

Episode 3: The Fall of the House of Betzold

K. Arsenault Rivera

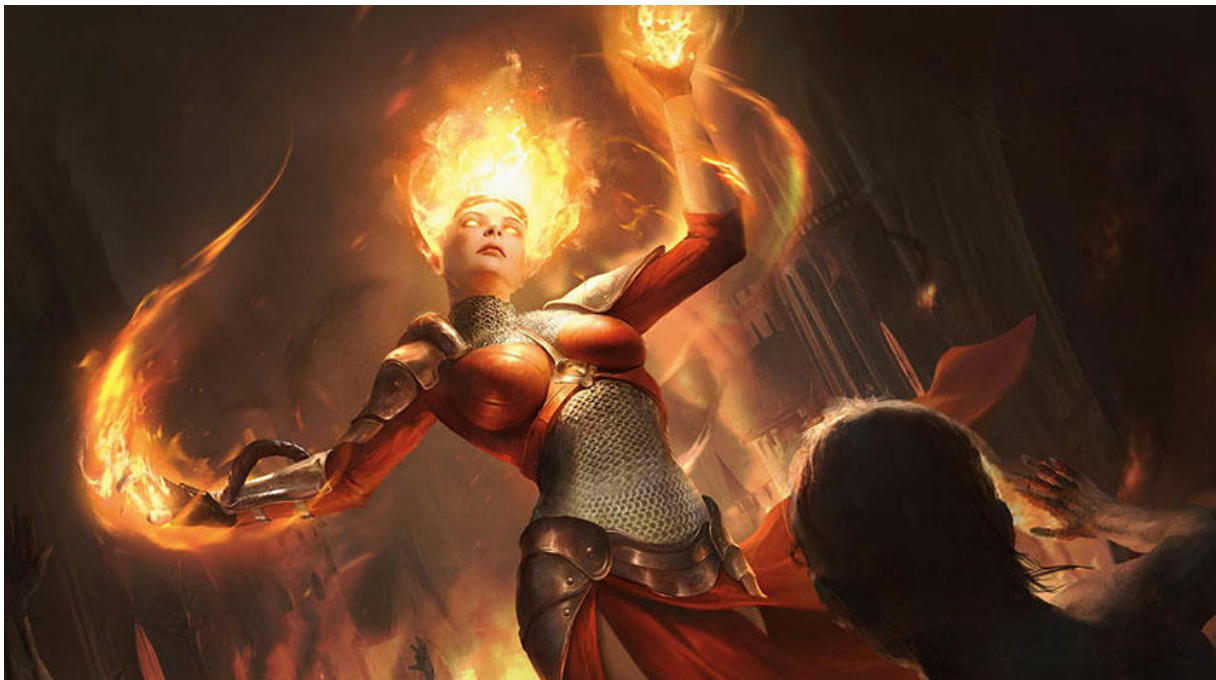
From set *Innistrad: Midnight Hunt*

“So, when you guys said that if the key was in Thraben, it’d be safe “

The groans of the unhallowed dead answer Chandra before any of the others can. Kaya pinches her nose. Teferi’s already stopped up his; he breathes through his mouth, and that’s still bad. Despite the midday sun, the clouds come together to cast their shade upon the remains of the cathedral. Even the sky’s ashamed of the sight.

Seeing it sets Arlinn’s stomach in knots. There, the spire where she spent sunny hours reading, now rubble scattered against the earth; here, the stained glass she so treasured shattered. To look upon the teeming mass of undead feels like a further betrayal. She doesn’t want to think about the odds that she may see someone she used to know.

She swallows. As ants around their hill, the zombies around the cathedral. Getting past them will be no easy feat.



Light Up the Night | Art by: Wei Wei

“It may well be,” Adeline says. “But we won’t know until we finish our investigation.”

