

# Arcavios: A Radiant Heart

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In the tunnels beneath Strixhaven, where dwelled the relics of bygone eras, Quintorius said, “I believe we’re lost.”

Groans met his announcement.

“It’s our own school,” Rootha growled, “we can’t be *lost*. It should be a straight shot from the dormitories to the Biblioplex!”

“Think of it as practice for when we’re actually *in* the Biblioplex and searching for the Invocation of the Founders,” Dina said. “Remind me, how many expeditions have been formed to rescue lost students? About a hundred?” The pests in her shoulder bag squeaked and squirmed, and she slapped its side to silence them.

From the rear of the group, Zimone said, “I wonder if the invocation will really slow the Phyrexian invasion, like Professor Vess said.”

Killian’s head snapped up. “Better finding it late than not at all. My father can help. He was in the Biblioplex when the invasion began.”

Quint flapped his ears but held his tongue. He wanted desperately to believe that professors other than Liliana had escaped the Phyrexian stranglehold—that there were others who *hadn’t* been overtaken and forged onto the Phyrexian intelligence—but in the dusty, lantern-lit darkness, with red sinew snaking across the walls and shadows stinking of black oil, hope was thin. The invasion had burned through Strixhaven’s defenses. With their professors captured and compleated, it was hard to believe that the school could repel their assault. The dormitories still stood, the students within protected by Professor Vess and an army of undead—yet she couldn’t last forever.



Art by: Alexey Kruglov

But Quint took a deep breath and said, “Killian is correct. There’s little to be gained from despair.” Lantern held high, he led the way down the tunnel. Really, it wasn’t too different from exploring any other ruins, though prior expeditions hadn’t carried the threat of capture and compleation.

It was difficult going. The devastation caused when the Phyrexian portals ruptured the sky and the Invasion Tree’s branches stabbed into the earth had caved in many underground tunnels. In some places, the ceiling had collapsed. The students were forced to heave aside debris to continue or backtrack and find new paths.

Resting beside a branch of the Invasion Tree after breaking through a particularly nasty blockage, Quint spotted a statue behind a crumbling block.

“Ah!” Quint said. “I should have considered this sooner.”

“Considered what?” Killian asked.

Quint crouched beside the statue and traced white-gold sigils in the air, for conjuring, calling, and regenerating. “Who better to guide us than Strixhaven’s earliest professors? The statue is clearly venerable, based on weathering and discoloration patterns, so if we ask—”

The sigils trembled as Quint’s spell caught. Dust and pebbles whirled around the stone figure, a whirlwind in miniature that grew increasingly solid. Glowing white stone accreted from dust. Limbs stretched through the whirl; luminous eyes blinked as the professor’s spirit incorporated into its statue.

The spirit looked around, scowled, and said, “Strixhaven’s gone downhill since my day.”

“Almost as if we’re actively being invaded,” Dina said.

The professor’s spirit glared at her. Before it could voice displeasure, Quint said, “I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience, professor—”

“*Dean*, thank you. *Dean Herrian the Second* of—”

"Please," Quint interrupted to a sputter of disapproval, "we're in a hurry. Do you know the way to the Biblioplex? We're somewhat—um—"

"Lost," Rootha said.

"Lost!" Dean Herrian yelped. "How can you be *lost*?" Glowering, Killian snapped, "It's a long story, and we don't have time to explain."

"I should say not! How can you be lost when you're *under* the Biblioplex?" Quint's eyes widened. Then, in unison, the students looked up at the Invasion Tree's branch, plated in carapace and pulsating with nauseating warmth, and the hole through which it had plunged.

"I'd rather we were lost again," Zimone muttered.

And Dina, grinning, asked, "Who's going first?"

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*Never again will I scale a structure without expeditionary gear*, Quint thought as he climbed. Four pairs of hands grabbed his coat; four backs bent and heaved him out of the hole onto the Biblioplex floor. He wasn't the only one tired of losing his grip and slipping.

One glance, and he wished he could sink back down.

His lovely, luminous center of learning was gone. Red-edged portals squirmed overhead and bled lifeless, ruddy light. The Invasion Tree's branches cut through the air and walls alike, disrupting existing structures. And here was more red sinew, overrunning the furnishings in knotty columns, hand in hand with porcelain plates segmented like spinal columns. It seemed to feed off the very walls, dulling them, drinking in everything that gave the Biblioplex luster, and spitting out black oil and more tendrils of itself.

