

Unbowed, Part 3

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From set *Core 2019*

Of the many lies she'd recited to the Baron of Vernot, the process behind adding another life to the Arkbow was not one of them. The relic did indeed make snapshots of the dying, although whatever sorcery worked into the bones of the Arkbow did not simply stop there, transforming every rag-and-bone memory of a creature on its last legs to the animal in its prime. There was a time when Vivien, of course, wasn't the only one who could perform the ritual. Her fellow shaman had also possessed that knowledge.

But now Vivien was the last of Skalla.

And the baron wasn't about to trust in her claims. To no one's particular surprise, the baron conscripted a small fleet of secretaries to tail Vivien, scrolls on the crook of their arms, a quill in their dominant hands. Little altar boys stalked them in turn, holding ink pots. "For posterity," he informed Vivien, swirling brandy in a goblet of faintly translucent amber, his expression stormy with distrust.

What surprised Vivien was the equipment they wheeled into the ballroom: haloes of wiring, together with metallic poles, filigreed artifacts embossed with spellwork that she did not recognize. Her puzzlement did not last. Quickly enough, the baron's minions assembled the contraption around the dying monstrosaur. More of the nuns were called to the room, and humming a couplet of chords, they conjured a shimmering barrier.

"Inside," said the baron.

Vivien complied.

There wouldn't be opportunity to revisit the process, not with what Vivien intended, not with the truth she kept tucked behind her teeth like the last rites of a world long dead. She had one opportunity to do this right. Lightly, the Planeswalker ran her fingers along the surface of the magical barrier. Though mostly translucent, it felt like a wall of steel.

Vivien crouched down beside the monstrosaur, the reptile so weak now that it barely stirred at her touch, only exhaled a lethargic death rattle, its breath stinking of bile and rust and carrion and very, very faintly, a tincture of lilacs and saffron. It blinked wetly at Vivien, tear ducts leaking a chalky emulsion.

"Anesthetics," she said quietly.

The nuns exchanged looks with each other as did the scribes.

"Or alcohol. Whatever your generosity would permit here." Vivien pursed her mouth. "I know it isn't part of your personal credo, but the Arkbow is excruciatingly precise. If it takes this thing at the height of its pain, the summon will share a similar condition. As you can imagine, it's difficult to fight when you're half-mad with pain."

The baron downed his brandy, poured himself a fresh serving, before he waved an irritated hand at the nuns. "Do as she asks."

The nuns complied. As their magic wormed through the monstrosaur, it sighed and slumped, seeming to shrink onto itself, receding into the new numbness. Its eyes fluttered close and slowly, the break between each breath began to lengthen.



Pious Interdiction | Art by: Lake Hurwitz

“There,” Vivien said and murmured a prayer to the cinders of Skalla, her voice so quiet she was certain not even the undead of Luneau could discern her praises. Petting the monstrosaur one last time on its broad nose, Vivien rose, her weight slouched against the Arkbow, its tip wedged into a crack in the floor tiling.

No one was trying to feign apathy any longer. The entirety of the room leaned into the act of watching; every noble, every courtier, even the scullery maids bent double under the burden of their station. They watched, eager as hounds. Vivien made a loop of her index finger and thumb, stroking the Arkbow like a lover. She had precisely one trick left, one last thing to try. Vivien curtsied at her audience, gleaming laughter.

It was time.

The Planeswalker tapped the Arkbow three times against the floor and on the third impact, the sound echoed. Energy roiled and rolled across the ballroom, jouncing through the walls, hissing through the ligature of the chandeliers, a transparent sheen of light reflected across every watching face. Then, as with any explosion, the power came howling back to the point of parturition, the floor beneath Vivien’s feet irradiated in such a manner that it almost looked as though reality had flaked away, leaving only white, only a brilliance so intense there was no space for the concept of shadow.

Vivien struck the floor with the Arkbow again.

The artifact opened. It spread into metallic bark and branch, flowering at intervals, geometric configurations of shining, mysterious alloy. The Arkbow split down to its pith, revealing a jag of light so bright that it made Vivien’s eyes water. But she watched it all without blinking. The monstrosaur was owed that dignity at least.