And they had done some investigating, or rather Kaya had. It took them the better part of a week to get to Thraben—plenty of time to look into things. A hunch wasn’t enough for her to go on. The second

they'd arrived in Thraben, she'd split off from the group to go do some reconnaissance of her own. Wherever she went, she returned not long after with a dusty tome in hand.

"Page seventy-seven," she announced.

Turning to that page showed an illuminated page and woodcut rendered in great detail: a family being handed a box by a witch who resembled Katilda. The caption labeled them the Betzolds, from Gavony.

Arlinn knew a Worrin Betzold from her time at the Cathedral—an older bishop, strict as could be. Her knuckles hurt thinking of him. But her heart did, too, for she knew that if he was anywhere well, he'd be in there. With the masses. And who knows how many of her old friends.

"I think I see him." Adeline's voice cuts through Arlinn's thought. The cathar points with her sheathed sword to the ruined nave of the cathedral. A figure in holy vestments stands before the pulpit. To Arlinn's horror, he seems to be preaching to a gathered crowd. The pews are full of zombies sitting and clapping and bowing and praying.

What The Travails did to this place is really, truly unholy. Once, Liliana had raised all these zombies to fight against the Eldrazi. It was bad enough having to share the field with the living dead—but worse dealing with them afterward. She'd heard that someone asked Liliana what to do about all the remaining zombies. The story went that she replied, "They have plenty of uses, you know; try thinking creatively."

Thinking of it weighs her down. This place is an affront to everything she loves. She knows what it once was.

And she knows the vestments the man wears. Wearily, she nods. That's him.

"Nothing for it, then," says Kaya. "Someone's going to have to make a way through."

Adeline pulls herself up onto her horse—a white stallion she's probably named Thunderbolt or Lion-shield or something equally heroic. Looking at her astride it, it's hard not to feel some hope.

"You can leave that to me," she says. "My cathars and I have been fighting the undead for years. You four focus on getting to Worrin."

Chandra looks over at the horde, then back to Adeline. "What, and let you do all the fighting? I don't think so," she says. "I've got your back. *You* three make for Worrin." The air's gone hazy around her, heating up in reflection of her grinning enthusiasm. There are no two ways about it—Chandra's going to let loose.

Adeline's smirk returns. "All right. I'll be the vanguard, and you take the rear, Chandra Nalaar," she says.

A mock salute is the answer. If the situation weren't so dire, it might bring a smile to Arlinn's face. As it stands, she can feel a distant happiness that they're getting along well, which falls away the moment she eyes the ruined nave.

There's no time to waste.

Adeline and the cathars lead the charge, falling like a holy hammer upon the anvil of the undead. Adeline's commands come swift and certain as does the cut of her blade. Heads fall from bodies like fruit from trees. One leaps upon her only to slow mid-jump. Blue streaks fly from Teferi's staff as he slows the undead's advance down the central column. It isn't much—only the slightest delay—but it's enough for Adeline to bash the zombie back with her shield and plunge her sword into its throat.

The way won't stay open for long.

Into the hard-won furrow of safety they go, Kaya flickering in and out of existence, Arlinn shifting halfway through. The encroaching arms of the dead taste foul in her mouth; she avoids them whenever possible, slashing at faces, teeth, and feet with the claws that nature's given her. Still, spittle falls on her fur; still, the snarls slither into her ears; still their stench stops her throat.

But it isn't until Chandra takes up the rear that Arlinn feels any kind of safety. Two great sheets of flame fly from her hands, replacing the now-fading walls of Teferi's magic with something far more solid. Even the dead fear fire, as Thalia had shown them all: they scream as one, retreating from the searing heat, widening the gap between the heroes and the undead. Yet she isn't done there—as the others press on, Chandra turns to face the masses, the fire she conjures like the breath of life itself. There were zombies there, once, and now they are ash upon the wind.

Adeline chances a look over her shoulder as Chandra bathes them in orange light, at the pyromancer in the very heart of her element, surrounded by life-saving destruction.

