held in, the prison I tried, and succeeded, in escaping, and here from the depths of my own mind, the horrid memory burst forth like a spring. My heart pounds in the memory of the fear and it is confusing, why does this body panic so? Panic is a weak and fleshy state. Perhaps answers are inside the building. I guide my branch downward and the breadths of my forces join alongside as . . .

I am seventeen years old.

My feet have been submerged in standing water for weeks, and I pry at a blindfold with my tendrils. I hiss and wrestle with teenaged might, but someone is holding me back—his nails dig into my arms as he holds me close. I would overpower him any other day, but half my ribs are broken, blood pours from my side. I heave for breath. Everything is dark and smells of misery and piss. The hands holding me are not familiar, they belong to a stranger.

"I'll tell you what's happening, how about that?"

His voice is gravelly and close to my ear. I want him to be shale. I want his tongue to crumble to sandstone. He is an Azorius prison guard, and I want to tear him apart with my hands.

I cannot be sure. Is this happening now?

The only other gorgon calls to the rest of us from across the prison cell.

“You’re not alone my doves, I’m here, I’m here.”

I yell for her, and my yell is halted by a sob.

I hear two wet punctures, a scream, then a sound that reminds me of meat hitting the wet ground. The other Golgari prisoners call out for her. “Ludmilla!! No!”

“She’s on the ground now. You Golgari don’t mind that, love the ground don’t you.” I scream and hear her plea for the rest of us through her own anguish—“Don’t take their eyes, too, don’t take them, I’m here doves! I’m here, I’m here! You aren’t alone, I’m here!!”

And then, with a wet slice and a heavy thump, she was not. I was the only gorgon left.

I was not alone. We are never alone.

We?

We—Phyrexia, Golgari, are one and the same.

Something is wrong. I am having difficulty concentrating. I must demonstrate my capacity as general to stave off suspicions of weakness. But the dream just now serves my purpose. The dream is a reminder that I was not strong enough, that only we can eliminate such prejudice from the planes. Only We could have prevented that pain.

Where are we again? Air is smoky with debris and dampened by rain. Sky is netted with interwoven branches. My Phyrexian kin flood the streets, and we follow them into the prison where my weaker, past self was incarcerated.

My boots click as we step into the demolished front entrance of the prison. The roof is half caved in, holes in the floor lead to an elaborate network of secret cells and chambers. I never saw any of this until the day I tried to escape, so we continue onward.

A series of Azorius and Boros guards run out. I lean to my lieutenant and cannot help but smile as I say,

“Blind them.”

My agents sweep forward, and in ten delicious seconds, do just that.

A compleated Kraul I recognize as a lieutenant wipes blood from their claws. With a claw I point them upward. “Lead them to the Transguild Promenade as an example of what we do to the unjust.”

What is that saying again? An eye for an eye and an eye and an eye and an eye . . .

Our forces have opened a cavern that leads to the undercity. I recognize it, so we begin to descend.

“Turn my people into ours,” we command as we descend into the realm of the Golgari, “I’m here doves, I’m here. You aren’t alone. You’ll never be alone again.”

Deep branches plunge into the city below. I follow one down into the Golgari undercity. I am surrounded by Phyrexian allies swiftly transforming the faces of horror near, around above us, into faces glistening, perfect, compleat. Phyrexia is so beautiful, look how beautiful our people are together and gleaming. It is a hive in the truest sense, all pieces of a single purpose. It’s strange, we Golgari tried too hard to create a true swarm out of many disparate parts, and at last, we have assembled into a collective at last. And Realmbreaker dutifully follows—protruding from the surface above like great roots they upend Korozda, the great maze, and send a great crack through the cathedral walls of Sogthos. The sound of it vibrates in my chest and I laugh.

The hours of our invasion turn to a full day, then two, then more, we move ever forward, undeterred. We do not need the quaintness of sleep. We do not need supply. We need bodies.

This still feels like sleepwalking. A dream, a memory, comes to our mind. Through the crashes and collapse we sing without shame. The tune doubles as we sing, rattling in the metal of our throat:

“A castle grows in Old Below, Its windows shine with an ancient glow. Some wander its maze, a mess of decay, and the Kingdom of Rot will rise one day.”