None of them spoke. The air felt so thick it choked the words in their throats. And yet light danced nearby, somehow, not the redness of Phyrexia, but motes like dust through a sunbeam, pale blue and frail. Without thinking, Quint reached for a mote and his eyes widened as the mote seemed to melt into his skin. A sensation quiet, nascent discovery settle over him.

*The invocation should feel new*, Professor Liliana had said. *It should emit traces of itself... what kind, I don't know. But Strixhaven originated with the Invocation of the Founders, and the spell will seek to oppose any invasion. Find it. Cast it. Help it drive Phyrexia from our school.*

Quint glanced at his fellow students. More motes drifted around them, and their expressions shone as well with the same realization. These were traces of the invocation, awakened and struggling against the Phyrexian gloom.

*Onward*, Quint thought, and followed the dancing lights.

Even though the Biblioplex appeared deserted, the presence of the portals stifled Quint's desire to talk and turned his thoughts gray with uncertainty. Which was odd, he thought as he inched along a book-lined, sinew-bound aisle. The Invasion Tree's branches themselves hummed; the air throbbed with the heartbeat thrum of malignant expansion. Yet the red-lit Biblioplex reminded Quint of a sepulcher. Even the ruins he'd studied had felt livelier.

Then, creeping at Rootha's heels, with Dina, Zimone, and Killian behind, Quint looked up—and almost jumped. Another student, a dark-haired dwarf in Lorehold red and white, stared at them from atop a bookcase, wide-eyed and still very much uncompleated. Their breath shuddered from lips bloodless with dread, barely rippling the staleness.

The student caught Quint's gaze, and their eyes welled up with relief. "Help me," they whispered.

As if the student's voice were a thrown pebble and the Biblioplex a pond, the red sinew *rippled*.

*Something* coiled around the bookcase and snared the student's leg. They had time for one terrified shriek before the thing whipped them down a dark passage—and Quint glimpsed a figure covered in steel-bright feathers and razored talons. Where tongue and beak should be, there was instead a spreading web of metal filaments.

"No!" Quint shouted, unable to stop himself.

At once Killian grabbed his shoulder in warning and Rootha slapped a hand over his mouth, but his cry raced through the red sinew with the same awful, spreading ripple. Dean Shaile's head abruptly swiveled around.

They didn't even speak. They just ran.

The Biblioplex howled around them in a voice that made Quint want to tear off his ears. The shadows themselves seemed to grasp at him with blood-red fingers. Down the labyrinthine ways—past shelves monstrous with carapace and chitin—over moats murky, reeking, veined with black oil—silent no longer, for silence was gone, and what chased them now was fear and fury. The edges of Quint's vision skittered with too many limbs and proportions too twisted for recognition. Magic flashed: darkly green bursts as Dina ripped life from the pests in her bag and flung patches of treacherous, moss-slick footing behind them; Killian's lashes of ink that snared at their pursuers' limbs; Rootha whirling to fling needle-sharp ice spikes or fiery blasts. Zimone panted as she tried to keep up, and Quint hauled her along as gently as possible. On they ran, trampling over ancient tomes, and even with his heart stuttering in his chest, he felt a stab of remorse—

"They're slowing," Rootha panted, and hope churned through Quint. They were almost at an atrium, where they could dive into one of a dozen branching halls and lose the pursuit—

Feather and metal and web-mouth fluttered overhead. Before Quint could react, Dean Shaile dove. Her talons hooked into Killian's collar, and then she was pulling up from the dive, Killian thrashing in her grip and Dina and Zimone grabbing at his feet, trying to pull him back. Dean Shaile simply flapped her wings and rose higher. The web of her mouth wormed over Killian's skull and tried to creep beneath his eyelids, squeezed shut with horror.

"Where is your father?" Dean Shaile asked, and the web pulsated gently, almost lovingly, around Killian's head. White and black flashed along his hands, but whatever spells he was trying to cast fizzled inches from his fingertips.

Quint shook. He saw all too clearly the fate that awaited Killian, fetid with metal and oil. He couldn't let that happen. Voice high and cracked, he croaked, "We don't know. And since it's Dean Lu you want, you shouldn't waste your time on Killian. You don't need him. He won't be beneficial to you. To—to Phyrexia."

Dean Shaile's web-mouth fluttered wide for a second, showing Killian's terrified, ashen face, then closed again. "While I would have preferred the elder Lu over his inferior progeny, you're mistaken. Killian isn't wasting my time. All are welcome in Phyrexia's better, unalloyed Multiverse."

