Innistrad's Last Hope
Doug Beyer

From set *Eldritch Moon*

Thanks to Nahiri's machinations, the Eldrazi titan Emrakul has been unleashed on Innistrad. Meanwhile, Liliana has been in a tower of Vess Manor, probing the powers—and painful repercussions—of the Chain Veil artifact. Ever since she quarreled with Jace, Liliana has decided she can only rely on herself to face her demons.

Thin metal wires hung from the points of the Chain Veil. Liliana Vess could almost see her reflection in the spectral-glass vessels where the wires led, and in the latticework of the witchbane orb on the windowsill, and in the conductive tubes that led out the window and up onto the roof. The etchings in her face were just visible through the Veil. The lines in her skin matched the menacing light of the storm clouds outside. Lightning flickered appropriately.

Two demons still needed to die. But she had to make sure she wouldn't die herself when she managed to face them. The Chain Veil was a potent weapon, but potentially deadly to its wielder. If this worked, she could use the Veil safely. She wouldn't need the help of some mind mage who persisted in chasing some wild mystery across the provinces. And she could rid the Multiverse of her creditors once and for all.

"Are we ready?" Liliana asked.

The Chain Veil | Art by Volkan Baga

The others in the tower with her had not displayed a fraction of the smarts of Cloak Boy, but they would have to suffice. The geistmage, Dierk, listed items to himself in a micro-whisper as he adjusted a series of nozzles and tightened clamps on the orb. Dierk's assistant, Gared, stood at the window, his one big eye switching back and forth between the equipment and the lightning storm outside the tower. Gared held his hand on an appropriately sizable lever.

"The collectors are raised, madam," the geistmage said. "And the storm is reaching its peak. But I feel obligated to point out that we'll be coursing an enormous dose of spectral energy directly into the artifact…"

"You don't have to warn me," Liliana said.

"…powered by the force of a lightning storm."

"Yes."

"While you are wearing it."

"I know."

"On your *face*."

Liliana rolled her eyes. "The flow of geist energy through the orb will thus act as a kind of spectral antenna, shunting the object's counterassault away from the subject, sublimating the backlash as harmless atmospheric static, circumventing all repercussions and thereby allowing free utilization of the artifact."

Dierk glanced at Gared and tapped his mouth with gloved fingertips. "That is the theory."

"Look, Dierk," Liliana said. "My friend recommended you because she thought you knew something about spirit inhabitation. Do you or don't you?"

"Of course I do, madam," Dierk said, taken aback.

"Then—?"

"Then let us proceed." Dierk adjusted the goggles over his eyes. "I should add…this will hurt."

"Pain is temporary," said Liliana, sitting back in the chair. The wires dangled from the hanging points of the Chain Veil. "Besides, we learn nothing by testing this on Gared."

Gared grinned. His larger eye shuttered for a moment like a reptile's. Dierk nodded to him, and he slammed down the big lever.

Art by Adam Paquette

The witchbane orb hummed and dials flexed. Liliana could feel the links of the Veil touching the curves of her face.

"It's activated," Dierk said. "Now all we have to do is wait for a proximal bolt of—"

Lightning.

Liliana's teeth clenched involuntarily as the surge came. Writhing lassos of energy bloomed on the wires leading from the roof collectors, and the spirits of the dead followed immediately. Geists shrieked through the tubes, filling the orb and the reinforced glass with electro-spectral screams. A spray of sparks puffed from the equipment, but the circuit held.

A blast of howling energy looped through the Veil. Liliana could feel the weight of it lift from her cheeks slightly, its links floating against the force of gravity.

She glanced at the others. Dierk had given up trying to adjust clamps and switches and pressed his back to the wall, shielding his face with his arms. Gared reached a finger out toward a thrashing curl of energy and recoiled when he touched it. Between them she could see her markings shining in the equipment, the etched diagram of her demonic contract forming a reflection-halo around her.

This was when Liliana felt most beautiful—when she was about to wield a power that made others afraid.

She grasped the arms of the chair and called on the power of the Veil.

The backlash was immediate and total. The thousands of souls that resided in the Veil filled her with power, but the power was coupled with pain, and the pain was blinding venom. Inextricable from the magic it afforded. The geist circuit had not drawn off any of the backlash.

