

Return to Dominaria: Episode 12

Martha Wells

From set *Dominaria*

“And everything was going so well, too,” Liliana said with a grimace. Thunder rumbled in the distance and she cast another spell at Yargle, then gripped the railing as the *Weatherlight* jerked sideways.

The purple bolts slid across Yargle’s slimy skin with no effect. Shanna and Arvad hacked at the giant fingers gripping the ship’s bow, but they couldn’t break Yargle’s grip. The massive creature made a rasping noise in its throat and spat onto the deck. The corrosive stench of acid filled the air and Liliana choked as the fumes reached her. “Oh good, it’s worse.”

Raff clung to the railing on the opposite side of the ship and blue light flashed as he flung a counterspell. The acid cloud roiled against it and turned liquid, flowing across the deck. Raff gasped, “Oh, that’s new! Jhoira!”

Liliana gritted her teeth with the effort of holding on to the undead army she had raised out of the swamp. It was taking all the power she could muster, and she wasn’t strong enough to hold it and attack Yargle at the same time. Most of the dead were panther warriors, just different enough from humans to make them slippery and difficult to control. She found herself having to cajole them rather than just give orders, and under the current circumstances it was more than frustrating.

Jaya slid sideways across the deck and dropped to her knees to aim a stream of fire. It burned off the remaining acid cloud but Yargle jerked the ship sideways again and nearly knocked Shanna and Arvad off the bow. Liliana smashed against the railing and clawed at it to hold on. Jaya swore and blasted Yargle again.

Jhoira bolted out of the hatch under the ship’s bridge. She reached the center of the deck and tossed something into the air. It was her mechanical owl and it gripped something like a metallic grapefruit in its claws. Yargle roared and the *Weatherlight* lurched again and swung sideways, the deck at an acute angle.

Liliana gasped as the jolt almost threw her over the rail. Shanna and Arvad tumbled toward the side but Raff, still gripping the other railing, cast a blue-tinged light that turned into a glowing rope. Arvad caught it with one hand and grabbed Shanna’s arm with the other. She planted her boots against the railing to brace them.

As Jhoira tumbled across the deck, Liliana made a wild grab and caught her jacket just as Jhoira hit the rail. Jhoira gripped Liliana’s wrist. They hung there for a breathless instant before the ship tipped the other way. As they swung back, Liliana managed to wedge herself between the deck and the rail, gripping Jhoira’s arm to keep her from falling.

“Thanks,” Jhoira said breathlessly.

“Don’t mention it,” Liliana said. She could feel her panther warriors attacking Yargle, slashing and tearing at its feet, but it didn’t seem to be helping. The angle of the *Weatherlight*’s deck was so steep

Shanna and Arvad couldn't move, and Raff was stuck holding the support spell that kept them from falling off the ship. Jaya's fire blasts kept the acid at bay but couldn't penetrate Yargle's thick hide. Liliana couldn't let go of the rail or Jhoira, and Jhoira couldn't let go of Liliana. Up on the bridge, Liliana saw Tiana at the wheel, struggling to free the ship from Yargle's grip. The engines strained so hard the deck vibrated like it might burst apart. Liliana added grimly, "I rather hope you have a plan."

"I do, actually," Jhoira said, her voice rough with the effort of holding on. "My owl has one of the mana-charged burners I constructed to use against the Stronghold."

"Oh, good," Liliana managed. Her arms were going numb. "And is this going to happen soon, because —"

"Everyone, brace yourselves!" Jhoira shouted.

Liliana ordered her undead to break off, just before a blue light flashed and Yargle's enraged shriek deafened her. The *Weatherlight* shook like a child's toy, rattling her teeth. Her eyes were dazzled and she blinked hard, unable to make anything out. Then her vision cleared.



Yargle, Glutton of Urborg | Art by Jehan Choo

Yargle still gripped the bow, and now its gigantic maw was opening. Jhoira swore bitterly and added, "I should have used all the burners."

Exasperated, Liliana snarled, "This is a ridiculous way to die!"

Gideon hit the ground and rolled, then came to his feet. The pit was a nightmare of fighting, screaming figures, slashing blades, and flailing clubs and chains. Above him, Chandra shouted a warning. Gideon leapt aside just as a Cabal grimmant hit the ground. Chandra must have shoved him into the pit, but Gideon couldn't see her from this angle. He lunged forward, kicked the man in the head, and took his sword.

That was all he had time for as he was rushed by a swarm of desperate fighters. Some dragged at the grimmant's body to get his remaining weapons and armor. Others charged at Gideon.

