

Episode 4: Heart of Fire

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*

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Sarkhan Vol recalled when he felt like he'd live forever, like he'd never grow old, like if he were to fall, it would be into the arms of legend, remembered forever as a thing beautiful and fearsome as the dragons themselves. He felt old now. Brittle and bitter. Broken: not like a sword in war, shattered by an adversary, but like an egg moldering from the inside, decay eating through the shell. These days, Sarkhan found himself worrying he wouldn't die, that he'd instead continue eternally on as this husk, nothing but rot on the inside, all his dreams and glories turned to maggot food. Like when he was under Nicol Bolas's thumb.

"That one looks young enough for our purposes," came a low voice from his right.

The monk Taigam had named himself as a loyalist, but there was something in his expressions and speech that suggested to Sarkhan *zealot* might have been a better description. Under different circumstances, in another life, Sarkhan might have burned him to ash upon first sight. But Sarkhan had seen in Taigam a grief cousin to his own. Like him, the Jeskai monk had lost something profound.

"Does it?" said Sarkhan, feeling like he needed to say something.

"Its heart needs to be strong. Otherwise, the ritual won't work. Your sacrifice must be able to endure pain equivalent to what you've suffered over the years."

And Sarkhan thought, *Necessity can be such a cruel thing*.

"This is how you fly with a dragon's wings once more," said Taigam, as though he had somehow heard Sarkhan's hesitation.

Sarkhan remembered what it was like, how it'd felt to have fire for blood. He recalled the sky and its vastness, flying through the star-drenched blackness of night, feeling invincible. He remembered all of it with painful clarity. He could have it back, and it could be effortless again. All he'd need to do is take the dragon's heart so he could begin mending his own. He'd done so much for them; he would do more still once restored.

It seemed a fair enough bargain.

"Yes," he said lowly, prowling forward through the tall, moon-colored grass, his spear in grip. The dragon took no notice of him. It was a young specimen, newly born from the storms, clumsy, graceless, bestial. It played with the corpse of a gazelle the way a kitten might accost a ball of yarn. Entrails fountained through the air as the dragon flung it up, but Sarkhan paid no attention to it.

To his surprise, excitement began to kindle in his chest. If the dragon killed Sarkhan for his audacity, it'd still be a better end than what waited: a slow, agonizing deterioration, an old age spent weeping for death's pity. To die here. To die in battle with a *dragon*. Yes, that was the exit Sarkhan vastly preferred. He raised his spear infinitesimally, balancing it along a muscled shoulder. Taigam had given no indication if he planned to participate in this hunt. Too late, Sarkhan wondered if he should have

asked. There was the risk now the monk might misstep, costing Sarkhan his quarry. But he would deal with that should the time arise.

Now, he had to focus.

The dragon paid no notice to Sarkhan until he crouched five feet away. The wind shifted direction, carrying his scent to it. The creature raised its head, its expression the same as the one Sarkhan had once seen on a Sultai nobleman's much-pampered pet cat: mouth slightly ajar, nostrils flared. It sniffed the air. There was no fear in its gaze, no menace either, only the innocent curiosity of a young predator that hadn't yet learned the world wasn't just a feeding trough. Sarkhan unfolded from the grass, raising his spear. The dragon's expression sharpened to one of hungry interest: here was prey that was still alive, prey that would respond to its claws, prey that would *scream*. It lowered to its haunches, preparing to spring, tail whipping across the air, flattening the grass where it struck. It let out a noise that made Sarkhan think again of that long-ago feline, a kind of yowling challenge, its pupils dilating until its eyes were almost a perfect abyssal black.

But Sarkhan Vol was too old and too desperate to be the dragon's new plaything.

He leapt at the dragon, who lunged in answer. Sarkhan torqued his body at the last possible instant, away from needle-toothed jaws as they snapped closed over the air. He ran the point of his spear over the creature's muzzle, tracing a line along the scaled hide before, as gravity reached up to claim him, bringing his weight down to the handle. The blade sank through the dragon's cheek and then deeper, Sarkhan kicking so momentum would carry both him and his weapon along the curve of his prey's throat, goring it open. Blood sheeted down across the grass. The dragon tumbled forward, bleating in pain, writhing and bucking, calling in a choking wail, and Sarkhan might have felt sorry for the beast if he wasn't so exhilarated by his success and if Taigam hadn't said in a low, urgent tone.

