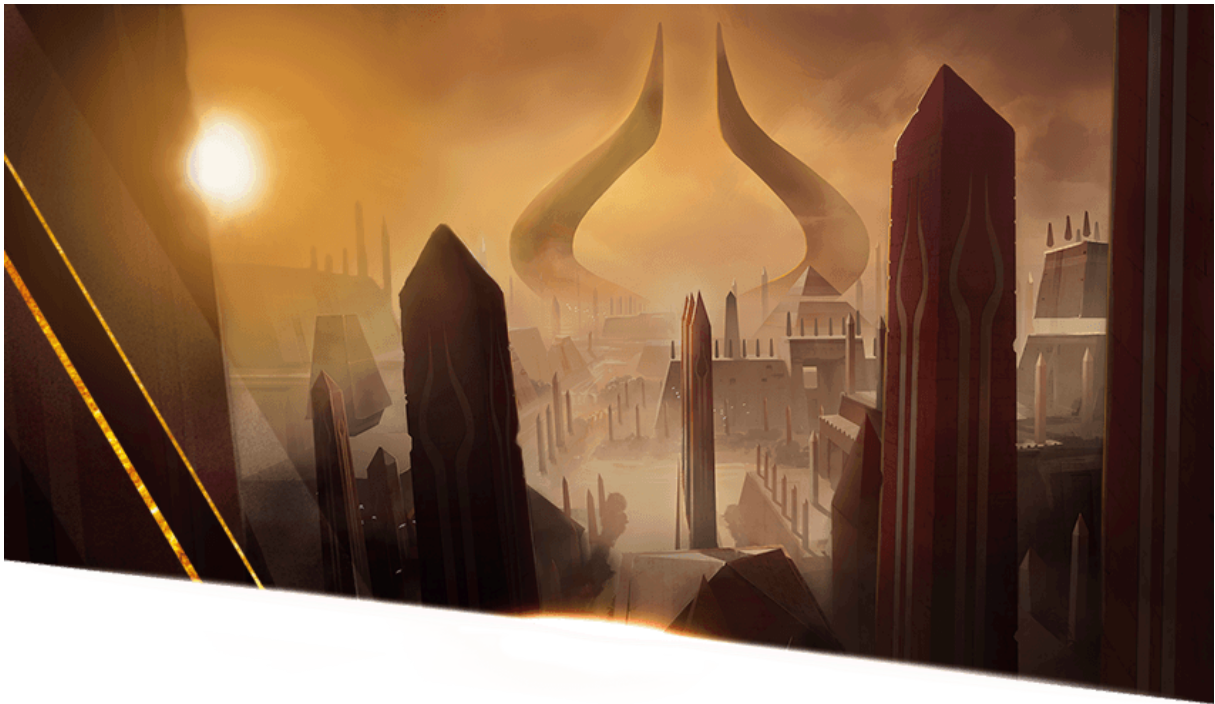


Impact

Michael Yichao

From set *Amonkhet*
29. 03. 2017



Deciding that a proactive approach is best, most of the Gatewatch has gone after Nicol Bolas on Amonkhet to attack him head-on before he can set more of his schemes in motion. With no plan and no information, five planeswalkers set off to take down an elder dragon on a mysterious and unfamiliar plane.

A scalding wind danced across the dunes, its invisible talons etching cryptic lines in the endless sand. It cast sprays of dust and grit airborne in empty tantrums, heated into a burning fury by the twin suns overhead. As dawn broke into morning, the first sun scorched its path across the sky, while the second remained fixed in its point on the horizon. Below, the wind flitted along the vast expanses of desert, picking up speed and ferocity, growing into a growling, tumbling sandstorm. Soon, its howl drowned out all else, fangs bared as stinging sand swirled and slashed at anything in its path. It gnawed at stony outcroppings, the remnants of monuments both natural and designed, and bit at the exposed flesh of wild beasts too slow to flee before it.

At the height of its fury, near its wild and blustery heart, a sudden shimmer of light, a blurring of the air, a ripple of shadow, a spark of flame, and a flash of green danced within the sandstorm. Five figures stood where none were moments ago, caught by surprise in the blinding sands.

The wind carried on, oblivious to their presence.



Art by Noah Bradley

Earlier, on Kaladesh . . .

JACE

I watched as Ajani stalked away from us, pulling his cloak closer and vanishing in a flash of light. My mind followed after him briefly as he disappeared from my reach, his thoughts fading within the impenetrable Blind Eternities. Behind me, Gideon cleared his throat, and I turned and gave him a quick nod. “We’re in the clear.”

“Let’s move quickly then,” Gideon replied. “And you’re sure you know of the place we are to meet him after, Liliana?”

Liliana raised an eyebrow, a languid hand drifting up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “My dear Gideon, I’ve traveled to countless worlds in the Multiverse in the centuries *before* you were born. I know many places, and I know the place Ajani spoke of especially well.”

“We’ll trust you to navigate, then. Both to Amonkhet and to our rendezvous after.” Gideon flashed what I’m sure he intended as a warm smile at Liliana.

Liliana gave an exaggerated bow back. “I’m flattered and honored by your trust.”

I cringed. *He’s trying, Liliana. You could cut him some slack.* Liliana’s eyes darted in my direction, and she gave me a wink. I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes.

“What is our plan once we get to Amonkhet?” Nissa’s question cut through the lingering silence.

“Pop in, find a dragon, roast a dragon.” Chandra sat on the short wall at the edge of the rooftop, adjusting her gloves. Gideon frowned, but nodded.

“More or less. Liliana leads us there. We go to Amonkhet and learn what we can of Nicol Bolas’s plans, then neutralize the threat he poses—either by stopping his schemes, or, if necessary, taking him out.”