Wary his eternal aegis shield spell would give him away, he blocked wild sword thrusts and dodged a blow from a broken mace. He shouted, “Why are you fighting for the Cabal’s amusement? Just stop!”



Gideon’s Reproach | Art by Izzy

That was when he realized everyone attacking him was wild-eyed with dementia magic. They had no idea where they were—they were trapped in their own nightmares. One flung himself forward like a berserker and Gideon stabbed him through the chest. As he freed his sword and backed away, the others leapt on the fallen man to tear at his weapons and armor.

Gideon dodged away from the wall and headed farther into the pit. He couldn’t get out on this side and there was no point in trying to stay near Chandra if it ended with them both dead. Another group charged him and, left with no choice, he cut his way through, then looked around, desperate to find someone in their right mind.

Toward the center of the pit he saw a small group fighting back to back, defending each other from the prisoners maddened by dementia magic. Relieved, Gideon fought his way toward them.

The leader was a tall, muscular warrior with dark hair and blue-gray skin, dressed in battered leather armor. Gideon cut his way through the wailing cultists attacking the group and asked, “May I join you?”

“Since you ask so politely.” She jerked her head, telling him to join the circle on her right. As he moved to her side she said, “I don’t recognize you, are you new?”

“I just arrived.” Gideon swung his sword to knock aside a spear cast at the man on his far right. “You were all captured together?”

She drove back another attacker with a flurry of sword strokes. “No, my companions were killed. We all met in the cells.”



Run Amok | Art by Svetlin Velinov

If there were others trapped in the Stronghold who weren't infected with dementia magic, then they could free them. If the *Weatherlight* ever arrived. "I'm Gideon."

She thrust her sword through the chest of a black-robed cultist and said, "I'm Radha."

Slimefoot crawled out of the *Weatherlight*'s hatch, its usual method of locomotion now coming in handy with the deck angled so sharply. The light was dim, the sky obscured by dark storm clouds and the volcano's haze of smoke, framing the terrifying creature holding the ship's bow. Slimefoot headed toward the rail, which was now only twenty feet above the treetops. It used all its stalks to hold on and leaned over.

Amid the swamp grass and ponds below, it saw the undead panther warriors as they hacked at Yargle's feet. But they weren't the only spirits here. Liches and other spiritfolk had been drawn by the battle and gathered in the trees below. Like the others Slimefoot had met, they were all shapes and sizes, from small bulbous lumps to tall gangly creatures. Slimefoot called, *Please help us!*

They all looked up. *Who are you to ask for help?* they said.

I am Slimefoot, friend to Yxarit. Slimefoot hoped Yxarit hadn't been lying or tricking it. The *Weatherlight* shuddered underfoot and Slimefoot knew they didn't have much time before the engines burst from the effort to escape. *We go to attack the Cabal and kill the demon.*

Kill the demon, the spirit voices echoed. *We can't help you*, another spirit said, and Slimefoot's insides sank. *But we will call something that can.*

Jhoira gripped Liliana's wrist and the rail as the ship wrenched around again. Everything she had that could blast Yargle's hands off the ship might take out the whole bow. And Shanna and Arvad were trapped up there. The *Weatherlight* groaned in protest, and she knew she might not have a choice. She'd

just drawn a breath to shout to the others to try to get off the bow when Liliana demanded, “What is that thing doing?”

“Which thing, the one trying to eat the ship?” Jhoira said, baffled at the question.

Liliana jerked her head. “No, that thallid.”

Jhoira turned to look. “The thallid?” It was at the stern near the bridge, leaning far out over the rail. *It’s talking to someone, something*, Jhoira thought, startled.

Then Liliana said, “Something else is coming. It’s not dead, either, but it’s not alive.”

A wind swept the deck and drove away Yargle’s heavy stench with the strong scent of green plants, wet earth, and flowers. Jhoira knew it instantly. “That can’t be Multani, not here!” The wind carried the scent of Yavimaya, but there was something wrong with it, a tinge of corruption and sourness.

“The Yavimaya fragment,” Liliana said, almost under her breath. “Could it be an elemental like Multani but—”

A shape rose up behind Yargle. It was larger, suffused with green light and wrapped in the remnants of rotting vines and wood and woven through with fragmented corpses and mud. Huge horns topped its head and its open maw was a rage-filled rictus. Jhoira grimaced with dismay. It made Multani’s enraged unconscious manifestation look no more than vaguely annoyed.

“—but much angrier,” Liliana finished. With one arm still looped around the rail, she lifted her hand. “But while it’s distracted, I can send the panther army at it—”

“Wait!” Jhoira said. The elemental wrapped its arms around Yargle. Yargle, apparently finally realizing that something was attacking it, twisted its head around to clamp its massive jaw on the elemental’s torso.