Quint cried out and reached for Killian, futile, distant, even as Dean Shaile screeched in triumph and more Phyrexianized professors rolled toward them in a terrible gleaming tide—

Then someone whispered, "*You left yourself vulnerable*," and Quint reeled as, in a whirl of ink-black flutters, Dean Embrose Lu landed beside them. Dean Shaile's web-mouth *writched*; she spat Killian onto

the floor and launched at Embrose as the other professors leaped—and the whirl exploded outward, passing over Quint and his fellow students with the lightness of silk scraps—but where they touched the professors, flesh bubbled and metal cracked or melted.

The professors' screams of rage and pain echoed through the Biblioplex as the ink stormed around them.

*“Father, behind you!*” Killian shouted. He staggered upright, ink spilling from his hands and surging toward Dean Shaile, who arrowed at Embrose’s back.

Then another curve of black knocked Killian aside—and a second later, a scythe-limb pierced the storm, slashing where Killian’s head had been just a moment ago.

“*You are so much weaker than you know,*” Embrose spat. The bookcases rocked back, books flying open as the words and wisdom of a hundred thousand writers ripped free and flew to Embrose’s command. Arrows and darts pierced some of the attacking professors; shrouds of the stuff swarmed over others, choking them; still more ink flashed upward to shred the filaments of Dean Shaile’s mouth. The onetime-owl-in fell—

A scrap of darkness slapped over Killian’s mouth as he summoned another slash of ink. As he clawed at it, Embrose said, “Run, Killian.”

Killian’s eyes flashed; he tore the ink aside. “I can help!”

“Yes. You would also distract me.”

Dina snapped, “If you couldn’t stop Phyrexia before, what makes you think you can defeat them now?”

Embrose’s gaze flicked toward Killian—and to Quint’s surprise, he caught the faintest wavering of the dean’s normally stoic expression.

“I need not explain myself,” Embrose said. “Now go.”

And without warning lashes of black whipped around the students’ torsos and flung them through a split-second hole in the vicious ink storm. Dean Shaile swiveled toward them—but another burst of ink ripped through her wings, and with a scream she refocused on Embrose, a shadow carved in human shape.

The ink dumped them unceremoniously several rows away. Quint scrambled to his feet as Killian leaped up, fire in his eyes—and Dina seized his arm.

“Let go!”

“You’ll die,” she said flatly, and the pests in her bag chirruped as though in agreement.

Killian’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t let my father be taken by Phyrexia.”

“Right, sorry, you won’t die. You’ll only *wish* you’d died.” Then, as Killian drew breath, Dina added, “What’s more important, throwing your life away here or finding the invocation?”

Quint thought of the lashing ink. Though he knew it would hurt Killian, he said, “Dina’s right.”

“My father could help!”

Zimone reached for Killian’s hand, then drew back, as though afraid to touch him. “Dean Embrose is helping.”

“By making himself *bait*?”

"By giving us the time and space needed to find the invocation. You'd know best, but—would he sacrifice himself if he didn't believe you would succeed?"

Killian's jaw clenched, and Quint saw Rootha tense, ready to restrain him—then he nodded, just once. But as they marched forward, Quint caught flashes of white magic—words to strengthen and support—flitting from Killian's fingertips in his father's direction.

The sounds of battle faded as they advanced through the Biblioplex. To Quint, the silence felt thicker now, as though punishing them for speaking even briefly. Even the invocation's wafting lights grew weak at times, forcing them to search until they found another drift of motes. The only consolation, if it could be called such, was that Embrose had attracted the professors' attention. The corridors were now clear—*mostly* clear.

Quint paused mid-stride. A metallic shape hung from the arch at the end of the corridor. The five students exchanged glances. Then, without speaking, they chose another path.

Unfortunately, it became clear that the upside-down professor was not the only one to have abstained from battling Embrose. The Biblioplex whispered with slithering and clacked with metal against stone floors. Twice—three times—four—more times than Quint could count—they scrambled behind stacks or wedged themselves into alcoves as professors stalked past, eyes sweeping the shadows and shelves. Strange shapes, limbs cracking and bending in ways that should incapacitate, but somehow didn't. Quint knew those appearances would haunt him forever.