“Don’t expect that to be easy,” I warned. “We don’t know if Tezzeret has already found him and warned him about us, or how much he knows, or if he is prepared for potential interplanar threats—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Chandra waved her hands, as if trying to disperse my train of thought midair. She hopped off her perch and walked toward us. “We’re burning daylight and our chance at surprise. Let’s do this.”

The five of us gathered in a circle. I looked around at my companions and, not for the first time, marveled at the oddity of our little gathering. Beyond us, Ghirapur slowly stirred to life, the sounds of the street and the denizens below rising with the sun. Little did they know, just above them, an indestructible soldier, a necromancer, an elven druid, a pyromancer, and a mind mage prepared to venture to another plane of existence.

What strange friends I’ve made.

A second thought crept from the corners of my mind, one I tried pushed away.

How strange it is to have friends.

“See you all in Amonkhet.” Liliana began to shimmer as she started to planeswalk.

I watched as the others around me began to shift as well, each form vanishing in a slightly different manner. How other mages cast spells—especially how they planeswalk—has always tugged at my curiosity. Perhaps I’d ask the others, when we all had more time.

Whenever that would be.

I raised my hands, concentrated on the invisible strands of mana around me, and gently pulled.

The world of Kaladesh blurred and wavered, then melted into smears of color, much as an illusion wipes away when its magical threads are unwoven. I felt the now-familiar (yet ever-alien) press of the Blind Eternities around me, the crackle of energy and aether leaving the taste and tingle of fresh rain and lightning on my tongue. We traveled infinitely far yet not at all, standing still yet moving at blinding speeds. Time and space and dimensions folded and unfolded, and I followed behind Liliana (*or was it below—or within?*) as we pushed through the nothingness between worlds, leaving strange trails and inverted wakes of energy behind us. I *felt* as they arrived, and with a final tug, the colors around me slid back into place, the vague electric taste of illusion and dreams solidifying into reality.

A scorching, gritty reality.

I coughed as the wind swept a fistful of sand into my mouth. The heat crushed down on me, a suffocating and instantaneous weight around my shoulders. A pungent smell of decay crawled up my nose and stayed there, so thick I could almost taste it. I squinted against the blinding sands all around. Closest by, Gideon rippled with golden light, the stinging sandstorm triggering his magical shields as it pelted against him. Nissa hunched low, face cast down, stumbling in the sand. Even Liliana looked slightly wilted as she stood a short distance away, hand held up against the pelting winds, her usual flawlessness marred by the oppressive storm. Chandra alone looked mostly unfazed, hair dancing wildly and one hand scratching at her shoulder armor.

I did not envy those of us in plate mail one bit.

As though on a mission, sand relentlessly poured into my boots and the folds of my shirt. A gust threw my cloak into my face. I pushed the fabric away best I could, taking uneasy steps on the dune. Gideon was shouting something about finding shelter. Through the storm, I saw Nissa attempting to cast a spell. I reached out myself, seeking mana, and found only the dry taste of sand and wastes at my fingertips. Didn’t look like shelter would happen—

A jet of white hot flame seared across the sand. Chandra walked forward, focusing her fire on the dune ahead. I took a step back as even greater waves of heat roiled from her and her target. “I got this!” she shouted above the roar of the wind.

CHANDRA

Man, who woulda guessed Amonkhet would be nothing but a giant pit of wasteland and sand and sun? Wait, make that *suns*, there’s *two* of them, what the heck, no wonder it’s so hot. Well I mean hot in like a relative sense because Kaladesh had this stifling humidity thing happening sometimes and really everywhere isn’t all *that* hot after the lava pits of Regatha, but yeesh everyone else looks like they’re melting into watery rice pudding in this dry sandy heat. How miserable can this be?

Then again, I guess this *is* the home of a giant evil dragon who sends evil henchmen out to destroy all that’s good on other worlds with their . . . evilness. So never mind. This place makes total sense.



Art by Volkan Baga

I turn up the heat, focusing my fire into a white-hot beam. I’d seen craftsmen in Ghirapur do this before, when I was a kid, though they had an aetherkiln and some special powders and stuff. I imagine the idea is the same though. I feel the sand *melting* and grasp the air with my hand, commanding and sculpting the rivulets of molten slag. Those Ghirapur artisans made elegant figurines and fancy parts for ships with delicate, complex, spindly bits. My goal is much simpler. I step forward and shape the still-liquid glass into a simple, crude dome. Just big enough to fit four regular-size people and one Gideon-size people. The glass takes shape, hardening into a semi-clear bubble as grains of sand pepper into its still-soft surface. I drag my hand across one part, fingers not quite touching the surface, creating a small doorway.

“Come in. It’s cool. Er, cooling. Er, it shouldn’t light your clothes on fire if you accidentally touch it,” I yell.

Liliana leads the way, and the rest join her, and soon we’re all standing inside, looking out at the blur of sand and dust creating a constant sound like a thousand mothers shushing their children at some kind

of weird place where there'd be a thousand mothers and their children gathered, only the thousand mothers is just tens of thousands of grains of sand washing over our little dome in this crazy storm. We all kind of just watch for a bit, and I'm not sure if the others are watching because there's a sort of primal beauty and awe-inducing aspect to the chaotic melee dancing through the air, or if they just didn't want to make eye contact after we came to kick dragon butt and ended up nearly drowning in sand.

"Right. So. What's next?" I ask.

We all sort of look at Gideon, but Jace speaks up. "Liliana, are you sure this is the right place?"

Liliana looks mildly offended. But then, she almost always looks mildly offended, that or bored, or if she thinks no one is looking, contemplative and a little sad. "Of course. I don't forget how to 'walk somewhere if I've been there once."

"Where might we find Bolas on this world, then?" Gideon stands in front of the doorway, blocking the worst of the sand and wind trying to sneak in. Liliana gives him a shrug.

"Unsure. My visit here last time was . . . brief. And some time ago. I didn't exactly get a tour of the place. Much could have changed."

"Nissa. Jace. Can you sense anything that could guide us in the right direction?"