The *Weatherlight* slewed sideways in Yargle’s grip and Jhoira slammed into the railing again. Jaya slid across the deck on her back and shouted, “It’s Muldrotha, a corrupted elemental!”



Muldrotha, the Gravetide | Art by Jason Rainville

Muldrotha extruded a limb made of rotting wood and corpses into Yargle's clamped jaw and pried it open. With a strangled gasp of acid, Yargle released the *Weatherlight*.

As the *Weatherlight* wobbled free, Jhoira shouted, "Tiana, get us out of here!" The deck shoved upward underfoot and the engines thrummed. The ship lifted away.

Liliana slid down the rail to the deck and Jhoira staggered forward to see the battle. Yargle tried to grip Muldrotha but its claws slid harmlessly through the mosaic of vegetation and earth and rot. Muldrotha pried at Yargle's jaws with its hands, and its weight bore the creature down into the muddy swamp. The thallid stumped over to Jhoira's side. She looked at it, her brow quirking in amazement. "What did you do?"

It waved at her.



Slimefoot, the Stowaway | Art by Alex Konstad

Raff dragged himself up on the rail. "I'd feel sorry for Yargle, if it hadn't tried to eat our ship," he gasped. "I don't feel sorry at all," Jhoira said. She was certain she was watching Yargle get exactly what was coming to it.

Shanna and Arvad stumbled down from the bow deck and reached the railing. "Are you all right?" Jhoira asked.

Acid had melted Arvad's armor off his right arm and side, but the reddened skin beneath was rapidly healing. Shanna had lost her shield and some of her braids, but looked unhurt. She glanced at Arvad, got a confirming nod, and said, "We've been better, but we'll do."

Jhoira turned to where Jaya and Liliana had clambered to their feet. "Liliana, you still have the army?"

"Of course." Liliana tossed her head, stumbled, and recovered her balance. "Let's go kill a demon, shall we?"

Jhoira agreed. It was time to end this. “To the Stronghold.”

Chandra managed to trip some brawling cultists into the pit to distract Gideon’s attackers, and in the confusion no one noticed. Cultists were knocking each other into the pit anyway, howling with joy as they fell. This was all much worse than Chandra had imagined. *Where is the Weatherlight? Why are they taking so long?* she wondered desperately.

As Gideon broke free and moved across the pit, she ran along the edge, ducking around groups of chanting grinnants. She could feel Belzenlok’s terrifying presence at the far end of the arena, like his gaze was burning her skin. If he noticed her and Gideon, they would be torn apart. Chandra could only burn so many cultists before they overwhelmed her. Someone grabbed her arm and shoved her toward the edge, and she twisted out of his grip and kicked him in the hip. He flailed backward and fell into the pit. All the cultists around her cheered. Chandra bolted past them.

She found another vantage point, an almost empty section near the stairs leading up to the arena, shielded from Belzenlok’s view by a curved riblike pillar. She spotted Gideon where he had joined a group near the center of the pit who were cooperating, defending each other. The tight fear in her chest eased a little.

Then a deep bell-like tone sounded, loud enough to make Chandra stagger and cover her ears. She wasn’t the only one. Everyone froze, staring, suddenly dead silent. The only sound was from the pit, where the combatants still frenzied from dementia magic barely seemed to notice the interruption. Then Belzenlok stood. His voice roared, “Defend the Stronghold!” Then he turned and shoved past the throne, vanishing into the shadows at the back of the arena.

Chandra gasped in relief. *Finally!* All around her the chanting crowd dissolved as the grinnants and clerics streamed for the doors. As the crowd cleared, Chandra looked for a way to get Gideon out of the pit. She spotted something back toward the end of the arena where they had first entered, some kind of apparatus with gears and chains and folded wooden stairs, tucked up just below the ledge. She caught Gideon’s gaze and pointed emphatically at it. He jerked his head in acknowledgement and Chandra ran back around the arena.

As she reached the mechanism, she saw the chained lever that released the stairs. But there were still too many cultists in the arena to just trip it without getting caught. And a large group of armed grinnants and a few robed clerics still clustered around the main doors. They seemed to be waiting for the cleric Whisper. She had stepped back up onto the blocks overlooking the pit.

As Chandra waited impatiently, Whisper spread her arms and started to speak. A black mist formed in front of her and drifted down into the pit. Chandra gasped in realization just as the mist touched the first of the dementia-maddened fighters below and they collapsed, choking and gasping. Whisper was going to kill the rest of the prisoners in the pit.