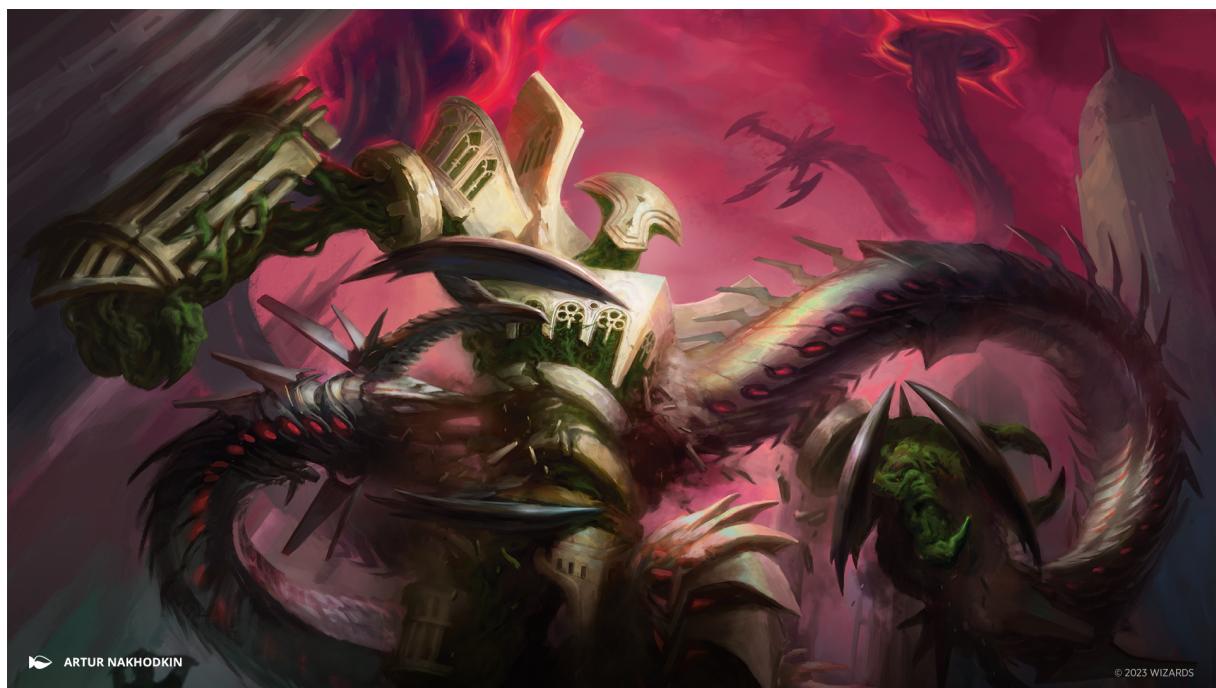
It is night on Ixalan, and I sing to the vast and buzzing jungle. Our little dinghy has done so well, to take us so far upriver to the golden city. There’s a sheen of humidity on my skin and it turns pale teal in the bright moonlight. Fireflies dance about us, and Jace is smiling like he has a secret.

“Cheery song,” he teases.

“The Golgari have little to be cheery about.” I open my eyes.

My lieutenant is staring at me. Did I speak aloud? I am incapable of explanation.

Fortunately, a cohort of Selesnyan warriors tear through a hole in the maze—how strange to see them down here!—we are amused, how quaint their vision of unity is. They think they march as one, but they don’t know what one is.



Art by: Artur Nakhodkin

The undercity is swarmed with my cohort, transforming my subjects and kin, it is such a proud and beautiful sight. But I am walking, it seems, toward somewhere I remember. We don’t mind, we are busy barking orders and doing our job and delighting in how well we serve Phyrexia. The glory of Phyrexia has, and uses, a thousand killers, but they, too, saw our potential. Elesh Norn sees we’re more valuable as an evangel, as a leader, and it tugs at my heart to know she sees my most treasured quality. So few see me as anything more than a being bred to kill . . . but they saw what I could truly do. A part of me remembers learning this on the deck of a boat, perfecting it from a stone throne, and look at us now. What glory I can give as a general. I take us through alleyways and connections, descending stairwells and closes to a small flat tucked away from it all. Sleepwalking in a literal sense.

I am awake for a moment, and I know my old apartment. I open the door.

Gods, it's small. I adore it. It is unremarkable and full of waste.