"Quickly. We need the heart before it dies."

Death was racing them to their prize. Already, the dragon's thrashing was beginning to lessen as more of its blood emptied over the grass, its cries quieting, thinning to gasps. Luckily, there were two of them and the work that Sarkhan's spear had begun would allow them to finish their task. Taigam raised his hands, calling to the air a blue fire that manacled itself around the dragon's limbs, pinning it to the cold soil of the steppes.

"Hurry," he urged.



Art by: Billy Christian

Sarkhan brought his spear above the creature, its screaming renewed now that it was bound: it was dying, and it understood that now; it was dying, and the instrument of its death stood over it like the farmer over his ailing bull, no longer good for anything but its meat. Almost, Sarkhan faltered. For as long as he had been alive, he had loved dragons, venerated them. This act was a blasphemy, a profaning of everything he'd once seen as holy.

But he'd come so very far. Wasn't this the way of things, too? The strong endured; the weak perished. The deer was sustenance for the wolf. If the dragon could die to someone like him, it didn't deserve its heart.

Besides, it was too late for second thoughts. If he stopped now, the dragon would die but it would be for an old man's cowardice instead of a warrior's redemption. Sarkhan told himself this as he sawed the dragon open, reaching up with both hands into its ribs, and taking a hold of its massive heart. Out of sight, Taigam began to chant, and Sarkhan droned its counterpoint, the words boring through his mind as he spoke them, like insects tunneling into his brain. They itched. They made him want to dig into his skull and extricate them. Sarkhan had no concept of Jeskai magic. But even in his ignorance, he recognized the spell's corrupted nature, and some part of him sadly thought for the first and last time, *We have made a mistake.*

As the spell reached its crescendo, Sarkhan lowered his face into the entrails of the dragon, his nose clogged with the coppery stink of its dying, and with his hands still clasped around the creature's heart, he bit down into the organ.

His world rippled into fire.

Incarceration by the Abzan was not part of Narset's plan. It happened quickly. The Abzan outrider scouts who found Elspeth and her on the borders of the stormplains were quick to tell the pair they were not authorized to be there and so were being apprehended for questioning. Narset insisted that their presence did not go against the accord created by the clans, but the scouts asked *what accord?* and Narset was forced to admit the other khans hadn't unanimously agreed upon the exact terms of said compact; it had stalled somewhat in the review process. Nonetheless, it was agreed upon that they'd at least try to see if the policies drafted would work in practice. Surely, that counted.

And the scouts had stoically listened to Narset's explanation, exchanging nervous looks between themselves, before saying in brisk but apologetic tones that they were still required to take the two in for a conversation with their khan. Otherwise, it'd be on their heads.



Art by: Livia Prima

Narset acquiesced, if reluctantly. Elspeth looked as if she wanted a fight but was placated by her companion's insistence that it wouldn't take too long, lapsing into a statue-like silence. Courtesies were owed. And they had, of course, gone to the stormplains rather spontaneously, after they had concluded the best place to find the alleged temple was where the dragonstorms were the fiercest.

Six hours after they were taken to Arashin, Elspeth broke her silence and said:

"Why do we delay? We could be free in moments to continue our journey."

"I am very aware of that, friend," said Narset, running a finger along the spines of the waiting room's meager bookshelf: it included several agricultural manifestos, a slim volume on hydroponics, some

contemporary poetry, and an abridged history of the Abzan, cobbled most likely from interviews with their ancestor spirits. Despite herself, Narset couldn't help a flicker of envy. "But we can't leave."

"Are you certain?" said Elspeth. "It won't take very much."

"No, no, no," Narset shook her head so hard her hair loosened from its formal coiffure. "We cannot. It would cause political turmoil between my clan and the Abzan. Possibly even war."

"None of that will matter if the planes are eaten alive by dragons."

"I understand that. I need you to be patient, Elspeth."

"I have been patient for far too long." The words were gritted out, each an ember in danger of becoming an inferno.

"Another hour, please. Then we can—" Narset hesitated. If she lost her gamble, she would need to honor this promise and then what? Her seneschals would be livid if she accidentally instigated inter-clan conflict. "—do it your way."