Arlinn doesn't know what Adeline's thinking, but she does know her own thoughts: she should never, under any circumstance, upset Chandra Nalaar.

It isn't easy going into the church, but it's easier between fire and sword. The walls rise around them and then fall away, broken by The Travails and twisted into something new. Worrin's wordless groaning grows closer and closer. Flames lick the once-holy walls, and though it hurts, Arlinn hopes it's a sort of cleansing.

"Got him yet?" Chandra shouts. It's hard to hear her over the roar of flame, but Arlinn does. She bolts ahead.

Adeline's got him back up against a wall, idly mouthing prayers he once taught Arlinn. As she shifts back to her human form, his rheumy, undead eyes focus once more. When his mouth moves, it is to shape her name. He points to her, or perhaps to her succulent flesh. Arlinn wants to believe it's the former.

"Worrin, it's me," Arlinn says. "You recognize me, right?"

"Dennick?" is the answer. She glances over her shoulder—Chandra's closed in with the rest of them. Adeline and the cathars spread in a circle around Arlinn and Worrin.

"Worrin," Arlinn says, forcing herself to sound calm in the face of this aberration she once knew, "We're looking for the Moonsilver Key. Do you know where it is?"

His eyes blink, one after the other. His toothless jaws smack together.

Silence.

The clatter of Adeline's sword against the dead, the rush of the fire. Kaya and Teferi's eyes on her.

"The key, Worrin," Arlinn says. Angel save her, she sets her hands on his shoulders. He can't look away from her now.

"Dennick," his answer.

"Arlinn, we don't have very long!" Adeline shouts.

"*The key*," Arlinn repeats.

"D Dennick "

Arlinn curses under her breath. "I think we've gotten all we can from him!"

"Great," says Chandra. "This time, Addy, you watch my back!"

And as the fire takes the cathedral again, Arlinn gives Worrin the only rest she can, a *crack*, a prayer, a hope for the better.

You think you know a person, but often you only know one part of them. Worrin in life was as strict an instructor as they came. Arlinn couldn't remember talking to him about anything other than theology, and though his answers were always well thought out, she always imagined him as the sort of man who had given up his life to the church. On occasion, he'd bring up his youth in Gavony, but that was as far as it ever got.

But people are rarely so simple, and as they arrive in the quiet Gavony township the Betzolds called home, they start asking questions.

"Worrin and Dennick?" says one woman, brushing the frost off the pumpkins she's spent all season growing. Old age has not kept her from tending crops, and her hands move with practiced precision. "Puh. I guess it was about time someone came calling."

Arlinn kneels next to her. "That so? Well, sorry we took so long. Snow slowed us down."

"Ain't enough snow for that," the woman answers. "It's only frost. You're old enough to know better than to use *that* as an excuse."

Arlinn allows herself a small smirk. No matter how many Planes she went to, there's never any place quite like home. "You're right, you're right," she answers. The snow is light—her touch is enough to melt it. "But maybe you can fill me in, anyway."

The old woman fixes Arlinn with a look. "You're too late."

"Too late?" Arlinn repeats, frowning.

"If he wasn't dead before The Travails, he is now," she says. "He holed up in the old family mansion. For safety's sake, he said. Haven't seen him since. Place is awfully haunted."

Arlinn looks over her shoulder. The Betzold home rests on a hill, and she can see its gaping windows from here. "But why go there if it's so haunted?"

The old woman pats her hands clean. "Because Dennick is Worrin's boy."

The Travails broke everything in Innistrad, but some things were remade. Steady, desperate hands reworked the warped Avacynian symbols on the road back to their old forms, breaking off the stone in favor of wood or rough-hewn iron. They pass houses torn asunder and constructed from neighboring pieces, like a stitcher got to them. The people are the same: some bearing their scars on the inside, some simply keeping a closer eye on their children, some clutching prosthetic limbs close as they watch the newcomers roll through town.

Innistrad breaks. Innistrad builds. Innistrad survives.