I haven't lived here since I became guildmaster. The flat is cramped, crowded with tokens and souvenirs from at least a dozen different planes. A banner of Lothwain above the stove, a Tharan pot I kept tea in, a Kaldheimr drinking horn, an entire Segovian chariot I could barely carry into the Blind Eternities but now sits under a bell jar—I always liked trinkets. It is garish, all these items in one room, how discordant they all are next to each other, but I like it. The effect is strange, being in this old room. I smile to be back with the things from my old life, before I was guildmaster, before the Multiverse became complicated. In some ways, things were nicer when my life was so portable. Just look at all my treasures and the stories I brought with them. I'm not sure if this is happening now or if this is someone else's memory I can walk through and touch. Why would I dream of an ugly apartment over the glory of my people unifying the Multiverse into one perfect whole? Why would I dream of meaningless filth like this? Memory and dream mingle. I remember the shine of another plane's stars. I remember buying tea in the jungles of one plane and bringing it home to the friends of this one. I know that those places exist, that all manner of stories happen within them, and I take comfort in how much more like us, how much more familiar they will be. No longer will I walk uncertain onto the soil of another plane, but instead we will walk with ease with the language of our mothers in our ears.

There is an object on the center table I cannot identify.

I know it is an object. I know it is dull silver, a series of stacks of circles and etchings, with one long point extending from an empty ring on its side. I pick it up, turn it back and forth, and long orange lines of magic briefly appear from its points. I am increasingly irritated, what is this? I search my mind, but the knowledge is distant, kept safe by the cushion of memory. No, kept safe by something (someone?) else.

It is the weeks before the War of the Spark, and I am laying on the floor of my apartment clutching my forehead in the worst migraine of my life. The air rings and lights flare as deep in my mind I feel at the latch deep down in my own mind. One hand presses the bridge of my nose while the other clings desperately to the thaumatic compass. I had told my attendants I needed privacy and hurried my way here, just in time to lock myself in my old flat, fall to the rug, and with sheer will forcibly pry open the trapdoor of my mind where Jace and all my memories of him were kept.

I grip the compass so tight it cuts my hand. I mourn knowing our plan was in vain, but what makes me weep is realizing I forgot the first time I fell in love.

The thaumatic compass is such a beautiful thing, so desperately important and vital. This fresh headache is rife with irritation. The object is of no consequence. I hold it precious in my palm like a stolen gem and secret it away in my pocket.

Above there is a deep rumble that draws us out of the ugly and boring apartment. As I emerge onto the undercity streets I see the ceiling, the soil above peel away as the branches of Realmbreaker sink deeper. I grab hold of a branch and ride it upward toward the Chamber of the Guildpact. I see familiar faces in the sky. Ral Zarek and Tomik Vrona approach, flying close on the back of a gargoyle. Even from this distance I see them grip hands before Ral steps off onto the streets as Tomik takes off. A bitter wave of jealousy fills what is left of my stomach and I grip the object in our dress, though I do not understand why.

The sky is an eruption of warfare. The immense Boros skyship looms over half the horizon, disgorging angels and skyknights with brilliant flashes of fire. On the other side of the skyline, great rickety Izzet prototypes blinking cyan and red teeter toward the rooftops. One collides with a Phyrexian ship, which chains half a dozen explosions upward to hit the compleated angels above.

"Spill as much glistening oil on the streets as you can," I command to our newly compleat Golgari kin, "and blind them all." Half of the Phyrexian fleet focuses on the lightning mage fighting through the crowd as the other continues blinding every citizen in their path. As they do so, metallic hands plucking soft pairs of eyes, the victims they leave behind universally collapse onto the concrete in terror and pain. From sky to soil, the plane is a cavalcade of war.

I remember blue-tinted skeletons, zombies, all manner run where I point, Nicol-Bolas, the God-Emperor, looms high above me. He is the only one who ever trusted me to lead. He is the only one who ever gave me a chance except for Phyrexia, except for my new family, my new people, they trusted me and look how I have rewarded them with glory!

As our lieutenants carry out my orders I am pleased with the expediency, with the tactic of blinding first and leaving them to phyresis. The screaming and stumbling masses collapse to the ground and feel their way forward, their hands smearing in oil, fingers patting the empty wounds on their face.