Nissa closes her eyes, and Jace's glow blue. A short moment passes, and Jace shakes his head. "Nothing with minds nearby."

Nissa takes longer, her brows knitting into a tangle of concentration. Finally, she too shakes her head as she opens her eyes. "The mana on this world feels . . . strange. I'm having trouble finding the leylines. They're there, but weak—like the pulse of a sick animal."

Jace nods. "I suppose that makes sense, if Bolas created this world."

"Or if he killed a living one to claim it as his own," Liliana cheerfully offers.

"No ideas on where we may find him, or if there's any life on this plane? Any leads at all?" Gideon does the Gideon thing where he stays focused on the task at hand. I do the Chandra thing where I am mostly listening but also mostly looking outside the nearest window. Which in this case is the entire dome we're in. Because glass.

That's when I see it.

"I think I know where to go."

Everybody turns to look at me. I point outside.

"Ah," says Nissa.

"Well then," says Jace.

"He's not subtle," muses Liliana.

"How . . . did we miss that?" asks Gideon.

Visible even through the sandstorm, against the murky red-orange of the horizon, the massive shadow of two horns pierces the sky—a perfect match for the image of Bolas that Jace had shared with us back on Kaladesh the night before.

"Looks like we're definitely in the right place, at least," I offer.



Art by Noah Bradley

NISSA

We decided to wait out the storm. Gideon stayed by the entrance, a human shield against the elements. Across from him, Chandra sat, her legs crossed, eyes closed in quiet meditation. For a moment, I followed the rhythm of her breath, seeking borrowed solace in her journey. A quiet pride buzzed in my chest at her progress—a warm happiness that the small tools I had shared with her helped her find calm. Indeed, she alone seemed most comfortable here. The oppressive heat drained my energy, and the rest of us looked worse for the wear already. I wondered, not for the first time, how we would thwart or destroy an ancient dragon. Jace and Liliana spoke constantly of Nicol Bolas’s power and cunning. We would need to be at our full strength to face him. And yet, here we were . . .

I closed my eyes and slowed my breath, pushing away the sand and heat. *I need to trust my companions. My friends.* I inhaled, sending my thoughts through my body, isolating tensions and releasing where I could. I hesitated for a moment, then pictured a flowing river—borrowing the imagery I lent Chandra in her meditation back on Kaladesh. Perhaps a journey downstream would help to quench some of the endless heat buzzing in my head.

It was strange, to lean upon others, to share my burdens and shoulder the worries of those outside myself. It came easier with some in our group than others—but all of it still felt foreign. Yet we were undeniably stronger together, the bonds of trust perhaps as powerful a force as an animist’s connection to the land. *Trust. Understanding. I am working on both.*

I breathed in, drawing air and mana in equal measure, my heart and thoughts reaching out to this strange world, seeking the tendrils of life and vitality, the familiar strands of leylines that crisscross all worlds.

Again, all I felt at first was a yawning darkness, an endless maw of decay and rot.

I had faced worlds devastated by monstrosities in the past. On Zendikar, the unnatural, chalky *emptiness* left in the wake of the Eldrazi titans. On Innistrad, corrupted leylines wild and toxic, impossible

to channel or control. Yet this felt different. Most worlds, regardless of outside corruption or influence, harbored a balance of death and life magic, wrapped up in an intricate web with its leylines, interweaving into a complex spiral made of knitted nodes of power. Yet here on Amonkhet, the shadow of death dominated all I could reach, as if the world itself favored the silence of the dead.

I focused on the weak strands of life energy I could find—more ghosts of leylines than leylines proper. I traced along their tenuous strands, and my mind left my body behind. My breath fell in tune with the weak pulse of the world, gaining speed as I flew over the dunes, finally bursting out on the other side of this storm, to see—

“Nissa. We’re moving out.”

I opened my eyes, and Chandra swam into view. She knelt next to me, her face scrunched in mild concern. Behind her, Gideon, Jace, and Liliana had already left the glass dome and stood waiting at the top of a dune. The sandstorm seemed to have passed, dwindling into remnant gusts of wind sweeping the sands in wide arcs.

“I think I’ve found something. In the direction of the horns.”

Chandra’s frown broke into a grin, her freckles a mirror of the now-past storm. “Oh good—glad my plan of ‘walk toward the big thing in the distance’ has some backup.”

She stood and held out her hand. I hesitated for just a moment, then reached out, and she helped pull me up. *Trust. Understanding.*

“Let’s go kick some dragon butt.” Chandra marched ahead toward the others, and I followed.

That’s when the sand dune *came alive*.

LILIANA

The first ones attacked Jace. Because that’s the sort of luck that boy has. One moment, we were standing, waiting for Chandra and Nissa. The next, rotting hands burst forth from the sand, grabbed Jace by the legs, and pulled him under. Jace let out an undignified little yelp as he sank up to his waist. Only Beefslab’s reflexes saved Jace as the larger man turned and grabbed Jace’s arm with one hand, keeping him from slipping under. I let loose a barrage of necrotic energy, withering the already-desecrated limbs grasping at Jace into dust. Around my feet, the sand broiled as more hands reached up, grasping hungrily at the air. I stepped back, cloaking myself in an aura of decay that withered all flesh that came near me.



Art by Daarken

Panicked yells and the unfortunate stench of charred rot floated up toward me from back down the dune. I looked over to see Chandra and Nissa just outside the little glass dome, surrounded by a seemingly endless mass of undead, dried and desiccated by the heat and sands, with more rising from the shifting ground near them. Nissa had drawn a sword from her staff (a cute little trick) and cut down the charging zombies nearest to her while Chandra sent streams of flame scorching temporary openings across the hordes. Yet as fast as she could burn them, more mummified dead rose from the sands to replenish their ranks.

I smiled.

The Multiverse was filled with planes, each with their own wonders and horrors and infinite curiosities. But one thing was always the same: things died.