*How much of the Biblioplex have we searched by now?* Quint wondered, trying to recall the layout as he scrunched behind a column of red sinew. The Biblioplex was vast and convoluted. Even Professor Vess, Planeswalker and scholar, had yet to explore its full extent. Still, thinking about the mazelike ways was better than listening to the professor shuffling nearby. The sound of its feet—however many of those there now were—scraped directly across Quint's brain.



Art by: Dmitry Burmak

The shuffling faded as the professor moved away. Across the aisle, Quint caught Dina's eye, and she nodded. It was safe to move again.

They were in a wholly unfamiliar part of the Biblioplex now, with dust thick on statues and books, and oil-slimed cobwebs twined with delicate strands of sinew. The students had to split up to pass through the narrower ways. They regrouped—the red, breathing silence made solitude repugnant—only to be forced by the aisles to diverge once more. Quint clung to those moments together, brief though they were, as the reddish shadows bore down upon them.

Then, as he slipped with Dina between two bookcases, the bookcase on his right trembled, and he spotted long, needle-like fingers curving over the top. He froze. A professor hung on the opposite side, waiting—watching. Quint exchanged a glance with Dina. It would spot them the instant they emerged.

Then he heard a gasp, somewhere to his right.

Zimone.

The bookcase creaked as the professor whirled around—

Quint stumbled to the end of his aisle and saw Zimone's terrified eyes barely peeking out from behind a waist-high bookcase, and Rootha and Killian's hands on her shoulders drawing her back—saw, in all its bizarre, twisted glory, the scythe-limbed professor slinking in their direction—but he also saw the statue against a far wall, shrouded in red sinew. His fingers flew through the motions, spilling out in one second a spell that normally took thirty. The statue's spirit coalesced in a flurry of dust and stone. It shot Quint a brief, fierce smile, raised its shimmering hands, and screamed, “No talking in the library!”

A shriek blasted through the air.

With a stiff, sweeping clatter, the professor spun and skittered toward the statue, now gleefully smashing every carapace plate and shredding every skein of red sinew within reach. Even dead, it seemed, Strixhaven's onetime professors could not abide the Phyrexian intrusion.

The students exchanged the briefest of glances—relief and terror and surprise all wrapped up together—then flew past the Phyrexianized professor's back, their footsteps obscured by the statue's defiant bellow.

Deeper they delved through the Biblioplex, always deeper, chasing the puffs of light, but they couldn't last. Quint could see everyone faltering under the brutal, unceasing dread. Killian kept flicking courage and hope to the others, the words flashing in Quint's eyes, but the redness of the invasion portals turned the white magic thin. He stumbled and barely kept himself from tripping over a chair. They were on the right path—the pale, downy motes glittered more intensely—but how far they'd have to go, he didn't know and didn't want to imagine—

Then his steps faltered; the other students slowed as well. Fear and fatigue seemed to slough off him like old bandages.

The light was stronger here: not just feebly withstanding the heavy Phyrexian murkiness but throwing it off completely in spots. Pockets of radiance hung between the bookcases, and when Quint passed through one, the freshness of the air itself was almost euphoric after so long plodding through darkness and distress.

*Almost there.*

Revitalized, they had to restrain themselves from rushing headlong. Patch to pale-lit patch they moved, each stretch becoming stronger, broader, brighter. To Quint, it felt like sunlight on unearthed ruins, or old words copied onto clean paper—

The aisles opened up, revealing a circular platform surrounded by a moat. Bobbing at the platform's center was a tangle of light like no spell Quint had ever seen—and no red sinew, Quint realized with a thrill. The platform was clean. It had to be the invocation. No other spell he knew of could defy Phyrexia's grasp.

With a sweep of her arms, Rootha crystallized the water into an instant, icy bridge. They dashed across, without a professor in sight.

Which was good, because as Quint neared the invocation, its glow wrapped around him in a soft, comforting blanket, and he could think of almost nothing else.

The tangle wasn't just light, but a prismatic confusion of letters so dazzling they warded off the red gloom entirely. Sentences looped out, sank back down, and reformed with new clauses and phrases. Single words burst like bubbles on the surface. Quint leaned forward, squinting to try and make out individual words—and a shining tendril coiled around his wrist. He almost jumped in shock. He'd thought the words would be intangible constructs of pure magic, but they felt like warm silk threads against his skin.

"It's alive," Quint breathed. The invocation pulsed faintly. His eyes widened. "Did you see—"

"It's *responding* to us?" Rootha asked, and the invocation pulsed again.