It's a good thought, but the mansion gives lie to it: the Betzold home is as dilapidated as they come, and evil to boot. Evil's the word for it, Arlinn's sure—for the way the windows look down on them, the way the vines rake at its stony face and the mouth of its door hangs open.

Arlinn doesn't like looking at it. But she will.

Of the five of them, it's Kaya who seems the least troubled. As they approach the home, she shows no signs of fear at all. The yawning door of the mansion doesn't faze her. She looks it up and down, her brows narrowing, and then flicks her nose with her thumb. "So, he's in there?"

Arlinn nods.

“With a bunch of malevolent spirits, right?”

“Sure looks like the place for it,” says Chandra.

“I’ve some holy symbols—” Adeline starts, but Kaya waves her off.

“Don’t bother,” she says. “Just give me five minutes before you follow.”



Thraben Exorcism | Art by: Matt Stewart

And, true to form, Kaya doesn’t bother waiting around for permission. Into the maw of it she goes. Arlinn’s nose tingles as the sharp scent of Kaya’s magic fills the air, followed by the low hum she’s come to associate with it. Adeline heads to one of the broken windows to peer in. Chandra follows, taking up the same window. From their reaction, there’s quite a lot to see.

It’s hard to resist temptation, sometimes. Bitterly, she thinks to herself that Tovolar would say the same. Restraint is as a human thing and not a wild one. Give in to your passions and your instincts—they always know best. That was what he taught her.

The Church taught her otherwise.

She presses her face to the window. Inside, a streak of grayish white gives rise to Kaya’s ghostly form. But it isn’t the only ghost present. The old woman was right: the place is *awfully* haunted, but it won’t be for long. Kaya’s putting them down at an incredible rate. It’s hard to follow her form as she jumps from one of the ghosts to the next, here plunging a knife into a back and there slashing at ghostly throats. Arlinn can’t help but wonder where the spirits are going afterward, if this is the Blessed Sleep coming to take them or something else.

Maybe she’ll ask later.

For now, the room’s clear of supernatural threats. Chandra’s the first one pushing in, then Adeline right after and Arlinn next. Teferi takes up the rear this time. The ghosts don’t seem to bother him much; he moves with the same warm ease as ever.

But there’s another floor.

Up they go, step by creaking step, breath baited, the hum growing only louder behind the decrepit door. Chandra moves to open the door, but Adeline stops her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Let me,” she says. “You’re safer behind me.”

Had Adeline walked out of a story somewhere? There’s the gallantry, yes, but also the way she splinters the door when she throws all her weight against it. Inside, Kaya’s leaning casually near one of the ghosts. She greets the others with a sarcastic bow as they charge in.

“Here’s your man,” she says. “Nice and easy.”

Teferi’s hum is one of amusement. “That was less than five minutes.”

“Rich, coming from you,” Kaya answers. “Don’t you just make the time up as you go?”

“If only it were that easy,” he says. Teferi looks over his shoulder, his smile softening with sympathy. He gestures to the floating ghost—a man no older than thirty, the skeleton pinned beneath a piece of rubble, presumably his. They’re wearing the same rough-hewn clothes. “After you.”

Arlinn doesn’t wait. She comes up to him, resisting the urge to shake his hand. “Dennick? My name is Arlinn Kord. I was a friend of your father’s.”

How strange to see a ghost’s eyes go wide. “My father? Has he sent for me?”



Dennick, Pious Apparition | Art by: Chris Rallis

Always better to give the truth where you can, no matter how ugly. “I can’t say he did. Your father’s dead. I put him to rest myself, but you should know he was calling out for you to the end.”

“Put him to rest?” the ghost twiddles worried fingers. “Does that mean he’s undead?”

“He was,” she answers. “It’s best not to dwell. But I came to ask after something very important, something your family guards—”

“Oh. This isn’t a social call?”

“No, it isn’t,” Arlinn says. “Please. If you know anything about the Moonsilver Key, Innistrad has need of it. The nights are growing longer; we need it for a ritual to set things right.”