Chandra sent the first blast of fire out of pure reflex, but after Jaya’s help, it was an accurate reflex. Whisper must have felt or sensed the heat; she twisted sideways just before the impact. The blast struck the grinnant behind her, dissolving him in flame. Whisper shouted in rage and pointed at Chandra. The grinnants charged, and the black orbs of death spells shot toward her.

Chandra didn’t need to brace herself or draw in a breath. She shot a dozen fireballs in different directions, aimed toward the clerics and the grinnants who moved toward her. Then she threw herself out of the path of the death spells, hit the ground and rolled to her knees, and shot another barrage of fire toward Whisper.

The cultists she set on fire ran, rammed into each other, fell over the side of the pit. Whisper leapt down from the block to duck behind the grimnants. Chandra raked the whole group with fire. It immolated most of them and sent the survivors fleeing for the doorways. Chandra shoved to her feet and fought the urge to just blast the whole arena; she knew she needed to conserve her strength if they were going to get through this alive. But all that effort keeping multiple fireballs afloat and contained while having emotional conversations with Jaya had come in handy.



Exquisite Firecraft | Art by Chase Stone

Chandra ran back to the stair mechanism, burned through the chain lock, and threw the lever. The stairs unfolded down the side of the pit with a wheezing clank. The grimnants nearby were either charred heaps, on fire, or gone, and she couldn't see any others in the dimness of the arena's upper reaches. Down in the pit knots of prisoners still fought, surrounded by the bodies of the fallen. She couldn't see Gideon or the other fighters with him and stepped to the edge of the pit to look down the stairs. The group was climbing up, Gideon nearly at the top.

Chandra stepped back, relieved, and turned just as Whisper appeared out of nowhere and cast a black cloud. Chandra blasted it with a thin, targeted, but intense burst of fire, the only thing she could think of. It wouldn't have worked to counter the death spell, but Gideon slung himself onto the platform and cast his shield spell. Its golden light dazzled Chandra's eyes as it deflected Whisper's magic. Then suddenly a blade blossomed in Whisper's right eye. She staggered back and collapsed.

"Huh?" Chandra stared at Gideon, then saw the gray-skinned woman behind him. She hung onto the edge of the pit with one hand and had thrown the knife with the other. "Oh, thanks!"

The woman slung herself up. "It doesn't bode well that it took three of us to take out a cleric."

"I'm sure we'll get better with practice," Gideon said. "Chandra, this is Radha."

"Hello," Chandra said. She told Gideon, "I don't know what delayed the *Weatherlight*, but they're here now. We need to get moving!"

"The *Weatherlight*?" Radha turned to Chandra in astonishment. "It was destroyed."

“Jhoira brought it back,” Chandra replied before Gideon could draw breath. “Teferi and Karn are here too, do you know them? Do you want to help us?”

More fighters climbed out of the pit. “Radha, you’ll lead us out?” one asked.



Art by Anna Steinbauer

Radha hesitated, then turned to Gideon and Chandra. “You have an escape route planned?”

“We have something we need to get first,” Gideon said. “Our friends are attacking the Stronghold—you should be able to get out in the confusion.”

Radha’s dark brows lifted. “Will this something rain destruction on the Cabal?”

“Probably,” Chandra said. She sure hoped so. “That’s the plan.”

“Then I’ll come with you.” Radha turned to the others. “Go on, we’ll meet outside.”

The other fighters saluted her and headed for the door.

“Now?” Liliana asked Jhoira. The *Weatherlight* was just about to crest the last hill. The dark tower of the volcano loomed ahead, stark against the ash-filled sky and the lowering clouds.

“Now,” Jhoira said, and Liliana told her undead army, *Destroy the Cabal, my lovelies. Take your revenge.*

As the *Weatherlight* sailed over the hill, thunder cracked and the sky split with lightning. Liliana saw the Stronghold, protected by multiple curtain walls and moats, each gate guarded by traps and dark magic. The desire for revenge made her heart pound. *Soon*, she told herself. She urged her undead warriors on, but their own lust for vengeance was so intense they needed no encouragement as they surged through the brush and trees and streamed down toward the first wall.

“There’s Teferi and Karn!” Shanna called out from the starboard side.

Arvad went to the rail and flung the ladder over. “Don’t we need to slow down?” Raff asked. “Oh right, I forgot, time mage,” he added, as Teferi and Karn appeared on the deck in a blur of motion.

Fitful rain slicked the deck as the *Weatherlight* reached the outer wall. A hail of arrows and crossbow bolts struck the hull. Dark orbs of death magic flew over the railing but dissolved into sizzling gold sparks as Shanna blocked them with her body and her sword. Jhoira's hands moved as she cast counterspells and deflected the arrows away from the deck. Raff murmured something and Liliana glanced back to see two more *Weatherlight*s sail over the hills to draw the Cabal's fire. "Not bad," Liliana commented, most of her attention still on her undead warriors.