She could feel the dregs of the monstrosaur's spirit, a tumble of misfiring nerves and a rage it was too exhausted to satisfy. Carefully, Vivien threaded the Arkbow's power through its ruined skeleton, coaxing that final spark of consciousness to her, promises humming through the connection. The monstrosaur did not resist. It came to her in a torrent, riding the link into the Arkbow with a shriek of joy. Vivien shuddered as she broke through the moment, disoriented by the smallness of her own physique, the monstrosaur's presence dwindling to a nub in the back of her thoughts. Its body remained, at rest at last, now encased in the same strange alloy that coated the Arkbow.

"That was all very good and dramatic. An excellent show, really." The baron's voice. "Are you done then?"

Vivien blinked, astonished. Light seeped from her fingertips and down from her tongue. It tasted to her of chalk and calcium, fury like nothing she'd experienced, fury like she could eat the world whole. This was new.

"Yes."

"Good." He fluttered a hand. "Now, let us see the results."

"Yes," Vivien said again, feeling slow, the word like treacle between her teeth. She twanged the Arkbow, felt it hum beneath the caress of her thumb, the monstrosaur so close beneath the surface that it was all she could do to keep it quiescent. Its eagerness bled through the contact, spilled into her bones. What was going on? The essences in the Arkbow were normally so much more quiet, half-asleep, happy to be safe, still, silent in the dark of the artifact. But not the monstrosaur.

The Planeswalker bit down on the impulse to lunge at the baron, schooled herself for steadiness, lifted the Arkbow only to have the baron clear his throat.

"No. We'll have someone else do the honors."

He signaled to a guard who might well have been a bull transformed into a more convenient form, the man so thick-necked, there was no separation between his throat and his jaw. He scowled at Vivien as he lumbered toward her, the forcefield arising to permit him entrance. The baron gestured at the nuns, and their voices rang out again, sealing the guard inside the containment area with Vivien.



Sanguine Sacrament | Art by: Bastien L. Deharme

“Now, show him how to do it.”

Vivien passed the Arkbow to the frowning guard. Thick-set as the man was, he soon divulged a dexterity that Vivien had not anticipated, his fingers quick despite their sausage-like width. The Arkbow sang out as he raised the relic, the guard sighting expertly down his arm, Vivien’s arrow nocked and ready. A minute spasm of those meaty digits, and his body burst outward.

The Planeswalker looked back at the baron, face placid. “I told you.”

“I won’t accept this,” he hissed. “We succeeded in calling up the bear. There must be a process. Something you’re not telling me. Are you doing this deliberately? You must be.”

“The Arkbow is mine. It won’t obey another hand.”

“Liar.”

Vivien held out the artifact in challenge. “*You’re* welcome to try.”

The baron curled his hand into a fist and Vivien decided, with a morbid pleasure, that the look on his face would be enough. That no matter what followed, no matter what would come to pass, that memory of the baron’s clear frustration would be a light she’d hold onto. She smiled. “I warned you.”

“Quiet.”

Vivien flicked her eyes down to the remnants of the guard’s carcass. The Arkbow had left him a mess. Almost by accident, Vivien caught sight of movement. She bent down.

A spider. Vivien watched in silence as the arachnid picked its careful way from the guard’s pocket and inch toward the edge of the barrier. It was small enough for the magic to ignore its existence, small enough for the vampires to dismiss its presence.

Vivien had an idea.

“The problem,” said the Planeswalker. “The problem with people like you is how often you ignore the little things, how you assume the clockworks of the worlds operate without effort, powered only by your will. You assume that the cogs do not exist. You can’t even see them.”

“What prattle is this?” the baron snapped, storming back toward the wall of light separating them.

“Tell me,” Vivien traced the world with her thoughts, felt the spider shudder and swell beneath her attention. “Have you ever wondered what it might be like to be as small and insignificant as a spider?”

She gave the baron no opportunity to answer, her power throbbing through the world, curlicues of green spreading from her in a halo. The baron snapped his head up, eyes going wide.

“What have you done?”

Engorged on Vivien’s magic, the spider became the size of a small dog, the size of a jaguar, of a bear. *Grow*, she thought fiercely at the spider, scrawling a sigil in the air with her fingers, the movements quick and filthy. Alarmed by its growth, the arachnid turned and launched itself at the king. The nuns and the nobles let out screams at the sight, all attention suddenly turned toward their ruler. In the chaos, the former loosened their hold on Vivien’s prison.