This seemed to mollify the archangel.

The holding cell wasn't uncomfortable. It was graciously adorned with both tapestries and carpets, silk-heaped cots, even a seating area beside the bookshelf. Jeweled lamps hung from the low ceiling, bronze light spilling across the room. A jug of cold water sat atop a wooden stand accompanied by handleless brass cups and a plate of some honeyed, nut-filled pastry, which Narset couldn't stop gnawing on, feeling like a mouse in a larder. Toward the corner was a modest bathroom complete with a small shower stall. The Abzan were known for their hospitality, but Narset hadn't been aware of the fact this generosity extended even to their criminals, alleged and otherwise.

"One hour," said Elspeth, deigning at last to seat herself on a mauve pouf.

Narset sighed in relief. "Thank you. I know it all seems incredibly trivial to you, but this peace we now have is such a frayed and tenuous thing, I'd prefer it not be jeopardized. The Abzan and the Jeskai have always been at odds. They believe in keeping their dead close, but we—"

"You don't believe in any afterlife, do you?"

"It is complicated," said Narset. "It's not that we do not believe in an afterlife, per se. It is more that we do not think that the spirit should continue on in any meaningful fashion."

She stared into Elspeth's placid golden eyes and thought, too late, that perhaps she could have spared the archangel this explanation, what with the latter being the embodiment of a spirit persevering in a consequential manner.

"As you can imagine, this has been the source of some conflict. The Abzan not only revere their dead but make them a priority in many decisions. Nothing in the clan happens without their involvement. And I understand it, of course. Dromoka all but informed the Abzan that their clan would be eradicated if they didn't forswear their ancestral worship. Unfortunately, that means they can become mired in hindsight, which means—"

Narset cleared her throat.

"Which means, we have had communication issues about the topic before, yes. We see them as somewhat backward looking. And the Abzan, well—"

"What do they think of the Jeskai?"

"They think we're dogmatic and arrogant. I don't know that they're incorrect."

Elspeth seemed to consider this for a time. Before she could answer, there came a knock at the door. It opened then to reveal a young Abzan woman, coal-eyed, cowed. She bowed.

“The khan will see you now.”

The gazelles seemed more skittish than what Ajani was accustomed to, but perhaps they could sense the encroaching Abzan riders. Four of them waited at their appointed locations, ready for Ajani’s signal. It was rare for gazelle to stray so close to Mardu borders, preferring the vast steppe. However, neither the leonin warrior nor the clan were inclined to complain. The Abzan were skilled hunters who had had centuries to acclimatize to unpredictability, who understood that the same year can hold feast and famine both, especially here in their arid lands. And Ajani, well, he was very used to loss and misfortune. If they succeeded in taking this herd, it’d guarantee them all food and supplies for a good long time. As such, they weren’t going to waste the opportunity.

Ajani stared out at the herd. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong, but it felt too like some trick of either the moonlight or the melancholy: perhaps the gazelle’s eyes weren’t as white-ringed as he thought. Perhaps this was just how they breathed, and the hummingbird flutter of their chests was no indication of heightened nervousness. It frustrated Ajani that he could not tell. Then again, he’d failed at so much else already.

He pushed his self-loathing down. There was work to be done. He could wallow in his melancholy later. Ajani advanced another step. Once he was close enough, he would give the signal. He and the Abzan riders would chase the herd to a central point and take down as many of them as they could. It was a simple enough task. This wasn’t their first collaboration. And once the hunt was properly underway, Ajani could sink into its physicality for a while, forget his griefs, put aside his endless self-torment if only for a moment.

This isn’t living. This is just death deferred.

Ajani swallowed a growl. Much to his chagrin, Nur had gotten into his head with that last conversation. He’d ruminate on her words later, though, along with his myriad other regrets. For now, there was work to be done. Ajani—

The antelope gazelle herd raised its heads as one, attention going eastward.

It was all the warning he got.