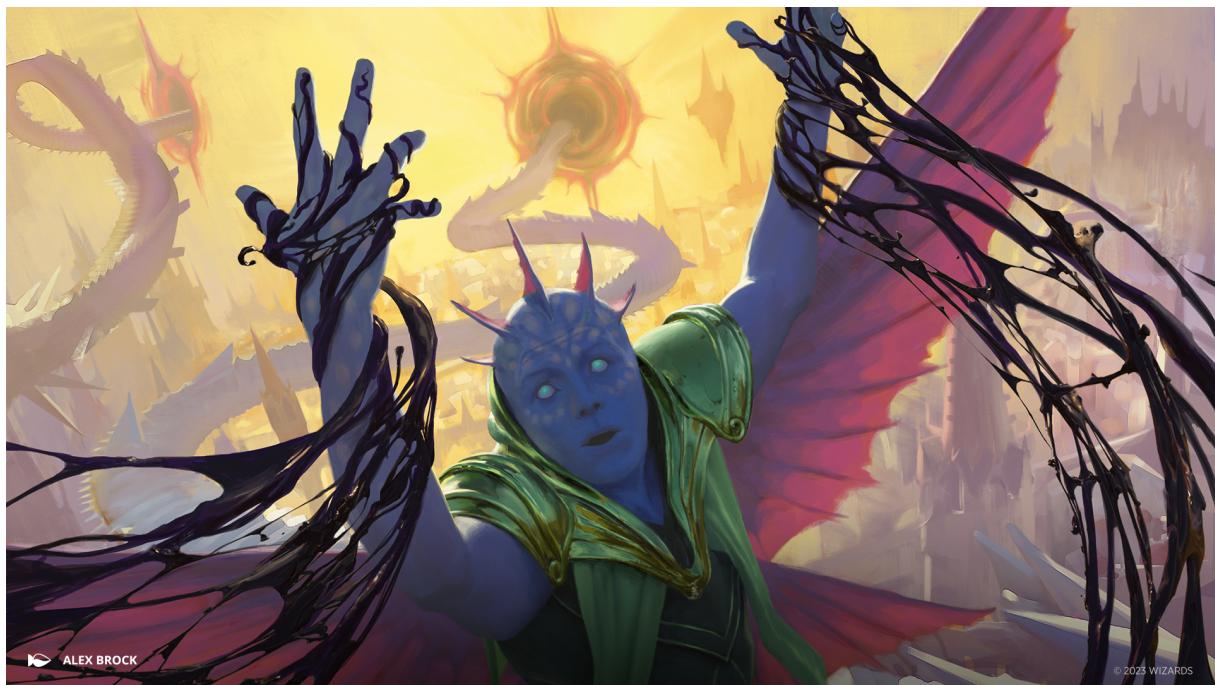
The scene is an utter mess of oil and blood and the jelly of eyes. I look to the instigators, to the Golgari-turned-Phyrexians, and I am filled with pride. At last, my people are in charge.

The dream shifts (why won't this headache go away?) and we are guiding a swarm to destroy the roof of the Chamber of the Guildpact, delighting in crushing Niv-Mizzet's seat, reveling in the dust of a newly repaired roof crumbling to the foundation. The whole building opens like a doll's house, and we fit so nicely inside, all these little chairs and tables, an entire wall bare and exposed like a weeping wound.

One exposed wall leads to a room I recognize. Out front, the desk Lavinia used to attend to her duties. Beyond that, the entryway I was never allowed past, the private office he used to spend late nights in, the washroom with the mirror he never needed, the bed he never slept in. He never slept much, but he sure went out of his way to make other people sleep.

To our right, where the south wall used to be, the city is in shambles. The Invasion Tree dives down through the metropolis like legs of a great spider. I don't like this dream anymore. I see Golgari warriors, their bodies blended with metal, I see them carry the same symbol of the flag that follows me, this isn't a good dream.

This headache is getting worse. Below me, I see many guilds running in terror, but others running in curiosity—a fleeing gaggle of Orzhov bankers takes off in one way while a few Simic biomancers approach as volunteers, curious with this new form of biomancy. A handful of Izzet we don't blind attempt to study the oil, naïve to the risk as they smear it between their fingers. I motion to welcome them.



Art by: Alex Brock

Then, a disruption. The forces of the city are pushing back, I can tell from the clink and clatter of alarm in our cohort's voices. We spot the source—approaching fast that fleshy idiot with the lightning has ignited part of Realmbreaker. I leap for a branch and ride it to the roof, ascending to join our collective and take Ral Zarek head on. All of us are here, my siblings from abroad mass and swam with the recently compleated—Golgari superiors push their former Izzet brethren to the front, the blood from their eye sockets mixing with oil, in hope of distracting and disgusting the Izzet guildmaster.

As he gets closer in midair, we see Ral Zarek falter. He avoids my gaze, wisely afraid of petrification, but as a result sees the damage we have done to his people. Ral lands on the roof, panting, furious, he keeps his eyes on the ground and walks forward. We step forward to meet him, claws out, nimble and ready to dodge—I briefly see the orange magic from something in my pocket pointing straight toward him—and I rush to attack.