And those that were dead belonged to me.

I raised my hands and dark tendrils billowed forward, subtly ensnaring the undead corpses closest to me. I felt my magic touch and bind with their core, and I spoke a single word.

“Obey.”

One by one, the undead I claimed halted in their approach. I dropped my aura of decay, focusing my powers on seizing command of the rising dead. A sudden spray of sand burst mere steps from my feet as a jackal-headed figure erupted from the ground, springing forth and swinging wildly with a curved sword. I stumbled back, cursing my carelessness—just as the wet sound of steel through flesh sloshed against my ears and a spray of ichor jetted across the sand. I watched the top half of the jackal figure’s torso slide off the rest of his body as the strange, flexible blades of Gideon’s sural danced back to his side. Jace stood back to back with Gideon throwing up illusions that did little to distract the pressing horde of undead assaulting the pair.

“You all right?” Gideon shouted.

"I could've used that one, Beefslab," I called back, letting bored disappointment seep into my words. His face soured, and I suppressed a grin. It's so simple provoking Gideon's frustration. Yes, his intervention covered for my moment of vulnerability. Yes, his usefulness was undeniable. No, I'd never need to let him know that.

Still, I should help him and Jace out. Play the role of helpful teammate and all. I willed my small squadron of undead forward.

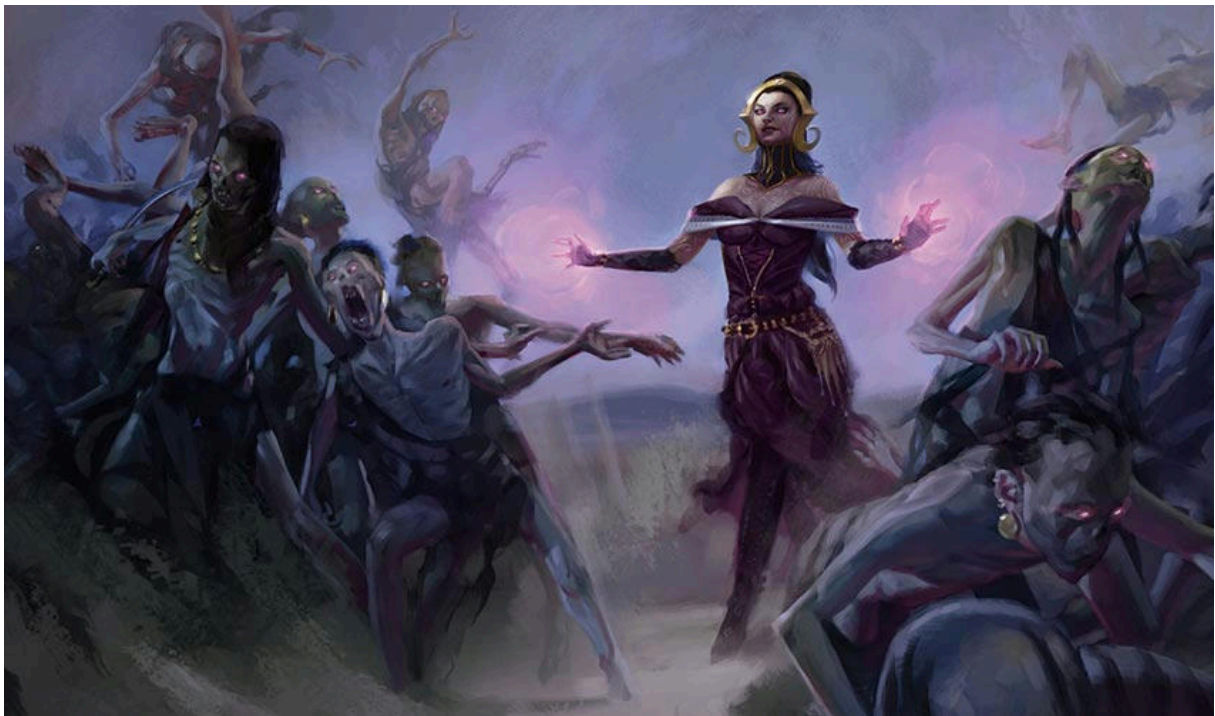
"Assist."

They launched themselves against the undead attacking Gideon, and I watched as he shifted his own assaults to seamlessly support my minions. His sural struck with surgical precision, covering the exposed flanks of the undead under my command, cutting down foes that threatened to overwhelm. His effectiveness has undeniably improved, even just from the last time he fought alongside my raised ones, back on Innistrad.

Yes. Definitely useful.

I turned my attention back toward the hordes pressing in against Chandra and Nissa, just in time to watch one mummy land a solid swipe on Nissa's shoulder, and another bite into Chandra's armored forearm before she ignited it into a charred cinder. *No time to gain full control.* Instead, I cast a much shallower link to a greater number, touching as many as I could before issuing one simple command:

"Flee."



Art by Kieran Yanner

Swaths of undead turned away, shambling off in different directions. Some ran pell-mell over the dunes; some burrowed back into the sands. The thinned numbers still pressing their assault fell quickly to sword and flame as Nissa and Chandra struck with impressive synchronicity.

As I watched them cut down the straggling numbers, my fingers brushed against the Chain Veil hanging at my side. What a luxury, to not need to draw on its powers, when I now had other planeswalkers to do the heavy lifting for me! Sure, directing *their* focus was significantly more . . . *challenging* than

using the veil or commanding my undead servants. But I had gotten them to come to Amonkhet. And if I played my hand well, they would probably help me accomplish the real reason why I came—and best of all, do it of their own volition.

I looked around. Gideon stood awkwardly eying the remnants of my squadron, having dispatched the rest of the undead. Chandra and Nissa now walked up the hill, catching their breath from the fight. Jace . . . was conspicuously missing.