"Not just responding, I think." Zimone paced a slow circle around the tangle. *Pulse, pulse, pulse*, it went, in time with her speech. "Do you hear that?"

Rootha looked around. "Hear what?"

"Exactly. *Nothing*."

Nothing. No screams, no screeches, no scuttling, clicking limbs.

Killian let out a slow breath. "It's protecting us from Phyrexian attention."

They fell silent. A little shiver ran through Quint. Awe or fear, he couldn't tell. The invocation, Professor Vess had said, held the power of Strixhaven's five elder dragons, all meshed and melded together to construct the school and safeguard it from harm. Until now, though, he hadn't realized that to do so, it had become partially *alive*.

"How do we begin?" he asked, half to himself. It was easier to imagine raising a mountain than casting the spell that had built Strixhaven itself.

"Maybe—" Dina began, but before she even finished, the invocation unknotted, rearranging itself into neat segments. Not a tangle, Quint realized, but a five-petaled flower, each petal a seamless blend of two colors. The muddled words reformed into recognizable sentences.

"Five elder dragons," Rootha said, touching a blue and red petal. "Five parts to the spell. I have a hunch we need to follow the elder dragons' example and read all five parts together."

Zimone stood on tiptoe to examine the very heart of the invocation. "Outside, too. You see this conditional? We have to be able to see what we're affecting."

"We likely can't return the way we entered," Quint said. Even the thought of creeping among the sinew-strewn stacks again made him shudder.

Dina's eyes sparkled. "There's more than one way to catch some fresh air. We can always blame it on the Phyrexians."

"Oh, no. You're planning something destructive," Killian said, then added, with awful emphasis, "*a-gain*."

"Depends on your definition of 'destructive.' Watch my back." Crouching, Dina pulled small pots of unidentifiable goo from her bag and began scrawling symbols across the platform.

Zimone knelt beside her. "I see. How are you powering it?"

"With my pests."

"That won't provide enough energy."

"Unless you're volunteering—"

"Let me add to the growth factors." Zimone's fingers, trailing bluish light, dabbed through Dina's scrawls, pocking the muddy-green sigils with spots of brightness. "The imaginary spaces between discrete physical features theoretically extend forever, the same way an infinity of numbers exists between discrete digits. If we apply Thale's Expansion Hypothesis to flip *imaginary* into *real* "

The air above Dina and Zimone's rapidly expanding ritual shimmered, blue-green dark blending in a way that ought to have been muddy but instead looked animated. Patterns like twisting ladders twined between symbols gnarled like willow roots. The sense of energy trapped and waiting redoubled.

Then Quint heard *movement*.

He spun and flung out his hand, hot-white symbols striking nearby statuary and scrolls, but even as seven spirit-statues scraped themselves together, the professor leaped from the shadows. Its claws stretched toward Quint; its metal sides opened, and in the center of the gaping ribs a red-beating *thing* glared—

An inky needle shot past Quint and tore through the red-eyed thing. The professor reared back, ribs shuddering wide, and a spike of ice screamed from the moat, piercing its leg with a tremendous crack. Quint's spirits charged the professor in a grinding crash of stone; the professor reeled under their assault. Quint's heart leaped. They only had to last until Zimone and Dina completed their ritual.

Then the professor's ribs stretched open again. With another hiss, Killian speared ink at the professor—too late. The ribs swelled out in ribbons, fast as thought, and cleaved through Quint's spirits. Three of them dissolved; the other four reeled back, torn almost to nothing.

Fire thundered from Rootha as Quint grabbed the invocation and begged it to condense itself. The single thought ramped through his head: above all else, *Phyrexia must not take Strixhaven's heart*. Around him seethed ink darts and crackling ice—at the corners of his eyes flared the white of encouragement and the blaze of fire—as the invocation furled its petals and knotted down to the diameter of a soup tureen, a dinner plate, a teacup, and he grabbed it and rammed it into his pocket, out of sight—

Then, "Done!" Dina cried. She upended her bag of pests—and the professor bulled past Rootha and Killian, sweeping the pests aside as it lunged for Dina and Zimone. But its foot landed in the ritual circle. A shriek tore from its ribs, but it might as well have tried to shout the suns out of the sky. Its flesh was *melting*, shriveling down to leather on bone, and the red-eyed heart flared as the ritual absorbed its life energy.

Then Dina screamed.