"I thought with all the people, maybe it was a social call," Dennick answers. Twiddle, twiddle. "Most people want the key. I never saw it. I wasn't a real Betzold, my father said."

"Then he was being a fool about it," Arlinn says. "Here you are at the mansion the same as any Betzold. And if you could tell us where the key is, well, you'd be doing your family's duty better than any of the others have."

Somehow the ghost sighs. "I guess I am," he answers. "All right. Well I did some digging here, too, because I heard about it and turns out we don't have it. My great-grandfather gave it over to one of the vampires for safekeeping. Isn't that silly?"

Kaya pinches her nose again.

Chandra sucks in a breath. She holds up a finger. "Excuse me, but can I just ask *which* vampire?"

Dennick sighs. "Will you let me rest if I do?"

"If that's what you'd like," Arlinn says. "But it'd be easier to rest if you knew Innistrad wasn't in danger, right?"

He rolls his head as if thinking it over. Then: "It's the Markovs. That prince of theirs, he took it. Did my father say he missed me?"

"I had the *worst* feeling about that," Chandra says, halfway to the door, but Arlinn stays behind.

Dennick wants someone to talk to. The least she can do is listen—at least for a little while.

Innistrad rebuilds.

Even the vampires.

As much havoc as they've caused, as much as her stomach rumbles at the scent, as much as she hates them—Arlinn has to admit there's something comforting about it. The Travails spared no one. Try as the denizens of the dark might to wipe out humanity, not long ago, they all fought on the same side.

Arlinn hopes they can again.

The others march on ahead. Chandra's listless; she doesn't like the idea of walking into the serpent's den. Kaya doesn't either. But Arlinn understands something they don't: this was once a place people found hope. And it is something the others know—but they don't understand it. Not really. To have such a hunger in your belly and yet act against those bestial instincts for the greater good she doesn't like Sorin Markov, but she can respect him.

And she can respect the memory of the angel who gave her hope when hope was as furtive as that white stag.

So as the others march on, Arlinn pauses just outside the gates. Vines have claimed the broken halves of an Avacynian symbol. Cutting them apart with her sharp nails, she rights the symbol and starts a prayer.

"Guard us through the night, O Angel. . ."

To her surprise another voice joins in, Adeline's from the sound of it.

Teferi's follows, at a slight delay, as he learns the words.

Chandra joins in after, a little too fast, stumbling here and there, but trying her best.

And last—with a bit of a sigh—is Kaya, coming in when they're nearly done.

When they're finished, they exchange soft smiles, and head in.

No one asks her why she prays to an angel who can no longer hear her.

People who say they'll cross bridges when they get to them haven't been to Markov manor. The thin strip of rock leading into the place would be intimidating enough in normal times, standing as it does above the yawning mouth of a chasm, but The Travails have come here, too. The bridge floats in pieces. Hopping from piece to piece is the only way to approach the crumbling castle. The broken visages of the elder Markovs make terrible stepping stones.

Inside, it isn't much better. Chalice laid under a coat of dust; pauldrons to beggar a village are only rocks to stumble upon; what portraits are not torn asunder have faded to black. Worse—it does not smell of death here, nor of rot, nor even of blood—it smells of nothing.

"What are the odds no one's home?" Chandra asks.

"Slim to none," says Kaya. "The place is bad, but it's not abandoned bad." She points up at the chandelier over their heads. "Someone's changed the candles."

"Likely a thrall," says Adeline. "But Kaya's right—we have to keep our guard up."

"But what if he's not here? Then we can just steal the key without having to talk to him."

"Let's hope he isn't," says Arlinn, "but it's best to assume he is. Besides, I'm sure he can be reasoned with."