I frowned. Knowing him, he probably vanished from sight during the fight to “gain a better vantage point.” Also known as turning invisible when things went poorly. He had a knack for disappearing when a situation turned sour, and I knew he wasn’t much help in this fight. When you’re a mind mage, the undead are a weakness. No brains means nothing for your powers to manipulate. As the two of us had determined many times throughout our numerous . . . encounters.

But maybe he vanished because a zombie managed to drag him under after all.

I sighed, and began reaching out to the corpses under the sand, just to make sure I wouldn’t find a squirming, struggling Jace in the clammy embrace of some desert dead. My focus was distracted, and I didn’t hear what exactly Nissa shouted as she suddenly began sprinting toward us.

Then all went dark.

JACE

I hate this plane.

Over my shoulder, I watched Gideon smash his fist into another undead, crushing its skull with a sickening crunch. Another zombie (must be one of Liliana’s) leapt in front of the one charging me, dragging it to the ground, the duo kicking up sprays of sand as they tore at each other’s limbs. I took the opportunity to vanish, throwing up a quick invisibility spell, and ran for the top of the dune.

Find a clear vantage point. Formulate a plan from this chaos.

I already had my fill of Nicol Bolas’s little hellscape of sand and heat and endless dead. We needed to get out of this desert and figure out a better angle of approach. Even Nissa—quiet and shy Nissa—had spoken up asking for a plan before we left. I knew I wasn’t helpful in this fight, but I could try to think ahead.

As I crested the top of the hill, I turned to watch the melee. Chandra and Nissa struggled against a throng of undead, but already Liliana seemed to seize the upper hand, gaining control over swaths of them, sending waves fleeing back into the desert. Meanwhile, Gideon . . . was Gideon. A blunt force instrument, albeit an efficient one. And one working in effective tandem with the zombies newly under Liliana’s control.

It was strange seeing the two of them working well together and strange to witness Liliana play nice with others in a fight. Perhaps she truly was changing. Perhaps she meant her oath and believed in the purpose of the Gatewatch, and despite her antagonism of Gideon, truly cared about our mission.

Perhaps I really should know better.

My years of . . . *entanglement* with Liliana left me feeling like I knew less of her now than when I started. The more I learned, the more unsolvable she became. Almost as unreadable as her zombies, she never ceased to surprise me—for better, or more often, for much, much worse. And yet, even now, she drew me in. So often, I found myself defending her to the others, even as I reminded myself to take caution around her.

I shook my head. I wouldn't unravel the mystery of Liliana here, standing on top of this pile of sand. Instead, I turned my attention toward the horns in the distance.

What do we know? What's Nicol Bolas's plan? What's our best next step?

This was an inhospitable plane. Nissa mentioned the world felt more dead than alive. Zombies apparently just lurked casually in hills, waiting to pop out and devour passers-by.

Why would Bolas make a world like this his base of operations?

What secrets hid beneath the sands? Was this truly a dead world? And what purpose did those grandiose horns in the distance serve? Sure, it was easy to think Nicol Bolas's ego was such that he'd build a mighty monument to himself just because he could. Yet Bolas wasn't one for wasteful, narcissistic grand gestures. No, his gestures always served hidden purposes several layers deep *and* were excessively narcissistic and grandiose.

I considered the possibility of planeswalking away then walking back in an attempt to arrive at a location closer to the horns, but quickly discarded that line of thought. Traveling to specific locations, even on a very familiar world, was immensely challenging. To do so on a foreign plane would require getting very lucky. Plus, if Bolas did have guards or alarms set against interplanar intervention on his world, I didn't want to potentially trip them more than once, giving him more opportunities to realize we have found him.

No. We needed to push on. However, our arrival on this plane so far has resulted in landing in a sandstorm and stepping into a zombie ambush. Our next steps had to minimize randomness and chance and maximize our strengths. We needed to gain our footing here and press on toward the horns, fully on our guard. No more surprises—

Nissa's yell yanked me out of my thoughts and back to the battlefield below.

... Did she just say—

NISSA

"SAND WURM!"



Art by Steve Belledin

I shouted out at Liliana, but my warning came too late. The tremors I felt underground erupted in a geyser of sand right beneath her, and I watched in horror she disappeared into the gullet of an enormous worm. A short distance away, a second worm breached the sands with a bellowing roar that shook the thick desert air. I grasped at what little mana I could find, drawing desperately at energies that weren't there for spells I knew deep down I couldn't cast in this dry wasteland.

"Take it down!" Gideon roared, charging forward—but the undead previously under Liliana's control turned and tackled him, and he disappeared under a pile of monstrosities.

Her zombies turned—Liliana is dead.

The thought clung stubbornly to my brain even as I tried desperately to pull it out of the way so something useful could take its place—a plan, an idea, anything.

Underfoot, other tremors deep in the sand reverberated up my spine, rumbling as they grew closer. Fear and doubt seeped into my heart and overflowed across my tongue, bitter and acrid.

Breathe. Act.

Trust.

"Chandra, stop that worm! More are coming!" I charged forward, blade gripped tightly in my hand. I couldn't draw the mana I needed for the spell I wanted, but I *could* cut down the undead now besieging Gideon. I *could* trust that Chandra would stop the wurms. I *could* believe that Jace would think of a plan, wherever he was. With a cry, I slid under the worm now crashing toward me, spraying sand and tucking into a roll. My feet landed beneath me and I leaped, closing the final distance between myself and the mass of undead, my blade cutting into rotting flesh as I sliced my way toward Gideon.