Giant Spider | Art by: Randy Gallegos

It was as she hoped. Without missing a beat, she nocked a new arrow and freed the projectile as the walls came down. The arrow burned through the air, evaporating into embers, into bone and vivid feathers etched in magic, into a body no longer hobbled by injury, a body perfect and pristine, exquisitely prepared to enact that one final desperate desire.

The arrow buried itself in the wall, and the ethereal monstrosaur tore itself loose, roaring, Vivien’s own powers lancing forward to wrap around the reptile’s newborn frame. It swung its head, blinking, and not even the shock of being alive again was enough to distract the monstrosaur from its intent. The creature had died starved for retribution. It would not go quietly without fulfilling that want.

Vivien dove sideways as the dinosaur thundered toward the Baron of Vernot, screaming courtiers scattering in its wake, a helpless few trampled beneath its clawed feet, their bodies pressed so flat they

could be folded in half. The rare guards loyal enough to stand in its way were bludgeoned aside, flung into the walls with a swing of the creature's head.

The monstrosaur's shimmering form strained against the firmament, splitting the ceiling as though it was the skin of a fruit. Rubble and ash ribboned from above. The building groaned. Strut-work, now untethered, gave way in increments, gravity tugging the masonry apart. Not that any of it served to dissuade the monstrosaur, its eyes wild.

Despite the odds, the Baron of Vernot would not flee. Though abandoned by his cohorts, the ballroom already collapsing into ruin, he stood his ground, teeth bared and sword drawn, his frame doll-like in this juxtapositioning against the monstrosaur's enormity. He blurred into shadow, zigzagging upward, the comet's tail of his sped-up motions revealing an upward trajectory through the falling rubble. Vivien caught a flash of silver as the baron swung, but no matter one's abilities, no matter the power differentials offered by training, nature possessed empirical favorites.



Raging Swordtooth | Art by: Izzy

At the end of the day, life has always been a contest of raw might.

The baron's sword passed harmlessly through the hollow beneath the lizard's right eye, eroding to an alloyed lump. Before he could reverse the thrust, the monstrosaur tossed its head up, flinging the baron into the air. Vivien saw surprise dart across the vampire's face, obvious even from the distance. And quicker than the baron, quicker than anyone might have anticipated, the monstrosaur snapped its maw forward, a rattlesnake motion, teeth closing over the vampire's torso.

Vivien staggered to a pause, staring.

The monstrosaur turned a doleful gaze to her, expression so ludicrously meditative, so human in its uncertainty that she nearly laughed at the sight. The baron stared at his captor, an animal terror rising in his face. Then, with considerable aplomb and no small amount of ceremony, the monstrosaur bit down and the two halves of what was once the Baron of Vernot fell quietly, messily to the ground.

Most of Vivien's summons were transient in nature, rarely persisting for longer than a minute, the creatures content to dissipate after a perfunctory dalliance with chaos. But the monstrosaur would not dissipate. Having dealt with the Baron of Vernot, the reptile was now rudderless, but it didn't remain that way for long. It sniffed the air once before it neatly picked a route through the doors into the palace, oblivious to the courtiers still pinwheeling from its path. Vivien followed behind, ignored in its wake.

Their trajectory marched them past the Royal Menagerie, which teemed now with agitated fauna, its captives either galvanized by the monstrosaur's proximity or simply excited by the stink of destruction in the air. It did not take Vivien long to come to a decision. As the monstrosaur took another corner, Vivien ran her magic through a family of wildebeests, stoking their cells until the creatures grew large enough to smash through their confinement. She did the same again for everything she passed. Hammerskulls and coatls and broad-bodied bears, power leaping beneath them like so much lightning.

Some of the animals fell together in frenzied knots, carnivore and prey tearing chunks free of the other, but most did not. Like the rampaging monstrosaur, they seemed absorbed by the thought of vengeance. Their handlers, previously secure in their knowledge that they were inoculated against the consequence of their own cruelty, quickly found themselves engaged in life-and-death battles. Screaming swelled through the air.