Beakers popped and the collectors blew out.

"I'm ending it!" Dierk said, reaching for the lever.

"*No*," Liliana said, her voice a dagger. Dierk retracted his hand.

The room shook. Liliana grasped the chair, trying to hold the room still, trying to hold in the scream that wanted desperately to get out, trying to see anything but the pain. *Pain is temporary* .

When she couldn't contain it anymore, she cried out. Fuses blew and the tower went dark. The spectral howling ebbed away, until Liliana only heard her own exhausted breaths.

Gared struck a match and lit a lantern. The lab was a disaster zone. The equipment was ruined. Raindrops plashed on the windowsill.

Liliana unclasped the Chain Veil and slid it off her head. Blood seeped from her etchings.

"I mentioned the risks, madam," Dierk said.

She glared at him, imagining the geistmage's skin withering away and his skeleton jawing the words "*I'm sorry*." Instead she nodded her head toward the door. "You may see yourself out. Deliver the orb back to its owner." A boom of residual thunder was her punctuation.

Dierk quickly collected the spent witchbane orb and a few other items into his bag and left. The echoes of his footsteps receded down the spiral stairs. Gared gently pushed aside a pile of broken glass with his foot, but did not leave.

Liliana stowed the Chain Veil in a skirt pocket. Innistrad's best and brightest hadn't been of any help. Tomes and grimoires of spectral remedies sat askew. Not even Olivia's premier geist expert had been able to tame the Veil.

Liliana looked out the window at the storm that boomed over the countryside of Stensia, daubing at her skin-words with a handkerchief. In the gloom, Thraben glowed like a distant candle.

She loathed relying on someone else.

But it wasn't that she needed Cloak Boy, she told herself. It was merely that she needed people to need *her*, so she had some warm bodies to stand between her and a couple of self-important demon lords.

If only he could *owe* her somehow.

From downstairs came a man's scream. A snarling scuffle and a crash followed.

Liliana tossed her crimson-dotted handkerchief aside and spiraled down the stairs.

She heard and smelled them before she saw them—their guttural snarls and their slobbering, hungry whines. The reek of damp fur over the reek of blood.

Art by Joseph Meehan

Werewolves. Liliana's entire throne room was overrun.

And they looked—not sick, exactly, but warped, as if their flesh and bones had been putty in the hands of some unnatural mutating force. Their extremities bent in odd ways, folding and crinkling like mats of kelp.

But they were still werewolves, and they still had claws. Dierk lay on the floor, his chest raked open. The contents of his bag and his ribcage were both spilled out over the floor. His face was pale, locked in a stare of surprise, and he was exhaling his last breath like a flattening balloon.

The werewolves turned to Liliana, sniffing. One of them roared, and it had eyes where its tongue should be.

A suite of spells, deadly ones, each tailored to one of the werewolves in front of her—that's what this called for. Just enough power to dispense with each one, for just enough of them to clear a path to the door of the manor.

"Gared!" Liliana shouted over her shoulder. "Get your coat."

The Chain Veil did not budge from her pocket.

Hours later, the storm had subsided, but the countryside of Stensia had become a twisted zoo. Liliana noted that every passerby had something *reshaped* about them. The bodies of roving vampires had the wrong silhouettes, always with too few of something, or too many. Anatomically improbable travelers raved prophecies of stone and sea at them as they staggered in diagonals.

Finally, Liliana, Gared, and—haltingly—Dierk, arrived at the monumental door.

Lurenbraum Fortress soared above them, a stark cliff with a citadel that protruded directly from the rock face. Higher up, the utilitarian architecture softened and elongated into tiers of ornate leaded windows, each one with its own floating chandelier of twinkling candles. In many of the windows, vampires peered down at them, wearing gleaming ancestral armor.

Liliana gestured for Gared to knock.