Magic rippled across the plains, flattening the grass. It was power on a scale Ajani almost forgot was possible: an elemental consuming force that sent the herd, and all the other creatures hidden in the grass, running at breakneck speeds, crashing into rock and tree, breaking their necks and spines, their terror such that it didn’t matter what stood in their way, only that they escaped, only that they ran. Several human cries tore through the air. Ajani snapped a look around to see the Abzan dragons wheeling skyward, twisting and writhing, their expressions identically impatient; they were trying to dislodge their riders. Three lost their grip and fell. The fourth was simply bitten in half by his irritated mount.

“What in the—”

And the answer rose into the horizon, a dragon of improbable size: red-scaled, triumphant, roaring as dozens of its smaller brethren rose to join it. There was something familiar about the behemoth. Ajani had seen it before, he was sure. More than that, he was certain he had lived this moment, too, had seen a flight of dragons come to a man’s call.

“Sarkhan?” Ajani whispered incredulously.

The dragon bellowed again, and Ajani knew at once he was right. It *was* Sarkhan in his dragon form. Only he was much larger than Ajani recalled and had changed somehow. If the man had embodied the bright power of dragonflame before, now he reminded Ajani of raging inferno, clinging and horrific.

“What have you done?” he whispered again, and Sarkhan screamed his victory.

The Abzan khan’s reception chamber was precisely as Narset remembered: too ornate. She appreciated the attention to aesthetics but there was space here being wasted on frivolities like glassware when there could be shelving for books. But Felothar wasn’t Narset, and Narset knew she couldn’t impose her vision of the world on others—at least without their consent.

Still.

“It has been a long time, Khan Felothar.” Narset bowed low. “I trust you have read the policy draft. I am interested in your feedback for the second iteration.”

Felothar was a soldier before she was a khan, and she dressed still in a martial manner. Rumor had it that there’d been a bit of a scandal when Felothar refused accepting the ceremonial armor that had been crafted for her, preferring the ones she’d been given prior to her promotion to this new role. She laughed brightly at Narset’s words. “Waymaster, please. We’ve just been reacquainted after a long period apart. Surely, we can wait before we discuss policies.”

Narset glanced at Elspeth. “There is no time.”

“On the contrary,” said Felothar, leaning back, fingers tented over her chest. She sat in the center of a row of thrones, hers only slightly more opulent looking than the remaining five, each occupied by richly dressed individuals of different species and genders. *Of course the Council of Houses would be here*, thought Narset. “We have all the time in the world. You are here as a guest of the Abzan, and I assure you that you will be provided with all manner of luxuries, including copious amounts of time for discussion.”

“That isn’t,” said Narset, stiffening, “how time works.”

Felothar’s smile lengthened.

“Nonetheless.”

Ah, thought Narset. Felothar expected Narset to behave like the politician she was supposed to be. It was a perfectly reasonable, perfectly logical expectation. It still made Narset want to scream. If this was going where she suspected it was headed, it’d be hours before any resolution could be found. First, the heads of the Abzan houses would cross-examine Elspeth and Narset, interrogating them on their reasons for being so close to the stormplains. Then Felothar would attempt to pass judgment, and, if Narset’s sources were correct, that would inevitably lead into a fresh round of arguments. It might even be a multi-day affair, if the various heads were feeling particularly combative.

Any other day, Narset would have steeled herself for the dull, drawn-out process. But they did not have the luxury of time. If this lasted long, the angel next to her would be forced to act, and all manner of chaos might follow from that.

“The dragonstorms have begun affecting the other planes. My—” Narset hesitated. The word *friend* was on the tip of her tongue, but they weren’t really friends. What relationship they had was the product of mutual need and shared loss. So, she decided on something safer. “—colleague and I are on

a mission to determine whether it is possible to ameliorate the problem, both for Tarkir and the rest of the Multiverse.”

“Pfwah. What concern are those other worlds to us?” hissed a woman so old her tanned features were all but buried in their wrinkles. “What I want to know is why you’re deflecting from the matter at hand. It is suspect when a khan—”

“Waymaster,” said Narset automatically.

“—of another clan enters Abzan territory without prior notice. House Emesh has not forgotten when one of your predecessors did the same. I—”

“Yes, yes. The House of Courage holds grudges like heirlooms. We’re aware of the history,” said a willowy man, tall and elegant in posture. He fluttered a hand at the older woman, who glowered at him. “However, I say we let the past live where it belongs. Though, since we have the Jeskai waymaster in our company, perhaps this is when we might negotiate the terms of one of our more minor trade agreements. House Fenzala—”

“If I may be so bold,” said a portly, long-eared male ainok. “House Mevak has had a long-standing interest in the red mineral that has arisen in Jeskai lands. We’d consider—”

“We are here to discuss the matter of the waymaster’s intrusion!” trumpeted the representative from House Emesh, banging her cane into the polished stone floor. “Those are frivolities.”