*It's too much energy!* Quint realized as Killian scrambled to her side. She writhed, body burning with a dark-green fire—which erupted from her pores and splashed every bookcase nearby.

Quint never knew growth could sound like violence incarnate.

Polished planks splintered into razor-edged branches, lengthening so rapidly they slashed the professor's remnants in half. Leaves erupted with sounds like blades being unsheathed. In the span of a breath, roots thicker than Quint's body churned the floor into pebbles. The thunder of unshackled life drowned Quint's senses as bookcases exploded and tangled into a single tree above the invocation platform—*and kept growing*, boughs forming a perfect helix of steps and leaves thinning into infinity. The tree's crown shoved against the Biblioplex's ceiling, paused—and broke right through. Light and air and masonry showered onto the platform.

Quint's mouth fell open.

Then Dina crumpled.

"Not bad for overloading, huh, Zimone?" she panted as Killian and Rootha helped her up with awed expressions.

Zimone's smile was quiet but fierce. "Not bad at all. But be careful not to go too far from the main trunk. *Theoretically*, the branches have converted from imaginary to physical space—but past a certain length, they become more imaginary than real."

Dina laughed breathlessly. "And don't look down."

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On the roof at last and wishing he hadn't looked down, Quint braced his hands on his knees, wheezed through his trunk, and thought, *This time—I mean it—I will never again climb anything without expeditionary gear*. After a few moments, he caught enough breath to straighten up and take the Invocation of the Founders from his pocket. In the open air, its petals unfolded, brightened, grew. Behind him came a sound like shuffling cards as Zimone released the imaginary boughs and the tree shrank back to a plausible height.

Killian, still supporting Dina, eyed the invocation. "We can't be disrupted while casting. That could lead to any manner of unintended results. The invocation *probably* won't create a massive swamp creature if that happens, but—"

"No guarantees," Dina cackled weakly.

"No disruptions," Rootha said, "got it," and she swept around the edge of the roof. Ice erupted in her wake, enclosing the rooftop and dampening the red, ruptured sky with its chilly purity.

Then, with only faint hesitation, they each grabbed a petal and began reading.



Art by: Dmitry Burmak

Shock ran through Quint. The words were so *prosaic*. The invocation simply described Strixhaven. Here, the invocation stated, the ground had this consistency; it sloped in this manner and contained these types of stones. The sky shuddered as Zimone defined the way the clouds moved and the air ebbed around the school. Rootha told the sun how it heated the school's roofs and lawns and the aquifers and springs where to flow. Dina grinned as she chronicled the flora: where they grew, how they died, the new life they fed. Through it all twined Killian's portion, cajoling the separate parts together as their words rose in pillars of light. They told Strixhaven what it was, and in that telling, there was no room for Phyrexia.

And Strixhaven listened. Even expecting it, the sight almost made Quint stutter. The portals overhead puckered as they fought being described out of reality, but they could no more resist than could water, wind, fire, earth, and light. Five voices rose as the invocation neared completion, and the pillars flared brighter—

The glacial wall shattered.

The explosion knocked Quint to his knees, and Zimone, Dina, and Killian flung themselves against the rooftop, hands still grasping their petals, mouths still reciting. But Rootha faced the person standing at the roof's edge, an elegant figure despite the way its body appeared to be one giant mechanical heart.

"Rootha," the figure sighed. "You always found flaws in your work that no one else could see—but somehow, you missed the weakness in your ice. I'm disappointed."

*Don't!* Quint tried to say; but he couldn't utter a sound without interrupting the invocation.

Rootha's voice faltered. "Dean Nassari?"

Her petal went dark.

The other students read frantically, trying to make up for Rootha as she flung flare after flare, spike after spike of ice, but Nassari evaded everything. Harsh words slithered from their lips—criticism without critique—and Rootha flinched and paled with each barb. The light overhead dimmed. The invocation was failing—

But Quint smiled.

Odd, how excited he felt. Almost like he had when finding the lost city of Zantafar. There was that same sense of bridging the lost knowledge of the past with the scholars of the future.

In this case, he was ensuring Strixhaven *had* a future.