CHANDRA

HOLY FIERY RIVERS OF REGATHA WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THAT THING AND DID IT JUST EAT LILIANA NO WAY WHAT THE HELL DIE IN A PILLAR OF FLAME YOU BIG FAT STUPID WAIT DID

NISSA JUST SAY THERE WERE MORE COMING OH GEEZ YUP THERE THEY ARE GET OUT OF THE WAY I'LL ROAST YOU ALL GIVE BACK LILIANA YOU STUPID SONS OF INBRED BANDARS—

GIDEON

Endless teeth. Hands that ended in talon-like claws. The press of putrid flesh all around me. I strained to bring my sural to bear, but the sheer number of them held me down. My defenses shimmered, the familiar golden glow dancing before my eyes as they chewed and grasped, pressing my face into the sand and tearing at my limbs, trying to rip me asunder.



Art by Seb McKinnon

With great effort, I managed to pull my left leg under my body, and pushed upward with all my might, shoving a few of them off and rising to half-standing. At the same moment, the whistle of metal slicing through air whizzed near my ear, and I turned to see the blur of Nissa's sword. Suddenly the limbs of the zombie holding my right arm were no longer attached to its torso. A triumphant laugh escaped my lips as I pushed mana into my sural. With a flick of my hand, the thin, ribbon-like blades whipped around, their curving, glowing arcs cutting down a swath of the zombies. Within moments, Nissa and I completed our deadly bladed dance, her elegant flips and precise cuts weaving seamlessly within the concentric paths of my sural. We ran past the ground now littered with severed parts of the mummified dead, once again laid back to rest, and sped toward Chandra, who had drawn the wurms away with her jets of fire.

"Four?" I yelled to Nissa as we ran.

"Six. Two more coming," Nissa corrected.

My insides clenched, but I pushed on, my next question more urgent than my apprehension at those numbers.

"Liliana—is she—"

Nissa pointed at one of the wurms trying to flank Chandra. I ran faster.

Nicol Bolas's realm held far more horrors than we could have imagined.

LILIANA

.
. .
.



Art by Slawomir Maniak

CHANDRA

“Raaaaaargh!” The yell tears out of my throat as I channel power into the inferno, engulfing one of the wurms in a billowing pyre. It finally falls, torched and charred, sand spraying wide.

My breath heaves heavy and ragged. “Who’s next?” I shout, more for my own benefit than the wurms because they’re wurms and probably don’t speak any words and what do they know anyway. A blur of motion to my right and a bellowing roar—I leap out of the way as one of the wurms dives at me. How the hell does a giant worm sneak up on a person?

I nearly jump out of my skin as I turn and see a behemoth of a blue, glowing scorpion appear out of thin air, looming in front of me. I jump again as Jace pops into sight a second later by my side. He grabs my hand and puts a finger to his lips and we both vanish just as the scorpion illusion goes skittering across the sand, drawing one of the wurms chasing after it, diving through the dunes as if they were cresting waves of water and not, you know, fairly solid sand.

“Their favorite food,” an invisible Jace mutters, his hand still clenching my own. I can feel his pulse frenzied and wild and I resist asking what else giant worm monsters thought about.

I see Gideon and Nissa racing toward us, with Gideon waving his sural and yelling, trying to draw the attention of the wurms. The two remaining (wait, four, when did two more show up?!) turn and wind their way with unexpected speed toward Gideon, the sound of scales on sand cutting across the dry,

dead air. My eyes follow one of them and I pull free of Jace's hand to sprint after the worm. I throw twin bolts of fire at it, and they glance harmlessly off its body, but it peels off from the others to circle back toward me. Behind me Jace is yelling something probably dumb. I clench my fists, focusing points of white hot flame between my fingers.



Art by Slawomir Maniak

But before I can unleash my blast, the worm skids to a halt. I'm caught off guard and the fires in my hands flicker as I lose focus. I watch as the worm rears back and begins convulsing. I back away because when I see humans do this it usually is followed by projectile vomiting, and I do *not* want sand worm vomit on me no thank you.

This worm doesn't vomit. Instead, its chest *caves in*, then *crumbles to dust*. I watch, horrified, as Liliana steps forward out of the worm, guts and stomach acid and viscera sizzling off her, a weird chain thingy floating in front of her face all aglow with purple light. She steps onto the sand, and the worm wobbles then collapses to one side beside her, its innards oozing out of the gaping Liliana-sized hole, its outer shell a gray, dead color. Liliana takes a few more steps across the sand as though in a trance. Markings

on her skin glow with the same purple light as the chain, and her eyes are blank and expressionless. I stare as wounds across her body seem to knit shut and worm slime continues to dissipate as though burned off by some heat, but I feel nothing from her. If anything she seems colder and more distant than ever, an inverted star searing across the sand.

“Liliana?” I take a step forward, and the purple glow from her *everything* fades, and she collapses in a heap.

JACE

This is not good. This is seriously, seriously, not good.

GIDEON

The first sand worm dove at me, its mouth agape, ready to swallow me whole.

Perfect.

I ran forward and leaped into its open maw, punching my hand forward and sending my sural spinning and slashing spirals down the worm’s throat. The blades sliced through its soft innards, and the burn and suffocating press of its throat muscles gave way to daylight again as I eviscerated my way back out its neck in a spray of blood and fluid.

One down.

The worm fell with a *wumph!* onto the sands, and I went sprawling to one side. I barely picked myself up when the tail of a second worm caught me in the chest with the force of a charging rhox, and I went flying backward, crashing into another dune before rolling to a stop.

I laid on my back and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to catch my breath.

I probably needed a different approach for the remaining worms.

Gideon. We need to leave and regroup. I sit up with a start. Never going to get used to Jace’s voice just *appearing* in my mind. A quick glance around had me springing to my feet just as one of the remaining worms barreled my way.

I think we can handle this, Jace. I readied my sural, trying to split my attention between the worm and Jace’s voice in my head. *Is Liliana—*

Alive. But she’s in bad shape.

I grimaced. The worm lunged at me, its mouth closed, its head a battering ram of force. I rolled out of the way and felt a cascade of sand pour over me, displaced from the worm’s mighty blow. I watched the distended sand churn as the worm burrowed around, charging at me again from underground.