But there, in his hand, is a second device I do not recognize. It is small, cylindrical, and in one boxer's punch he plants it right on my sternum and hits a button.

My vision whites out.

Everything convulses and stutters.

I collapse.

I briefly awaken, then vanish.

We groan, hit the ground, then vomit black oily bile.

My body is disintegrating. Broken. A device attuned to Phyrexian oil? The dream tells me I will recover, but our body screams in agony. I see my own blood—it is glistening black, and I vomit a second time.

I hear and sense my brethren hastily retreating. My broken body is an example to be made of. They see my brokenness as weakness, proof I am unfit to lead. My forces do not stay long enough for me to argue my case, nor would I have the strength to argue if I tried. By my own measure, I am unworthy.

I can barely make out what Ral says. It sounds something like sorry. He still cannot bring himself to look at me, and my vision darkens as he walks away.

The dreams fade. The headache blooms. Everything around me collapses.

I cannot move my body. I lay beneath the rubble, half-flesh, half-metal, bleeding and broken. I cannot take a full breath, and each exhale brings a mouthful of blood and oil. I have seen death so many times. But this time I cannot run. If I look up through the open ceiling to the clouds above, I can see the edges of Realmbreaker still, and hear cheers in the city streets around me.

Time for me to go, too, I suppose. I have compleated hundreds, I have razed Ravnica, I am glorious and good. Now, I close my eyes and wait for the death Phyrexia promised I would never face alone.

Time ceases meaning. The rain comes and goes.

I bleed, I empty, and I wake in the small and distant corner of my mind phyresis could never touch.

A vision appears to me, in these moments before I die, I release from this dreadful body and fall back into my own mind. It is a void. Dark and uncertain. A voice nudges me, “Can you open your eyes for me?”

The midmorning light of a café on Tin Street is bright and welcoming, it filters through the curtains and reflects off last night’s rain on the pavement. I see Jace in front of me. He wraps bare hands around a cup of coffee. I can see the start of his scar on his right ring finger. He is not wearing the cloak, here, instead he wears a handsome wool cape, fresh linen shirt, a pin holding it all in place. No hood, his freshly cut chestnut hair still has the sharp lines from when he trimmed it. There’s a bag of newly bought books at our feet. His face is open, friendly, with a relaxed smile and a little more of a crease at the corners of his eyes than what I remember when we first met all those years ago. He looks me dead in the eyes, as always, unafraid. It should have been like this.

“You look great,” I say.

“Can you breathe?”

“Don’t flatter yourself Beleren, you don’t *literally* take my breath away,” I deadpan.

“What can you remember?”

The question unnerves me. What do I remember? I remember watching my life distantly through my own eyes these last few days. I remember Realmbreaker, I remember my transformation, and slowly I remember with horror that I lured Jace. I betrayed him. I transformed him. And then I left, returned home, and then

“I deserve to die,” I concluded. Before, I had vowed to never kill someone who didn’t deserve it. How many hundreds of times over did I break my vow yesterday? Jace’s eyes soften. He has excused my murders so many times. He should say he agrees. He should say that I deserve my own punishment. That would be merciful, but instead he says—

“I would be sad if you did.” His forgiveness is agony. Please. Let this dream be over so I can die, alone, as always, as I deserve. “May I come in?”

I know what he means and guard my mind. “I’m ashamed of what you’ll see.”

“You mean see what you did?”

I realize I’m shaking in self-repulsion. “Turns out I’m as monstrous as everyone thought.”

He takes my fingers and places them on the back of his right hand. My fingers trace a stick-straight scar that begins on his knuckle and runs in a long angry line down his forearm that continues under his shirt sleeve. I remember *his* memory; the Consortium. Alhammarret. I remember he is a monster, too. So, I let him inside. I squeeze his hand and nod and feel him nestle alongside my mind.

He sees eyes and blood and oil, hears my delight, feels the writhe of my metallic lips against his. And all he does is grip my hand tighter. It kills me.

"Let's go somewhere private," he says quietly, and with the logic of dreams we are suddenly on an open beach with sand as soft and white as flour, with the brilliant full moon reflecting off the sea in a starlit dance. Jace lays next to me, the air is warm, the breeze scented with nightblooms and salt.