And still, the monstrosaur held onto its shape, somehow, powered by something. Its rage, perhaps? Or Vivien's? The Planeswalker decided it didn't matter. Instead, she counted the minutes between corporealization and disintegration. Each time the monstrosaur shimmered out of existence, she shot a fresh arrow through the air. The corridors widened into a gallery. Here, the monstrosaur halted, head cocked to one side. Men in tiered wigs and women painted with pearlescent powders, their bodices high and unnatural, gawked at the sight.

A rail-thin girl, scarcely an adult by any estimate of the word, tottered uncertainly forward. A leash trailed from her hand; Vivien followed the rope to where it attached itself to the collar of a small raptor. Someone had rouged its emerald scales, outfitted its neck with a ruff so clownishly large that it was amply clear the decoration impeded its ability to see. Vivien frowned at the creature. It looked miserable.

At that moment, the monstrosaur began to fade, dwindling into glowing pinpoints, an outline of a creature that soon degraded into an indistinct haze. Vivien couched into a fist, the congregation still silent, still dumbstruck by what had transpired. Behind her, there was the roar of the Royal Menagerie still in mutiny, the low clamor of its inhabitants periodically interrupted by terrified screams.

"I suppose," Vivien finally said. "This is where one customarily makes a dramatic speech."

The raptor hopped forward, head tilted first in one direction and then the next, brisk and bird-like motions. It trilled an inquiring note at Vivien.

"Or at least, inform you of what's going on."

The sounds were getting louder.

"I'm really not sure what the protocol is on this." Unbidden, a smile anchored itself. "But I keep feeling like some measure of informational exposition is necessary."

She dropped her hand.

"What is the meaning of this?" began a patriarchal-looking man with a trim beard, his physique still formidable despite evidence of middle age. He rested long fingers on the scabbard of his saber, glaring. "Who are you? And what is going on in the palace?"

“Someone once described the death of a nation to me as a ‘mercy.’ I didn’t really understand his point then, or where he was coming from. But now, now I find myself in perfect comprehension.” Vivien drew lazy figure eights with her fingers, magic beginning to collect in her palm, spokes of glittering power. “Anyway. This is a mercy. This is the last that you will see of Luneau. By this time tomorrow, the wilds will have this place again and you will be nothing but a memory to be forgotten.”

Vivien closed her fist and the raptor freed a confused hiss, its body suddenly wracked with convulsions. Unlike the denizens of the Royal Menagerie, it did not grow in a uniformed fashion. Instead, the creature swelled up in fits, its growth metered by the movements of Vivien’s hand and the motions of her power, uncoiling green and serpentine from her frame. Legs first, tail, then its head before at last, its torso followed suit. Throughout the process, its owner could only stare, slack-jawed in wordless perplexity.



Gigantosaurus | Art by: Jonathan Kuo

Within seconds, the raptor outsized its mistress, stooping to regard her with one luminous amethyst eye. In answer, she fish-mouthed in silence, a tremble of high-pitched sound eventually escaping. “Wh-wh-wh-”

Her former pet did not share her befuddlement. It reared up, chirping several crystalline notes, its curiosity about its owner clearly slaked. Then, without any reservation, it twitched forward and shut its jaws around the vampire’s skull, teeth crunching through the vertebrae.

The decapacitation of the young vampire dislodged something in the crowd. Pandemonium broke through the bourgeoisie in waves, spreading, growing, until it was nothing but hysterics, all pretenses of enlightened behavior forgotten in the face of carnage. Those with at least passable command of their faculties closed on Vivien, hissing, but the Planeswalker only scrutinized them with vague indifference.

Something was approaching.

A second before the stampede erupted through the doors, Vivien took a sideways step. Her adversaries, on their part, only had moments to look up, moments to take note of the beasts thundering through

the corridors. As the escapees of the Royal Menagerie rendered their former tormentors to an even pulp, Vivien found herself smiling.

The Royal Palace shook itself apart like a carcass worried to shreds by dogs. In starts and stops, without cogent sequence, the architecture fighting the whole while to remain vertical. Gravity, however, possessed an insatiable appetite. Soon enough, the Royal Palace fell, dust pluming into the air.



Siegehorn Ceratops | Art by: Filip Burburan

But Vivien Reid wasn't even halfway done with Luneau.

There was more chaos to be wrought.