Hang on. Nissa and I are coming. I crouched down, and as the worm struck, I leapt back, bringing my sural sweeping over my head, raking along the worm’s underbelly as it rose into the air. Metal cut through softer scales and the worm let out an enraged shriek. I rolled sideways to my right as the worm fell, writhing in the sand, injured but not quite dead.

A short distance away, I saw Nissa charge *toward* a worm as it emerged from beneath the sands, landing nimbly on its head. The worm writhed to throw her off, but she moved too quick—in a blink, she drove her sword with both hands down, piercing its skull with a squish, and rode the worm as it crashed back down to the ground.

“Nissa!” I called out. “Liliana needs—”

“Jace told me.” Nissa pulled her blade from the worm’s skull, and in a flash of green light it resumed the shape of her staff. We fell into lock step as we ran toward Jace and Chandra, the two kneeling over a crumpled figure that must’ve been Liliana, the corpse of a worm inert behind them.

Jace looked our way as we ran, his eyes aglow. *We should retreat. Back to Kaladesh. Come up with a better plan, a different approach.*

Hang on, Jace. I frowned at the worry echoing from his thoughts, and tried to evaluate the situation. The surprise of the attacks inarguably got the better of us, but we survived and managed to neutralize the threats. Liliana was badly injured, but alive. Nissa could see to her wounds, and we could press on. Leaving now, just to return later to potentially more trouble, hardly seemed the best course of—

That’s when I noticed the worm behind Jace stirring.

NISSA

I felt it before I understood what it was—a sudden shift in the air, like the quiet pressure right before the bursting of a rainstorm. Only this shift was a magical one, a surge in ethereal tensions, a pull on the pulse and shadow of the world’s leylines. Some power—ancient, deep to this world—stirred. I slowed in my running, distracted and curious, looking around for what changed. Gideon’s shouts of alarm drew my attention back to Jace, and that’s when I finally noticed, too late.



Art by Jose Cabrera

The dead worm behind them lurched up, a massive hole still visible in its chest. With unnatural speed, it lashed its tail out, sending Chandra and Jace sprawling. I watched in horror as they both bounced across the sand like pebbles skipped on a lake, landing in still heaps.

*The dead are cursed to walk in **undeath**.*

The truth of the land seemed to boom from the plane itself—echo from the sickly leylines and soul of the world. The strange sickness. The constant presence of rotting decay I felt since our arrival.

This world suffered an ancient, powerful curse. One that inverted and subsumed the cycle of life and death itself.

Dread poured over me, a sudden icy downpour sending shivers down my spine, as I turned back to the other slain wurms.

GIDEON

I doubled my speed, charging toward the undead worm now bearing down on the unconscious form of Liliana when the chilling roar and rumble of sand behind me pulled my attention back. Two zombified wurms erupted from the sand. I watched as Nissa managed to dive out of the way of the first one, only to have the second coil its massive body around her. “No!” I shouted as Nissa disappeared from my sight, the worm’s scales flexing as it squeezed tight.

Time slowed.

Horror took grip of my heart.

My eyes flitted between two impossible choices.

Save Nissa from the crushing grip.

Save Liliana from looming death.

Either way, another friend will die, once again, due to my hubris.

I stood, suspended, for a fraction of a second, fully aware that not making a choice meant choosing death for them both.

I took a step, pulled by instinct more than conscious thought.

Suddenly, a dazzling light burst from the horizon.

I threw up an arm and shielded my eyes on reflex as a force knocked me flying back through the air. The next instant, my mind had to catch up with what it saw.

A massive arrow, blazing with burning white light, pierced the worm that loomed over Liliana’s unconscious form. I watched, stunned, as the worm withered away, its body turned to ash. The arrow vanished, as though a sunbeam glancing off the reflective sands, as the remnants of the worm blew away in the wind.

The remaining wurms, both undead and living, roared and began to flee. The one that held Nissa left her unconscious form unceremoniously behind, and I ran to her. Before I even reached her, a giant blur of gold and red charged across the sands, moving with such speed and zeal that I could barely follow its movements. Only when it caught up to the wurms did I see its form.



Art by Chase Stone

She towered above me, standing at the height of a dozen men, golden headdress gleaming in the sun, a massive, two-pronged staff piercing one of the undead wurms. Her body glowed with radiant power, human-like in all her features save her head, which bore a resemblance to a jackal. Silver, fathomless eyes regarded me, and I felt her gaze pierce through me. She withdrew her weapon from the worm, and like the one shot by the unseen archer, this worm also turned to dust. The remaining undead worm burrowed beneath the sand, but with otherworldly speed, she leapt forward and drove her staff into the ground. The earth rumbled, a muffled dying squeal reverberated through the dunes, then all was still.

The lonely howl of the wind was the only sound as the figure stood. I started walking toward her, and she turned her full gaze my direction. I felt my heart fill with a golden fire, my steps faltering as her mere presence washed over me, robbing me of breath. Then, with the subtlest of nods, she broke away and dashed toward the horizon in the direction of the looming horns before disappearing behind a massive ridge of sand in the distance.

I slumped to my knees, surrounded by my scattered, unconscious friends, my mind as weary as my body.

There are gods on Amonkhet.

Of everything I've seen on this world—unrelenting sandstorms, undead hordes, giant sand wurms, the dead returning to life—this was the least expected and the most strange.

My mind and heart were torn in infinite directions. I was a small boy on Theros again, hearing tales of powerful gods and vengeful deities. A rebellious teenager, seeing the chaos sown by their fearsome strength and cruel vanities of those gods. A young man, standing in their exhalation and suffering their unforgiving wrath, witnessing their casual meddling in human affairs and careless disregard for mortal life. My faith and fear and hopes in them weaved and tightened into a knot I had not thought about in years, out of neglect and purposeful avoidance.

Yet they were here on Amonkhet.

They were here on the world of Nicol Bolas.