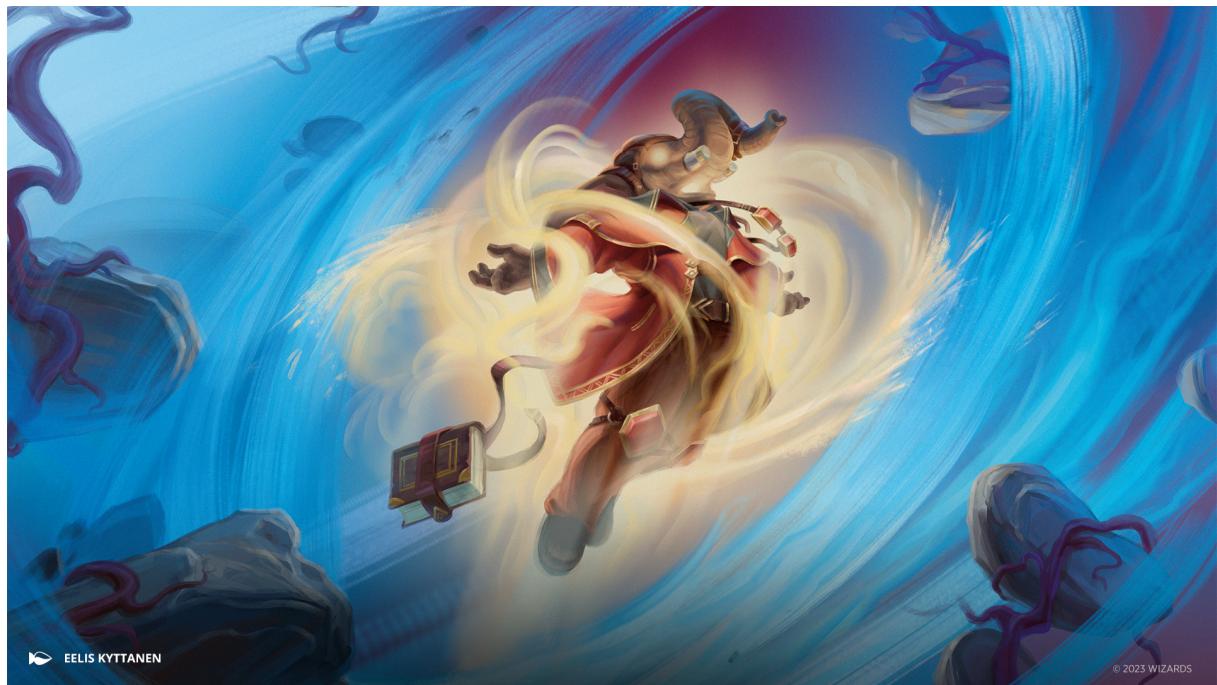
Quint took a single moment to bask in this school and the glory of its existence. Then he reached over and grabbed Rootha's petal.

The others' eyes widened, but he couldn't spare them a thought, because every scrap of himself was focused on the invocation. It was impossible to speak two parts at once. Instead, he poured magic directly into Rootha's petal. The earth was his voice; the seas and suns were his bones; he powered the invocation with his life alone. The pillars of light flared brighter than ever. Even as his life drained into the invocation, he thought, *I've never seen anything so magnificent.*

A shock ripped through his core.

Quint gasped. The invocation ? No. This light shone from *within*. Quint screamed as it tore through muscle and bone in savage coils. He tried to reach for his fellow students—his friends—but the invocation roared in response. The twin lights whipped about in fervent dance, cleaving through stone and steel alike. Dean Nassari was flung from the rooftop; the Biblioplex buckled and broke, crashing down as the light held Quint captive in midair; the stones of Strixhaven's outlying buildings came apart like sugar cubes in tea; the portals crumpled; the Invasion Tree's branches thrashed as the sky tried to close in on itself. And through it all, Quint *burned* —

Amid the conflagration, Quint's thoughts raced to Will and Rowan. His friends, too. He hadn't seen them since the invasion began. As the burning grew unbearable, he could only hope they were all right.



Art by: Eelis Kyttanen

The light swallowed Quint whole.

Strixhaven's students emerged from the dormitory to find not a siege—not their former professors, ready to whisk them to completion—but ruin. Some cried, but not for long, because the sky still bulged with invasion portals trying to force back through, and metallic figures still gleamed in the distance. Under Liliana's instructions, they built up what defenses they could, dug through rubble, pulled out survivors, and tried to identify any professors they uncovered, as Witherbloom students tended to the wounded.