The cafe was, in more ways than one, indistinguishable from the others festooning the cultural district of Luneau. Here, museums and bawdy matinees shared the same streets. Art took many forms, some less savory than others, but Luneau was rarely inclined toward being judgmental. The eateries enjoyed brisk business as the result of this generous ideology. There were always customers. Sometimes, they were scholars and cognoscenti, hungry for a space to discuss and dissect the day. Sometimes, they were more tawdry individuals, lust-drunk and simply desperate to sit. Regardless of their nature, they were inevitably weighted with money and, to the delight of this particular cafe's proprietor, often exceedingly generous with tips in the form of vials of blood.

The man in question studied his reflection in the mirror. He was tall, lanky, with shoulders too narrow to provide any heft to his frame. But not unattractive. At least, that is what he'd inferred from interactions with his female clientele. The proprietor corrected the angle of his wig. It wouldn't do to look disarrayed.

The evening was sultry, unruffled by anything that even resembled a breeze, and the air sat over Luneau like a wet towel warmed on a corpse. Not that many seemed to mind. The city's elite, particularly those numbered among the Legion of the Dusk, appeared to have a preference toward such climates, basking in the heat, while the humans wilted.

He picked a slow path toward where his most recent customers resided. Both were decorated officers, slim, impressively groomed despite the fact they spent most of their time embarking on expeditions toward foreign territory. The proprietor liked them for that reason. Most explorers eventually lost the trick of hygiene, along with any interest in reconciliation with the idea.

“Your breakfast,” said the proprietor.

They acknowledged him with a glance and tepid smiles. The proprietor set down an arrangement of victuals.

Luneau rumbled beneath his feet.

An earthquake? It was possible. Though only infrequently beset by such tremors, it wasn’t an unknown phenomenon and as such, the proprietor only saw mild reason to be concerned. He would need to secure his spice rack, ensure the cafe’s modest cache of wine bottles remained safely ensconced in their aerie. Small details. Simple chores. It would be fine.

“Stop sulking,” said one of the men. The proprietor slowed his steps to eavesdrop. Gossip was always good with such army men.

“Like you’re any more cheerful about this. You know the Baron of Vernot is studying the device right now,” said his companion.

The first man let out an exasperated noise. “I hope he fails, then. If he succeeds at deciphering that stupid artifact, we’d be out of a job.”

“Be careful with that tongue of yours,” returned his friend. “That’s treason you’re spitting.”

“Not treason. Truth. If Luneau learns to make use of something like that, we’d be left to beg in the alleys. Mark my words. The royals don’t care about people like us, badges or not. If they can make their own animals, why’d they bother with paying us to find ‘em more?”

Before his friend could reply, the rumbling beneath their feet, which had been constant but inoffensive, abruptly became something impossible to ignore and even more impossibly, something that recalled the proprietor’s youth. Once a year, as though to make up for its mundanity, the tiny settlement that he came from indulged in an unexpected tradition:

It set juvenile raptors loose among the streets.

How such a bizarre custom came to be and why anyone thought it would be necessary to ask adolescents to collect feathers from rampaging lizards was something the proprietor never understood. But like every immigrant from the town, like every man or woman born to those hills, he carried with him memories of how the world shuddered and shook each year under the feet of that annual stampede.

This was worse.

Much worse.

The cafe that sat opposite of his own in their cul-de-sac gave way like a broken leg, even as animal bodies flooded the streets, tumbling over themselves in a downpour of fur and claws and howling throats. Under other circumstances, the proprietor might have delighted in the sight, but there wasn’t time. There weren’t even words to describe what he was seeing. Lemurs swung between the balustrades, hunted by hawks. Bovines of varying sizes, cats saber-toothed and more mundane. The sound of shattering porcelain tugged at the proprietor’s attention.



Uncage the Menagerie | Art by: Simon Dominic

He looked and he laughed, half-hysterical, half in wonder of the situation. There were *bulls* in their local china shop, chasing its pomaded clientele out onto the streets. And everywhere in between, humans in the grimmest clothes, barmaids and butchers and bare-chested sailors, whooping in glee as they ran in between the chaos, barely conscious of the danger. Unlike the owners of the stores, *they* treated this like a festival, a celebration as primal as anything the proprietor could recall.