And my friends were all alive because of them.

And she burned with an undeniable righteousness. Golden light, a smiting staff, aided by the arrows of another unseen presence, scorching away undeath and darkness.

I don't know how long I kneeled in the sand. Slowly, my thoughts returned to my body, to my broken friends, and I willed myself to stand. Slowly, I roused and gathered my friends. Slowly, we nursed our injuries, healed ourselves the best we could.

I tried to explain what happened. What I bore witness to. They didn't fully understand. I could see Jace's skepticism, Liliana's contempt, Chandra's confusion. Nissa alone stood apart, stating she thought she felt a presence before she lost consciousness, but her belief in my words stemmed more from mere curiosity than faith.

Arguments erupted over our next course of action, but I knew we needed to press on.

We still had a mission to fulfill, as the Gatewatch.

And I needed to know.

How can a world supposedly ruled by an evil, ancient dragon, also be home to the divine?

When we had rested best we could, we gathered ourselves and continued our march toward the horns, alert and on guard. We encountered a few more marauding undead, but Liliana turned those aside with ease. Wild beasts and hyenas largely fled before us, or did so when encouraged by Chandra's flames. Soon, we walked up the ridge where I had seen Her disappear. And when we reached the top, we all gasped.



Art by Jonas De Ro

Before us, the endless sands gave way to a gleaming, fertile land. Lush plant life lined a mighty river that flowed into the distance. The first sun burned high overhead, its light reflecting off the water,

while the second sun seemed not to have moved at all since our arrival, smoldering from its position near the great horns in the far distance.

Much closer than the horns were other gleaming monuments and towering structures, all of which formed a sprawling city that spanned as far as we could see. The vertical lines of obelisks and towers ran perpendicular to expansive, geometric temples. Boats dotted the river, and the cry of birds and the sounds of a bustling metropolis floated back up toward us.

There were people down there.

Jace was the first to point out the shimmer of magic all around the city. Upon closer look, a translucent barrier covered the entire area, stopping the sands of untamed desert at its edges, even refracting the clouds above. Birds within the dome skirted their trajectories, unwilling or unable to cross.

Nissa spoke first, wonder in her voice. "What is this place?"

I cleared my throat. "Liliana, do you . . . ?"

Liliana shook her head. "I saw little of Amonkhet when I came last. I had no idea this existed."

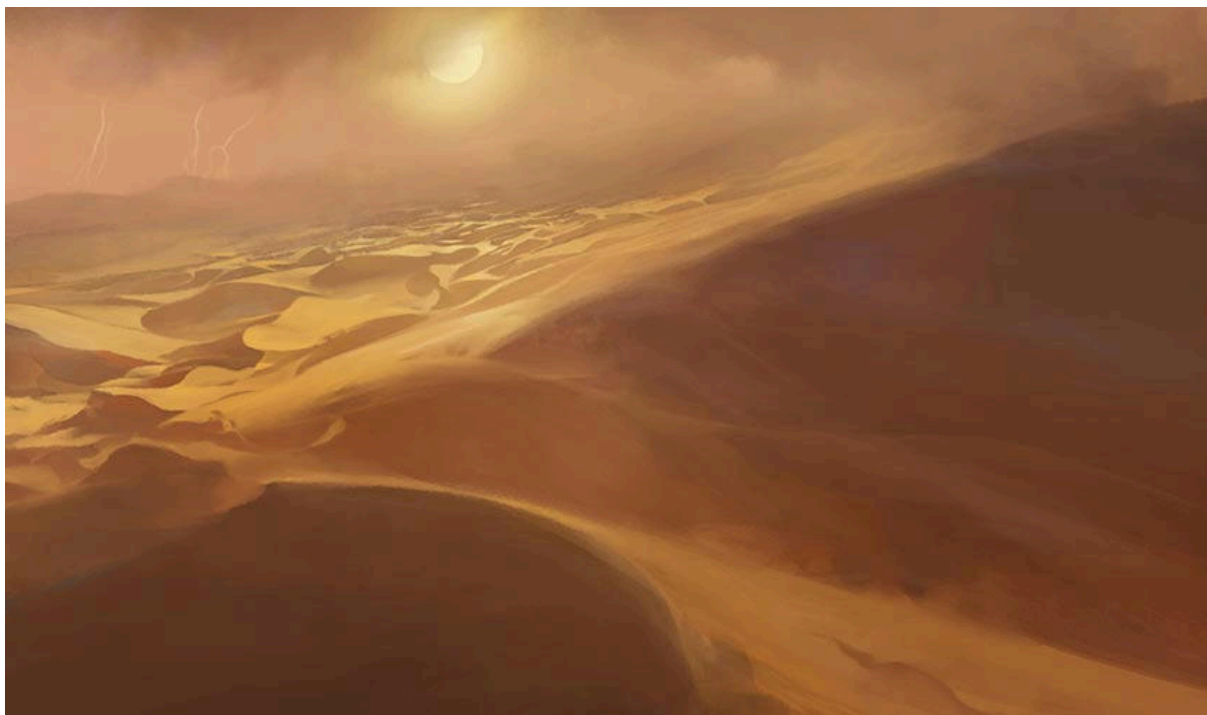
Jace frowned. "What is this place? What's going on here?"

None of us could answer. Finally, Chandra shrugged. "Only one way to find out." With that, she started the descent toward the city and the barrier.

We all followed behind, minds abuzz with more questions than answers.

As the five descended the across the sand, the whisper of the lonely wind brushed where they walked, shifting the sands behind them, erasing their footprints, carving new dunes and sweeping flat new expanses. Overhead, the first sun slid toward its zenith in the sky, while the second held steady at its position on the horizon, its fiery stare fixed on the world below. Within minutes, the desert was as it ever had been, with only the two suns bearing witness to the silent eternal.

The wind carried on, oblivious to all that came before.



Art by Min Yum