But as she says that, they pass a particular outcropping of rock, one not quite like its neighbors. Where the others are sharp, twisted things—daggers aimed at an unseen foe—this one is an open wound upon the face of Markov manor. Here, the gouges are worse than anywhere else, concentrated in two long furrows on either side. The rim of it is likewise rough, the edges looking uncomfortably like they'd been chewed away. Splotches of dried blood only make the sight more gruesome.

"Don't like the look of that," Adeline says.

"Can't say I do, either," says Teferi.

Kaya makes a small sound. Her eyes narrow. "Can't have teeth anymore, whatever it was."

"Sorin will know what happened. Maybe we aren't the only ones after the key," says Arlinn.

"If he's even here," Chandra says.

But he is. He has to be. After all this, to have him elude them Arlinn grits her teeth. She's going to find that key one way or another. Tovolar wants to tear Innistrad's heart from its chest; she can't let that happen.

"If he's anywhere, it's the throne room," Arlinn says.

"Should be up ahead," says Kaya. "All the portraits down this hall. It can't lead anywhere *but* the throne room."

She has a point. There aren't many images left, but there are *enough*. To say nothing of the gate up ahead of them: a large, looming thing, carved with the snarling faces of bats, now thrown partially off its hinges. When they get to it, it takes Arlinn shifting to her wolf form to throw the doors open. Adeline eyes her as she shifts back. Arlinn offers her a friendly smile.

"Don't worry, I'm housebroken," she says. Joking about it sometimes sets people at ease even if these days she's not sure how accurate it is to say. Back in the woods, she'd come so close to running off.

But she's Arlinn today, and she plans to stay that way—even when, in the dusty throne room, they find the prince awaiting them.

Sorin Markov sits with one leg slung over the broken throne of his house. He's reading an old, unmarked book, something like a journal. A hole in the ceiling casts a single ray of moonlight upon his gray skin. Surrounded by the empty splendor of the abandoned manor, he makes for a strange sight.

Though he doesn't look up at them as they enter, Arlinn can smell the resentment coming off him. His voice is forceful and arrogant. "State your purpose for disturbing me now, or I shall see all of you out."

"Sorin," says Teferi. Of course it's him stepping forth. Of course he shows no signs of intimidation. The court bow he manages would put any aristocrat to shame. "A pleasure to see you again. We just have a small business matter to attend to. We'll keep it brief."

The vampire glances up over the edge of his book. "I know better than to put any faith in your definition of brief. The reason, now."

Teferi's shoulders rise in a shrug, as if to say he tried. "We're looking for the Moonsilver Key. The nights are growing—"

Sorin snaps the book shut. "No."

"What do you mean, *no*?" says Chandra. "We've spent forever looking for it. The least you could do is hear us out."

His eyes fix on hers. Chandra stops talking. There's something predatory about the man, and yet something enchanting, too. Arlinn's met plenty of bloodsuckers in her time, but none quite like him. It was like the difference between dogs and wolves.

And yes, there is something carnivorous to the way he stands, the way he casts the book aside, the steps he takes, and the posture he assumes—his hand resting just so on the pommel of his sword. "I cannot expect someone so *impetuous* to understand how much I've sacrificed for this Plane already. If my *family*," he practically snarls the word, "so wishes to descend into the worthless hedonism of eternal night, then I have done enough to stop them. Let them feast."

Teferi holds up his hands, standing just in front of Chandra. "If you won't listen to her, listen to me. Innistrad is your family, Sorin, we all know that. You've done *more* than enough. We're asking for the key so we can do our part. Arlinn here doesn't want to see eternal night any more than you do."

"Is that so?" he answers. "Pray tell me what you've done for the Plane. Go on, I'm listening." Now he's advancing, now the sword slips from its sheath, now the beast in Arlinn's blood calls for her to change.

But she doesn't. Not yet. She plants her heels onto the stony ground. "Maybe I don't have your history, but the past few years I've been traveling the place, listening to people. I thought you'd understand better than anyone why humans need to live. You made Ava—"

She's not through the name before the sword's swinging through the air. It's only her own preternatural reflexes that keep her from harm—she raises an arm to parry the flat of the blade. Still, steel bites into flesh; a streak of red paints the floor; black vapor stings her eyes. Teeth grow longer in her mouth. Those golden eyes are burning in the dark.