"The you that kissed me wasn't you. The you that led the invasion wasn't you. The you I know only hurt people who deserve it." He is so close, so relaxed. "And that part that *is* you knew you'd be safe here. We're in the corner of your mind I made for you all those years ago."

"Just us monsters here."

"Guess so," he smiles.

Here, in my dream, with my beloved whom I betrayed, secreted deep within a broken body that ordered the slaughter of thousands. I feel another tear on my cheek.

"I am sorry I tricked you," I say.

"I'm sorry I didn't come like I promised," he replies. "None of this should have been like this."

"Nothing should have been this way," I agree. "I wish we could take it all back. Do everything the right way." He's looking at me like I'm saying something critical, like a piece of machinery in his mind just locked into place with my words. "Jace. Will you give me one last gift before I die?"

"Anything."

"I want a do-over."

He smiles. "I would like that, too."

I kiss him.

It is intense and sincere, desperate and immediate. He feels like a homecoming. Our cheeks press, he makes a small noise and the toes in my boots curl, I draw his lower lip gently between my teeth and he gasps in delight. The tide laps the beach. We grasp each other desperately, making up for lost time, our bodies drawing close on the sand. I run my hands through that hair, and it is just as soft as I hoped it would be, and when my nails skim the surface of his scalp, and he groans in response.

In a sudden rush, I finally get what kept Liliana on the hook all those years, and it draws my eyes up and around us as he runs a trail of kisses down my neck. Jace projects *back*, his mind overriding my own dream, a rush of images of his own; we're in a Kaladesh apartment, we're on the deck of *The Belligerent*, we're in a glade in Zendikar, we're in an Innistrad castle, we're in the Chamber of the Guildpact, our lips press and for one thrilling moment I feel the kiss from *his* perspective, and then seamlessly we're back on the beach surrounded by infinite impossible stars. I laugh, "You're incredible!" and he kisses me even harder.

And then, once we begin to tire, he draws up, and I smile to see a little brown freckle in his eye I never noticed before. He looks apologetic. "Brace yourself. This part hurts." He cradles my face, puts his forehead against mine, readies himself, and exhales as if he's about to exert effort. "I've got you."

I smile, uncertain what he's talking about. "You've always got me."

Vulnerability fits strangely in the window of my heart, but it is worth drawing the drapes for him. I rest a hand on his cheek and tell him what I feel, in *his* way. Silently, the words fill my mind and I fill them with the sun of Ixalan and the perfume of undercity roses, project the feel of our hands holding tight, the thrill in my chest when he smiles, the adoration of the brown freckle in his left eye. A cinder of hope that someday he sees my own face full of wrinkles, that our old and arthritic hands

will still clasp tight as we walk toward the clouding dark. There's a moment of recognition in his eyes, a softening at the edges, and one of those rare smiles that meets his eyes blooms across his face as he instinctively reads my own thoughts.

He kisses my forehead and I caress him back. Jace meets my eyes, forehead back to mine, and responds aloud, in *my* way.

"I love you, too, captain."

And I gasp as my mind and vision erupt in startling, incandescent white.

Ral

I just want to go home and sleep, damnit.

The rain has soaked through my clothes, there's more rubble than city at this point, and even though I've electrocuted more Phyrexian goons than I can count my body still jumps like there's more. The invasion ended two days ago, but my body hasn't got the memo yet. My hands still tired from casting, my shoulders still tight from panic. Recovery from the invasion *ought* to mean recovering for me, too.

I've been up for nearly two days at this point directing the remainder of the Izzet to lead the clean-up, to load rubble and raise buildings and wash all this damn blood away. But no matter how much I try to focus on the recovery effort all I can see is the long line of Izzet researchers and mages, standing side by side, a long line of screaming faces and empty sockets, and all I want to do is sleep and hope the memory vanishes. Gods, why can't I be an optimist.

Tomik is here now, at least, we stand overseeing what was the (second) Chamber of the Guildpact. He sits with his head in his hands, and I keep a palm on his shoulder as we both try not to think about eyes. But all I see is her face. Glaring and gleeful. She picked the way to transform them that would hurt everyone else the most. That wasn't her, and yet it absolutely was. My stomach turns and I try to swallow it down.

Climbing up the rubble behind me I hear footsteps. It's a high-level officer, one of the ones I trust. There's an apology on her face.

"Well?" I ask, "The haemalectric switch worked. What did you find?"

The officer's lip trembles, she knows what she is about to say will alarm me, and I brace for the inevitable when she announces,

"There's no sign of her body, sir."