Gared gawked at the door's height. "You really know the lady of the house?" he asked.
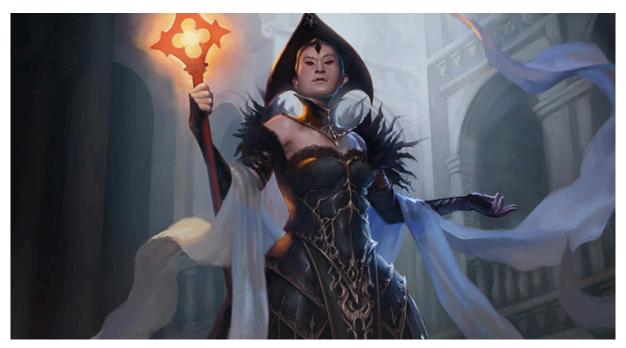
Dierk, for his part, made a gurgling noise. The man's neck was broken, so his head rested at a weird angle and his throat looked lumpy. But at least his legs had gotten him here, and at least his arms had been capable of carrying the spent witchbane orb. Gared's long coat was strapped tight around Dierk's midsection, doing its best to hold the remainder of the dead man's insides in. Liliana raised her hand slightly, and Dierk squared his shoulders, but his head still dangled to one side. The desiccated tongue wouldn't stay completely inside his mouth, contributing to the gurgle. Liliana shrugged.

"I make it my business to know those who wield power," Liliana said. "As does she."

Gared banged on the door and stood back.

The door opened, and an imposing woman in an ornate gown—or possibly an ornate woman in an imposing gown—appeared. She held forth a priest's staff that radiated like hot embers in Liliana's face.

"She is not receiving human visitors," said the woman, flashing her fangs as she spoke. Her irises were black pits that seemed to smolder.

Bloodhall Priest | Art by Mark Winters

"I'm returning something that belongs to her," said Liliana.

The woman paused, visually inspecting Dierk and the spent witchbane orb he carried. "Leave it here. Then begone from this estate, before I call an invocation down upon you."

Gared made a movement to confront the vampiric priest, but Liliana stopped him with a touch. In a citadel full of vampires, one did not fight when there was still a chance to cajole. "I'd speak with Olivia directly, please. Tell her Liliana Vess would see her."

"I told you, she's not receiving mortals."

"Mortals!" Liliana laughed. "Bless your bloodless heart."

The vampire priest held her staff high, the jagged symbol at the tip warping the air with heat.

"Oh Liliana, my dear one!" Olivia Voldaren appeared in the door suddenly, dismissing the priest with a brief but vicious hiss. The priest stood to one side, bowing her head, but following Liliana with her eyes.

Olivia was glorious in black segmented armor. As usual, her feet didn't touch the floor. "Have you come to celebrate the good news?" she asked, ushering in her guests. "Come, come!"

"Just returning your orb," said Liliana. "And your geistmage. And hoping you might know the where-abouts of an acquaintance of mine." She smiled pleasantly at the priest as she passed by. "What exactly are we celebrating?"

Olivia took Liliana's arm, floating next to her and drawing her deeper into the citadel. "Why, the long wait is over! You haven't heard?"

They entered a broad gallery where elegant vampires stood or hovered at every staircase, every land-ing. Hundreds of eyes watched Liliana and her attendants as Olivia led them through the lower halls of the fortress. Every vampire that had ever held the name Voldaren seemed to be in the building, glowering in unison.

Indulgent Aristocrat | Art by Anna Steinbauer

Liliana made a furtive motion with one hand. The corpse of Dierk the geistmage dragged itself over to an antique gilded chair, slumped into it, and went limp with the orb in its lap. The coat around his middle squished, holding its contents as best it could.

Olivia leaned over conspiratorially, squeezing Liliana's arm. "It's the archangel! *Poof*!" She cackled. "A smear on the floor of Thraben Cathedral. Oh, but it's simply *too* good."

"Avacyn is dead?" A small thought of Jace descended on her, like a moth landing in her hair. He had been on Avacyn's trail when they last spoke.

Olivia made an expansive sweep with her arm. "We of the night can rejoice, for the world is ours again! I *was* quite cross when I had heard that she'd been freed from her little trap."

Liliana raised her eyebrows a millimeter.

"But Sorin has come to his senses and put *down* that thing of his. And now, I must say, it's all worked out rather well, hasn't it?" Olivia laughed. She led Liliana on, through gallery after gallery. Gared disappeared into the maze.

Liliana kept up with Olivia. "And now you're raising an army."