Teferi stepped up beside Liliana, his robes tossed by the wind, and leaned out over the bow. "I'll take the first gate, shall I?" he asked.

"Go ahead," Jhoira said, grinning. Her owl shot past overhead, carrying another mana-burner.

Teferi held out his hand and the gate across the causeway turned red with corrosion, then dissolved in a puff of rust. Liliana's undead panther warriors flowed through the opening like water to tear through the armored grimnants.

On the next wall, Jhoira's owl dropped its first mana-burner and the gate exploded. The fragments of stone and metal froze in midair, then swirled into a tempest that slammed through the nearby grimnants and cultists. Jhoira held up another mana-burner and her owl swooped back around to grab it.

Fiercely pleased with the destruction so far, Liliana said aloud, "This is going well." Belzenlok would be writhing in a horrible death in no time and she couldn't wait to see it.

From the bow deck, Shanna shouted, "Something's coming! From the volcano, there!"

Liliana swore in annoyance. "Oh, I wish I hadn't said that." She turned to look. A dark shape rose out of the light-colored smoke streaming from the volcano's cauldron. At first all she could see was the wings of a flying creature far too much like a dragon for comfort. Its head was shaped like a double-headed ax blade, and as it twisted in midair she saw the clawed limbs and the tail. Then she spotted the armored figure riding it. It caught the draft off the hot air above the volcano and soared upward toward the storm clouds.

Raff said, "Uh, I wish you hadn't said it, too. I have a bad feeling about this." He raised his voice. "I think that's Urgoros!"

Gideon led the way out of the arena through the nearest archway. The shadowy corridor was empty now and he started to run, Chandra and Radha easily keeping pace. A distant roar punctuated by explosions suggested the battle outside was well under way. "You do know where this treasury is?" Radha asked, looking back down the corridor. The dancing torchlight made the place alive with shadows. "The Cabal is constantly rebuilding their defenses."

"It should be down here." Gideon spotted the opening just beyond the next archway. From the flickering light of the nearest torch, it was a tunnel of Phyrexian construction, a curving gullet that led down into darkness. "Probably." Raff had extracted the information at Tolaria West from the Cabal agent's fractured thoughts, and they just had to hope he had interpreted it correctly.



Memorial to Genius | Art by James Paick

The corridor curved around and finally opened into a large, mostly unlit chamber with more of the curving riblike supports. There were half a dozen sets of doors in the walls, all sealed with heavy chains. A miasma of dark spells floated in front of each one like a gray veil. Gideon stopped and felt that sinking sensation that usually accompanied the moments when he realized his plan had just encountered a possibly catastrophic obstacle.

“Which door?” Radha asked, her brow furrowed as she looked around.

“That’s a good question,” Gideon said. “Our informant knew the weapon we need is in this treasury, in this part of the Stronghold, but that was all.”

Radha’s expression was doubtful. “It’s going to take us time to get through these doors. If the attack outside fails while we’re searching—”

Gideon flinched as fire roared. He and Radha spun around to see Chandra blast the first door. Her fire washed over it, white-hot, and burned away chains, the sigils powering the guard spells, and the door itself.

She stopped and flexed her gloved hands. The fire vanished to reveal an open hole in the wall where the door had been. Chandra stepped over to face the next door.

“Or we could do that,” Gideon said, relieved.

Liliana grimaced as she watched Urgoros and its mount circle down toward the *Weatherlight*, rain glinting on its dark wings.

“And what exactly is an Urgoros, Raff?” Teferi asked conversationally. A barrage of arrows came at them from a gate tower and he gestured absently to freeze them in midair.

“I don’t know, but the Cabal agent we questioned was really afraid of it!” Raff said. He pulled his book around and paged frantically through it.

Karn stepped forward, his metal head turning as he tracked Urgoros's progress through the rain and ash-clouds. He said, "It's a powerful lich. But like the spirits created from the purest dark magic, it's never been human."

As Urgoros turned to dive on them, Liliana saw the armored warrior's head was also a double-sickle shape, confirmation that it wasn't human. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Liliana, can you stop it?" Jhoira shouted. Her owl had just left with another mana-burner. The path to the Stronghold's doors was almost clear as the undead panthers poured through the destroyed gates.

No one wants a necromancer around until they're being attacked by something giant and undead, Liliana thought wryly. "I'll try, but somebody should be thinking of another means of attack. Belzenlok knows I'm here, he wouldn't have sent this thing against us if I could take control of it." She gripped the railing to steady herself and stretched her awareness toward that dark figure.