"A poor effort, Merrow," Liliana said, examining the contents of a cauldron. "The blood-restoration potion requires *powdered* blackcrest pods. You haven't even sieved out the hulls. You're focusing too much on the obvious injuries, Frena. That poor boy's going to suffocate long before the arm you're splinting mends. What's this? The *Sorlian Theorem*? Really, Rinne? She's an owlkin, not a loxodon, the Sorlian Theorem is hardly applicable"

There was a crash; then multiple voices shouted, "They're down here!" Liliana had to force herself not to run. She was the one who'd sent them to find the invocation; she was the reason they were now injured, possibly dead. They had granted Strixhaven this reprieve, however brief. She owed them her attention and much more besides

By the time she reached the remains of the Biblioplex, the students working there had dug out the injured. Despite her stern facade, Liliana's heart beat rapid as a drum as she looked over Dina, Killian, Zimone, and Rootha. Broken bones, contusions, gaping wounds, no doubt a myriad of interesting infections—it would be faster to consider the injuries they *didn't* have.

And she was impressed. Even bleeding from multiple gashes, Killian was staggering through the rubble. Ink snarled around him as he tore through stonework and carapace alike.

Trust Embrose's son to be a nuisance. "Sedate him," Liliana said, and a Witherbloom student descended with an ominously smoking potion.

But before the student could get within force-feeding distance, Killian yelled, "*Father!*"

Liliana drew in a sharp breath and peered into the hole Killian had excavated. There was Embrose, dusty and disheveled, bloody and blemished, surrounded by the remnants of a number of Phyrexianized professors—but alive, and himself.

"Well, Lu," Liliana said.

"Well, Vess," he returned, curt and dignified as ever. His attention shifted to Killian, standing stunned at the edge of the hole. "Help me up."

Liliana beckoned another student over. "Lend a hand to—"

"I don't need help," Embrose interrupted, but when Killian reached down, his father grasped his hand.

Liliana turned aside, her own heart twisting uncomfortably at the look on Killian's face. The others still needed her attention, anyway. Zimone had, sensibly, not tried to stand, with her broken leg and eyes glassy from sedation. Still, she grasped Liliana's arm and croaked, "Nimiroti you have to save her"

As gently as possible, Liliana unhooked Zimone's hand. She couldn't spare anyone to check on Zimone's grandmother. And Rootha—one look told her more than enough. The girl wasn't even attempting to move. She simply lay on her stretcher, broken as a child's doll, and stared blankly at the sky.

"Not bad for students, right?" Dina croaked.

Liliana glanced at the fourth stretcher. "I'd suggest there's no way you could have done *worse*."

Dina shrugged, then winced. What few patches of skin remained unbloodied bore large, painful-looking bruises. “Now we have plenty of room to remodel.”

Liliana shook her head—then straightened, eyes widening. “Where’s Quint?”

A cloud passed over Dina’s face. “We don’t know. There was a burst of light, and he just—disappeared.”

*Dead , Liliana thought; then she frowned as Dina’s words echoed in her mind. Dead . . . or a spark? Kasmina suggested there was an ember among them, and it’s clearly not one of these four. If Quint’s spark ignited, he could still be alive . . .*

Dina was saying something. Liliana shook her head. “What was that?”

“We should expand the swamp. I’ve always thought it needed to be bigger.”

Liliana looked up. She looked at the sky, brightness warring with murky redness, and the pulsing, squirming, black-edged scars that used to be invasion portals. She looked at the branches puncturing the ground, bent and battered but still standing. She looked at her colleagues’ bodies, some crushed by collapsing buildings, others with their metal parts torn away by the incomplete invocation, and knew that more were still alive, and they would never stop. She looked at the ruins of *her* home, *her* sanctuary, *her* respite disrupted by Phyrexia.

Then she stared up at the portals like open wounds, with the maggots of the Invasion Tree’s branches already breaking through the invocation’s incomplete banishment.

Liliana’s hands dropped to her sides. Her fingers opened. Light spilled from her palms: not the murky blood-color thrashing overhead, or even the clear brightness that fought against it. This was *her* light, dim and grim. It sank like water into the ground. Far below, in the corpse-strewn ruins of the school—in the catacombs where ancient professors moldered—beneath even that, where the bones of unnamed, unknown thousands leached into the bedrock—her magic found bodies and gave them new life.

Skeletons and zombies erupted from the ground, and students screamed and scrambled to get out of their way. Empty sockets smoldered with purple fire as Lilliana’s army arranged itself around the rubble of Strixhaven in obedience to her silent command, forming a barrier to hold off Phyrexia. It would stand as long as she had breath in her body.

“Remodeling will have to wait,” Liliana said.