Call the Bloodline | Art by Lake Hurwitz

"Well, my dear, it turns out that whoever opened the Helvault—"

Liliana kept her face correctly polite.

"—set loose more than just the archangel," Olivia continued. "And more than just…those demon friends of yours. They released that *other* one, as well. Drink?" She signaled to a nearby vampire. "You there, bring our guest a drink."

A vampire pushed a glass of wine into Liliana's hand—actual wine—and clanked away in his suit of ornate ancestral armor.

It was Liliana herself, of course, who had caused the Helvault to break open and spill its contents all over Innistrad. She had slain the demon Griselbrand, and the other consequences of its opening were of no importance to her. She hadn't seen any reason to let her vampire social acquaintances know any of this.

"And she seems quite miffed, now that she's free," Olivia went on. "Can't say that I blame her. As I said, I was cross before, but now I should *adore* to know who set them all free, just to express my utter gratitude!"

Liliana didn't know who else might have escaped the Helvault, who was so important to Olivia. But she had an intuition it was connected to the changes she had seen all around Innistrad. The warped werewolves in her manor. The countryside of twisted vampires and raving doomsayers.

This was the kind of thing that fascinated Cloak Boy. Liliana just wanted some demons to die. But maybe the two could be linked after all.

They emerged into a broad, thickly carpeted drawing room. A tall, white-haired vampire in a long jacket stood with his back to them, looking out the tall windows into the night.

Liliana felt claws dig into her arm. "We know it was you," Olivia hissed, suddenly hovering just by her ear. "We know you freed them." She added, brightly, "Isn't that right, Sorin?"

Sorin Markov turned around to face them. He wore hatred like a flamboyant suit.

Sorin's Thirst | Art by Karl Kopinski

"*You* ," he said.

"Look who's paid us a visit," Olivia said, her voice all dainty politeness once again. "Sorin, I believe you know Liliana Vess?"

"You did this," said Sorin. "You released the Lithomancer and brought this upon us."

Liliana wrenched her arm away from Olivia and gathered herself. She walked up to Sorin and looked him up and down. Finally she chuckled, picking a mote of dust off of Sorin's lapel. "I had business to attend to," she said. "Not my fault if your closet was full of skeletons."

"You had no right," Sorin said, each word like a blade on a whetstone.

"Sorin, you and I have another matter to attend to," said Olivia, floating around them. "But I'd be remiss if I didn't allow you two the opportunity to catch up, wouldn't I?"

Sorin brought his face close to Liliana's. "All this is because of you. The Lithomancer is free, and now we must face her."

"You have quite the vampiric army assembled," Liliana said. She smirked at him. "Or—let me guess—is it more of a *defense* force? You slighted *her* , didn't you?"

Sorin's fangs flared. "I told you when you came here as a *pup* . Innistrad is mine. You meddle in my affairs, you die."

Liliana looked him in the eye, her fingers reaching down to touch the rings of the Chain Veil at her waist. The etchings began to glow on her skin, and her hair floated slightly. "Innistrad may be your domain, Sorin," she whispered. She patted him on the arm. "But *death is mine* ."

Sorin snarled, whipping his arm away and pressing his forehead into hers. His eyes snapped just briefly to her neck.

"Now, my friends!" Olivia laughed lightly, putting herself between them. "As giddy as I'd be to see you two tear each other apart, all over my drawing room…Sorin, it looks like the time has come. Join me outside. Nahiri awaits." She gestured toward the tall windows, into the night.

Liliana was struck by what she saw through the glass. What had been the remnants of the lightning storm was now a swollen cluster of clouds churning over the coast of Nephalia. Tendrils of mist reached out in all directions. It was not just a few werewolves or vampires that were being warped. Whatever force had arrived—it threatened to tear apart all of Innistrad.

Olivia slid a sword from its sheath. "Liliana, dear one, I'm afraid you've exhausted my supply of geist experts and spectral toys. But perhaps you'd like to join us? You were the one who released Nahiri, after all. She may even want to thank you."

Liliana just watched the clouds. This was deep, ancient magic, world-altering and vindictive. "She caused this?"

"The petty act of a petty mage," Sorin murmured. "With a misguided sense of justice."