And felt nothing. Urgoros was a hungry emptiness, growing closer, and there was nothing in it for her to seize hold of, or even speak to. There had to be something she could do. She instinctively touched the Chain Veil, but though the Onakke whispered, she knew she wasn't strong enough to use it again yet. Not without endangering herself and everyone on the *Weatherlight*. She snarled under her breath. She hated being helpless. "Jhoira, I can't stop it!"

Jhoira stepped forward, her hands cupped around a blue swirl of light. Teferi moved to her side, staff extended, waiting. Shanna and Karn stepped up beside Raff and Jaya.

Urgoros and its beast slammed into the deck through a haze of blue spell light as Jhoira, Teferi, and Raff cast a barrage of attacks and defenses. Liliana dove out of the way as Urgoros deflected it all with magic so dark it was like the heart of a dying star.

Shanna walked forward and her resistance to magic deflected Urgoros's spells in flares of gold light. Karn crouched behind her, using Shanna's immunity to get close enough to attack. Liliana cast her own spell, hoping all the distraction would let her kill Urgoros before it could shield itself.



Urgoros, the Empty One | Art by Daarken

The purple light struck Urgoros but washed over it, lighting up the joints in its armor. *Oh, that didn't work*, Liliana had time to think before the beast's tail slammed her sideways.

Liliana hit the opposite railing and sprawled, too stunned to move. She looked up to see the others scattered and Urgoros's spear lifted and about to drive down through her body.

Tiana suddenly landed in front of her. Her sword flashed and deflected the spear, and the dark weapon careened over the rail. Jaya blasted Urgoros from the side and the wash of fire drove it back and away from them. Karn jumped on its back and grabbed its head. Tiana leapt after the snarling beast, Arvad following her.

Liliana pushed herself up, dazed. Who was flying the ship? She looked back toward the bridge and saw the green shape of the thallid gripping the ship's wheel. *Oh, that's all we need*, she thought.

Jhoira turned to her urgently. "This is a distraction, Belzenlok is trying to keep us out of the Stronghold."

Liliana swore. "You're right." She hated that she hadn't thought of it first. "I need to keep the panther warriors on the attack. And I need to get down there!" Gideon and Chandra might be fighting Belzenlok right now and Liliana needed to be there. She needed to see the Blackblade rip Belzenlok's life force out of his body.

Jhoira jerked her head toward the ladders. "Go on. We can handle Urgoros."

Liliana strode to the railing but the mechanism that dropped the ladders had been sheared off the deck by the battle with Urgoros. She grimaced in annoyance, but this wasn't going to stop her. She leaned over the railing and sent her awareness to her undead warriors.

Many still fought the Cabal grimmants all along the causeway, in the water, in the guard towers. She focused in on the group just below the *Weatherlight*, gathered to watch a strange procession of the spirit creatures flowing in through the broken gates. The spirits were all strange shapes and sizes, from round and bulbous to thin and insubstantial as willows.

Liliana sent to her undead panther warriors, *I need to get down to the ground. You have a solution, my lovelies?*

They replied, *We have allies.*

Some spirits turned aside and climbed, ran, floated, or bounced into place below the *Weatherlight*, then piled on top of each other and clung together. They kept coming, the tower of spirit bodies rising higher and higher.

As they reached the hull of the *Weatherlight*, Liliana swung herself up over the rail and dropped down to land on top. A three-fingered hand reached up to grip hers, and a strange array of faces peered up at her, all with a seemingly random number of eyes and features. "Well, this is interesting," Liliana breathed, as they began to lower her to the ground.

Gideon ran across the shadowy chaos of the Stronghold's hall with Chandra and Radha. Undead panther warriors and odd-shaped spirits had swarmed in through the main doors. Pockets of cultists and clerics still fought, but their dementia magic had no effect on the dead. The panther warriors surrounded and overwhelmed the cultists, protecting the more vulnerable spirits as they tore the hall apart. "We're winning!" Chandra shouted.

"Stay focused," Gideon told her. He carried the Blackblade, still in its scabbard. They had found the weapon inside the fourth treasury vault, mounted on a stone plinth like a trophy. He could feel the

dark power of it burning through the leather into his hand, and he didn't want to use it on anyone except Belzenlok.



Blackblade Reforged | Art by Chris Rahn

They reached the outer foyer of the hall. A cleric stood in the open doors, holding a circle of panther warriors back with a dark haze of spells. She saw them, snarled, and cast something that took the form of a net expanding in the air. Gideon turned instinctively to use his shield spell, but Chandra shot a bolt of fire that neatly missed the undead warriors and struck the cleric square in the chest. The cleric staggered back and the panthers overwhelmed her, her spell dissolving in midair.