“Trade is what ensures that there is food in the bellies of our soldiers,” said the head of the House Mevak without rancor. “I’d hardly call it a frivolity.”

More squabbling broke loose through the hall. What Narset assumed were more minor dignitaries were beginning to contribute their opinions to the situation; one demanded that Elspeth be inspected by their physicians to ensure she wasn’t a dragon. Narset saw Felothar motion delicately, and soldiers peeled from their stations beside the walls, ready to diffuse the growing tensions.

“Please,” said Narset after a moment, trying to keep the desperation from her voice. There were too many people talking at once, too many separate threads of conversation. Even Felothar seemed to think so. “Can we stay on the agenda?” she asked.

“Yes, let us stay on the agenda,” roared the old woman from House Emesh. “Tell us why you were in the stormplains.”

“We were looking for a temple—”

“I don’t know if we actually set an agenda,” said a soft-faced girl who looked entirely too young to belong to the council. Narset knew she was only elected as the representative because her grandfather, the true head of House Gudal, was deathly ill.

“A temple?” said a djinni woman. She wore the heraldry of House Zanharr. Her eyes narrowed as she asked, “What temple are you talking about?”

“I do not know for sure. But we were told by a voice in the Crucible of the Spirit Dragon that there was a temple we needed to find in the dragonstorms. Our assumption was that it’d be in the stormplains.”

“But why the stormplains?” said the djinni woman. “The dragonstorms happen everywhere on Tarkir.”

“A voice in the Crucible?” said the soft-faced girl, some of the anxiety falling from her expression. “There may be historical precedent for this. I seem to recall reading similar anecdotes, but I cannot be sure. Not unless House Zanharr is willing to provide access to some of their records.”

“Of course, we are. But there is the matter of—”

"It's been an hour," said Elspeth finally, softly, her expression calm and beatific. "We should go."

The doors to the chamber slammed open.

"Felothar Khan," boomed a familiar voice, its usual resonance frayed from terror. Ajani stalked into the room trailed by protesting Abzan officials. "Something monstrous has occurred. Sarkhan Vol has taken control of the wild dragons at the borders. I fear—"

"Ajani?"

For the first time since Elspeth's arrival in Tarkir, Narset saw real emotion shining through the archangel's face: a rawness that transformed her from statue to woman, softening features that before seemed carved from stone. The golden light of Elspeth's eyes flickered as she spoke the leonin Planeswalker's name, her voice an ache.

Ajani staggered back like he'd been singed by a flame. "Elspeth? What are you doing here? The last time I saw you—we—"

His eyes flicked to Narset, ears twitching to the side like a chastened housecat.

"Narset," he said miserably. "You're here, too. I've been meaning—I'm sorry—I—"

Elspeth took a forward step, all else forgotten, all else ignored save for Ajani's presence. "The Multiverse has need for you. I'm glad to see you're well after Melira's work—"

"She died saving me," said Ajani harshly.

"She was going to die, regardless. There was nothing that could have been done—"

The leonin warrior shook his head. "Others deserved salvation more than me."

"Melira certainly didn't see it that way," said Narset.

"Melira was wrong."

"Ajani," Elspeth breathed out. "The past is the past. We cannot change any of it."

"No, we cannot. I cannot. I cannot alter what I've done. But I can make sure it doesn't happen again. Elspeth, *I swear* —"

"Leave the past with the dead, Ajani," said Elspeth, a remorseless kindness in her expression. "You don't have to stay there with them."

At this, Ajani let out a hollow laugh, and Narset understood at last why the Planeswalker had kept himself in exile, had hidden himself from her and the rest of the world; the grief in his voice was a flayed thing.

"I'm afraid I must."

The miserable tableau was interrupted by Felothar clearing her throat: "So, Sarkhan Vol and these wild dragons—I would hear more of this."

And Ajani told his tale.