"So it was you who caused all this," Liliana said. "You wronged her!"

"And now we're off to wrong her again," Olivia said with a fanged grin.

Framed in the windows of the fortress, the atmospheric mass shifted slowly from its origin over the Nephalia coast, tipping toward Gavony province and the brightly lit High City. The sky seemed wrinkled and torn, Liliana thought, like those werewolves. It was as if the whole plane—the whole of Sorin's home world—had been tainted on purpose, warped from horizon to horizon, just because Sorin cared about it. Whoever Nahiri was, Liliana had to admit—she didn't do things halfway.

"Aren't you the least bit concerned about what her vengeance is doing to Innistrad?" Liliana asked. "Jace is"—she straightened herself—"there are thousands of people out there."

"This world is ruined," Sorin said. "She has made sure of that. And your Jace will die at Thraben with the rest of them."

"What Sorin means," Olivia said brightly, "is that stopping Nahiri will surely stop the unpleasantness she has wrought. We're on a heroic mission!"

Liliana glanced outside, then looked back at Olivia, now with a dreadful tenderness. "Oh, you sweet child."

Sorin slid his sword out of its scabbard, lazily, like an afterthought. "Let's go, Olivia." He turned and stalked out of the drawing room and out of the mansion without another word.

Olivia floated after him, and ranks of Voldaren vampires followed after, their armor echoing through the halls.

Liliana followed them out. As she saw Gared again, she said, "Gared, get your coat."

Gared looked sadly at his coat and began the task of extricating it from Dierk.

They emerged out into the night. The wind howled now, great cones of suction thrashing the sky. A ruddy, otherworldly glow floated along the distended bellies of the clouds.

Liliana pushed her hair out of her face as it whipped side to side. She looked toward the distant hills of Gavony as great shadows coalesced over it. This is what Jace is trying to stop, she thought.

Sorin barely glanced back over his shoulder as he and the vampires assembled. Sorin pointed with his sword. "Come, Olivia," he intoned over the wind. "It's time for you to fulfill your end of the bargain."

Olivia smiled gaily and swept into the air. The vampire army marched off down the hill, swords and pikes and red-hot priest symbols held high—off into the mists, off to battle Nahiri.

Not to battle the horrors that Nahiri had wrought upon this world. Not to help out-of-his-mind Jace.

This world was destined to die, then, Liliana thought. Its protectors had all forsaken it. It was time to say goodbye. "Goodbye, Vess Manor."

The sky uttered an unfathomable sound that shook Liliana's bones. In the distance, Thraben glittered like a fallen star resting on the horizon. "Goodbye, Cloak Boy."

But she found herself walking down the hill, on a different path from the vampires. She found herself on the road. She found herself passing a noosegraf, where the criminals lay in their graves, waiting out the eternal part of their sentence. She found herself reaching out. Corpses crawled up out of the earth. She kept walking. The corpses followed her.

She found herself passing another cemetery, and another. A little roadside shrine, a cursed iron-fenced diregraf, a mausoleum of honored cathar dead. Each time, she reached out. Each time, the dead obeyed her, wriggling themselves free from their rest and lurching along behind her.

Art by Joseph Meehan

As she walked in the direction of Thraben, she reached down to her waist. She could almost hear the scores of spectral essences sneering at her, *chanting* at her from within the Chain Veil—over the sound of the zombies dutifully lurching and foot-dragging their way down the road behind her.

Sorin and Olivia weren't going to do anything about the crisis Nahiri had caused. And the only person she could count on to understand—he and his broken, irritating, fathomless brain—was following his curiosity directly into messy, twisted, and almost certainly inevitable death.

It wasn't that she needed him. It was simply that she needed someone to need *her* .

"Well, Gared," she said loudly into the wind.

She raised her arms, feeling the etchings like hot blood vessels in her skin.

"Looks as though I'm…"

A dozen more zombies lurched out of the ground, compelled to follow in her wake of necromantic power.

"…this world's…"

The corpses did not seem warped—at least, no more warped than their disheveled bones had already become by their years in the ground. The restless dead seemed to shrug off the effects. Liliana smirked.

"...last hope."

Art by Anna Steinbauer