"*You*," he rumbles, "aren't permitted to speak of her."

"Have you already forgotten why you made her?" she says. Chandra's already got fires burning; she signals Arlinn over his shoulder. All it would take is a word for the other four to descend on him, but she doesn't want that. Not yet. "We need angels. We need hope, we need faith. We need the day—and we need the key."

“Get out,” he shouts. The empty walls turn it into a vicious echo. “Now.”

“Not without the key,” Arlinn answers, just as firm. “Maybe you’ve forgotten but I haven’t.”

Up the sword, another strike coming as his anger gets the better of him. Arlinn raises her arm again.

But there’s no need to. A feather falls between them, gold and glowing, followed an instant later by a heron-headed scythe. Sorin’s sword clatters against the angelic weapon; he draws back in naked fury to behold the interloper.

And it may be the middle of the night, it may be a cold, dark time, it may be the beginning of the end of Innistrad, but the golden light that floods into the throne room brings with it a swell of hope to Arlinn’s breath. So, too, does the holy fervor of the angel before her.

Avacyn may no longer hear prayers.

But Sigarda does.



Sigarda, Champion of Light | Art by: Howard Lyon

“Sorin Markov,” she says. Her voice is resonant, with a slight echo that casts it as more than human. “How far you’ve fallen. Carving your way out of the stone only to sulk.”

That pit—that was *him* ? How strange, to feel pity for a centuries-old vampire prince.

Stranger still when that same man levels his blade at an angel. “What would you have me do? Since you clearly have all the answers. Go on, explain. Either that or throw your lot in with them and get out of here.”

Sigarda’s golden eyes narrow. She does not avert them from Sorin, yet when she speaks, it feels as if she’s at Arlinn’s side. “Arlinn Kord—it is your faith that summoned me here. The cause in your heart is just. You will find the Moonsilver Key in Sorin’s personal chambers on the third floor. Go. I mean to speak to him about his old creation.”

Chandra and Kaya don’t need to be told twice—they bolt off for the staircase. “Thanks, Sigarda!” shouts Chandra, feet against the plush carpets. Teferi is soon after, stopping only long enough to offer a respectful bow.

But Arlinn and Adeline remain, even as Sigarda brings the scythe down upon him, even as his features become more bestial in the face of danger. A certain holy dread has pinned them to the spot. Is it not the place of the faithful to aid their idols? The two exchange a look. Adeline raises her shield.

“Go!” cries the angel, Sorin’s sword slicing at her armor. “If you ever had any faith in me, you will go!”

Arlinn swallows. She wants to help. Adeline squeezes her arm. “We’d only get in the way,” she mumbles, as dejected as Arlinn feels.

And maybe she’s right.

But it doesn’t make it feel any better.

Up the stairs Arlinn goes, following in Adeline’s footsteps, trying not to pay attention to the howls of pain that follow, trying not to count how many belong to the angel and how many to the vampire. That is, in and of itself, faith.

It is Chandra who finds the room—festooned with bookshelves and antique weapons—and Teferi who finds the Moonsilver Key. It sits in the offering hands of a statue. Sorin must have lopped the head off of it, but the armor and wings leave little doubt who it used to be. The headless Avacyn sits beneath a portrait of a young Sorin and his grandfather dressed in their finest.



Moonsilver Key | Art by: Joseph Meehan

Arlinn takes the key.

For the second time that day, she mutters a prayer.

This time, she prays that Sigarda will be safe and that they will make it back in time for Harvesttide.

But it is a strange thing to pray to an angel for their own safety, and stranger still to ask them to warp time.

Nothing is guaranteed in Innistrad—but they will try to survive, try to endure, and look once more to the holy light of day.