Before Gideon could circle around them, a wave of spirits crashed through the doors and scattered the panther warriors and the few remaining cultists blocking the way. Gideon braced himself, and Radha planted her shield and pulled Chandra behind her.

The spirits flowed past them, but a familiar bulbous creature stopped in front of Gideon and pointed urgently outside. "Belzenlok!" it said.

Good, Gideon thought. He told it, "We need to get out there."

The spirit turned and gestured agitatedly. The other spirits scrambled out of the way to make a path. Gideon plunged through and ran out into the open area in front of the Stronghold.

Outside it was chaos. The sky boiled with dark gray clouds and the paving was slick with rain. The *Weatherlight* hung just above the innermost wall, spell-lights and blasts of fire erupting off the deck, though Gideon couldn't make out who or what they were fighting. The gates had been blasted open, the Cabal structures on this side of the wall were on fire, and dead cultists, pieces of panther warriors, and the bodies of spirits lay scattered across the ground. Then he saw Belzenlok.

At the far end of the compound, the demon strode through a mass of spirits and the undead, a sword in his hand, his reptilian wings spread. He swung the sword in an arc that sent bodies flying out of his path.

Gideon took a deep breath and drew the Blackblade. He hated to use such a dark weapon, but there was no choice. Shouts and battle cries behind him made him turn. A new surge of grinnants poured

out of the Stronghold. Chandra flung fireballs to hold them off while Radha shouted orders, urging the spirits into a defensive formation. Chandra glanced back at Gideon and said, “Go on! We’ll guard your back!”

Gideon hesitated, but he knew the grimnants would break when he killed Belzenlok. He turned and started toward the demon.

Belzenlok swung around at Gideon’s approach, then tilted his horned head in recognition at the sight of the Blackblade. “That sword is mine! I forged it to kill an elder dragon.” Belzenlok sneered, his teeth sharp against his pale lips. “You think you can wield my own sword against me? Your death will be excruciating.”



Demonlord Belzenlok | Art by Tyler Jacobson

“Out of curiosity, do you actually believe these lies you spout to your deluded cultists?” Gideon said and circled to the side. Belzenlok pivoted to follow him. The Blackblade made Gideon’s hands ache, as if the dark power was weakening his bones. He knew he only had to get close enough to pierce Belzenlok’s flesh with the sword. But the demon was taller and bulkier than him, with a longer reach.

Belzenlok was furious. “Lies? I will disembowel you as you scream—”

Gideon heard Chandra’s fire roar, holding off the grimnants at the Stronghold’s doors, and knew he couldn’t wait for a better opportunity. He charged, ducked in close, and thrust. The Blackblade came within a breath of Belzenlok’s hide but the demon smashed him aside and swung his sword down. The blade glittered with dark magic and Gideon’s shield spell glinted gold as it deflected the spells.

Gideon and Belzenlok circled each other. Suddenly sounding like a cunning demon and not a deluded megalomaniac, Belzenlok said, “I smell Planeswalker. Who are you?”

Gideon didn’t hesitate. “I’m Gideon Jura. I came here with Liliana Vess to kill you.”

Belzenlok bared his fangs again in a grin. “You. The Gatewatch. I know what’s planned for you. It almost seems a shame to kill you now. Almost.” Belzenlok lunged forward.

Liliana ran down the causeway and through the smashed gates into the Stronghold's court. A grimnant charged at her and she gestured a spell that slammed him into the wet pavement.

She saw Chandra first, obvious from the bursts of fire and the smoldering bodies. She and another warrior blocked the Stronghold's door, fighting the grimnants back with the help of a collection of spirits.

At the far end of the court, surrounded by wood and stone debris and the shredded remnants of the red Cabal banners, Gideon fought Belzenlok. He wielded the Blackblade, the darkness in it teasing the edge of Liliana's senses.

She started forward. All she had to do was distract the demon so Gideon could strike him. The Blackblade should do the rest. She smiled and whispered, "Belzenlok."

The demon's horned head twitched toward her. Liliana drew power from the dead sprawled everywhere and cast it like an arrow at Belzenlok.

The purple bolts struck the demon's head and chest but the light flowed harmlessly over his pale skin. He laughed and deflected Gideon's next stroke. "You're weak, Liliana, and you always have been. Who but a weak-willed fool would sign a pact with me?"