In between all of that, there were the dinosaurs:

Yes, the raptors from the proprietor's youth, only full-grown and radiantly feathered. Packs of slow-moving aegisaur, lowing like bulls. Spinebacks and swordtooths, working to keep ahead of the monstrosaurs, the tyrants, the dusk-dark deathgorge scavengers. These took no interest in the roads. They carved new ones for themselves, crashing through the city, knocking the buildings to the ground. The herbivores took their desecration of Luneau a step further. *They* paused to gnaw at the city's vertical gardens, nibbling its flowers down to the roots.

As the cultural district of Luneau evacuated from their respective homes and businesses, the deluge of wildlife quickly demolishing everything in their path, the proprietor let out a laugh, one delirious with confusion. He realized then what it was: these creatures weren't just unexpectedly everywhere, they were each three times their usual sizes, too massive to be plausible. How was this happening? Nothing of this seemed real.

A noise caught his attention. He turned to see a pair of monstrosaurs staggering through the teeming bodies. A new breeding duo, brought to Luneau to replace the last. But that wasn't what drew his attention. No, it was the woman seated atop the female's skull, expression set with a look of grim satisfaction.

If Luneau chose to rebuild, Vivien decided coldly, it would be decades before they succeeded. She crawled to a crouch, balancing atop the monstrosaur's head, and leapt as they passed a balcony. Vivien somersaulted nonchalantly to a pause, rising to her feet in a smooth motion. She dusted her smock.

There'd be a need to find actual leathers, something that wouldn't catch in bramble and tear at the slightest provocation. Luneau's tastes, even at its humblest, were entirely too impractical.

A brontodon lumbered past Vivien's perch. Was it the one from her naval voyage? It was hard to tell. The passage across the ocean felt like a lifetime ago. Certainly, she bore hopes that it was the same brontodon. While hardly the danger the carnivores of the Royal Menagerie might present, it'd still be an entity to fear. Especially if its species was inclined toward grudges, toward long memories. Perhaps it'd find a mate in the wilderness of Luneau. Whatever the case, it would be a long time before the vampires of the city would trouble the rest of the world. There were dinosaurs in their jungles now, more than they could ever hope to handle.

Vivien draped herself over the rails, looking over the anarchy she'd unleashed on Luneau. The Royal Menagerie, or what remained it, had begun to discover the vertical gardens of the city. She smiled, more pleased with the situation than perhaps warranted. But the sojourn through Ixalan had been an enlightening experience.

Almost unbidden, her hands strayed toward the Arkbow. Vivien hadn't considered how genuinely simple it was to remove the relic from her person, or the looming risk of it being taken and used by outside parties. Something needed to be done about this. Vivien wouldn't tolerate an encore. But perhaps, the answer laid with the inhabitants of the Arkbow.

The monstrosaur had proven itself exceptionally useful. Even more so than any of Vivien's other acquisitions. And how could it not? It was larger, more ferocious than everything else in her arsenal. If Vivien continued to find herself bigger prey to hunt, she might have an answer.

She closed her eyes. The membrane that split the planes was thin here, hardly more substantial than a curl of skin. Through the film, Vivien could almost see the next world. *Dragon*. The word bounced through her brain, settling into the image of colossal beings, ancient and frighteningly strange, beings with lungs full of fire and mocking laughter. Nicol Bolas wasn't the only dragon in the Multiverse. There were others. Smaller, less sly, but dragons nonetheless. If she learned to harness their power, if she could learn how they function, she might be able to learn the secret to Nicol Bolas's destruction.

But first, she needed a target.

Distantly, Vivien recalled conversations about Shivan dragons, the name only ever whispered in low voices. For fear, the Ghitu elders had said, that they might stray into their settlements, drawn by the sound of their names.

But if a Shivan dragon found itself lured to her, might that not be for the best?

In the distance, Luneau rallied against the insurrection.

Nothing slipped through the dusk, no sound except for the distant clamor of angry men-at-arms, and elephantine animals bellowing in challenge. Vivien rucked her brow before she chuckled good-naturedly.



Sulfur Falls | Art by: Cliff Childs

The Planeswalker rolled her shoulders and breathed in. She raised a hand, palming the air, feeling the structure of the universe beneath her skin. And then she pressed down and the Multiverse, viscous as honey, relented under the pressure, swallowing her from arm up. Vivien spared Ixalan one final look, before she flashed into the next plane and felt the hard, hot air of Shiv on her skin.