Liliana set her jaw. Most of her strength was spent keeping the undead panther warriors from collapsing back into inert corpses. If she let them go—no, it was too dangerous. There were still too many grimnants, too many horrors like Urgoros in the Stronghold. And even if she let the panther warriors sink back to death, she still wouldn't have the power to kill Belzenlok alone, not without the Chain Veil. She had to stick with the plan and distract him.

She strode closer, tempting the demon to break off from Gideon and attack her. "The others who signed that pact are dead at my hand. You're about to join them." She knew she shouldn't betray her real feelings, but she couldn't help adding, "You should have left my brother alone."

Belzenlok laughed as he blocked another sword thrust. "Everything in Dominaria is mine, the corpse of your brother, your home, you. And I use it as I want."

His ego is so enormous he probably believes that, Liliana thought. "You're a buffoon and a liar, and all of Dominaria knows it," she jeered.

Belzenlok swung at Gideon and narrowly missed him. "You'll beg to serve me before I'm done, and perhaps I'll let you live," he growled.

Liliana heard the real irritation under Belzenlok's bluster. Her words were striking in a sensitive spot. "You should have heard how they laughed at you at Tolaria West. 'The massive horned idiot thinks we're as deluded as he is,' they said. That ridiculous ode!" Putting every ounce of contempt she had in her body into it, Liliana started to sing a satirical version of the Rite to Belzenlok Raff had composed.

Belzenlok roared with fury and Gideon took the opportunity to lunge in. But the demon was too fast. Belzenlok turned back at the last instant to slam Gideon to the pavement. Gideon lost his grip on the Blackblade—Liliana hissed in dismay. But the Blade hadn't fallen to the ground. It had pierced Belzenlok's hide and hung from his thigh, glinting with dark energy.

Oblivious with victory, his mouth split with glee, Belzenlok lifted his sword to drive it through Gideon's sprawled body. Liliana leapt forward, under Belzenlok's arm, and seized the Blackblade's hilt.

She gasped as the dark energy jolted through her, using her body to pull the demon's life force into the blade. Belzenlok froze, trapped by the Blade's power, held immobile, his fanged mouth open in a rictal grin.



Settle the Score | Art by Yongjae Choi

Liliana gazed up at him in triumph and her skin coursed with sparks of violet light as the Blade drained Belzenlok's life. It was almost too much, the power stored within the Blackblade nearly overwhelming her body, her mind. She set her jaw and braced herself, riding the flow of dark energy as Belzenlok's body shrank and shriveled under the Blade. It had been a pleasure to kill all her demons, but destroying Belzenlok in this way was a particular delight. She managed, "You should have left Josu alone."

Belzenlok's body writhed, folded in on itself, as the Blade drained it. Abruptly the Blade released him and Liliana staggered back. What was left of Belzenlok collapsed into lumps of white flesh. His horns, still intact, clattered to the pavement.

Liliana's knees went weak and she sat down hard on the rain-slick pavement. She felt almost as drained as Belzenlok and shoved the Blackblade away. It lay there on the stone, glinting with dark satisfaction, new power sparking within it. She looked down at herself, but the lines of her pact were still written on her skin. *I thought it would disappear*, she thought, her brow furrowing in confusion. But maybe that had been a forlorn hope; just because the signers of the pact were dead didn't mean it had never existed.

Beside her, a dazed Gideon pushed himself up into a sitting position. "Are you all right?" he demanded blearily.

Liliana smiled at him. "I'm magnificent."

Jhoira stood on the *Weatherlight*'s bridge with Tiana. Through the port, they had a good view of the Stronghold under a cloud-strewn sky and the ruins of the Cabal's defenses.

Urgoros had vanished when Belzenlok died, and Jhoira had no idea if it had been destroyed or just freed. It was something she was putting firmly in the "worry about it later" category.

All day, more spirits and the human resistance fighters had continued to appear out of the surrounding countryside, drawn by the news of the Stronghold's defeat. Gideon, Shanna, and Radha had organized

a group to search the prison, releasing any captives still trapped within and helping the injured. The grimnants, cultists, and clerics were all dead or had fled into the swamps.



Grand Warlord Radha | Art by Anna Steinbauer

Teferi had been shocked to see that Radha had been a prisoner of the Cabal, but at least she was free now. The *Weatherlight* would take her back to Keld, and drop off the other former prisoners who wanted to leave Urborg, and then take Slimefoot and its children to Yavimaya. They would be traveling without Teferi, Karn, and Jaya, who had decided to accompany the other Planeswalkers in their effort to destroy Nicol Bolas.

Jhoira had admitted to herself that if she were a Planeswalker, she would have been tempted to join them. But her life and her work had always been here, on Dominaria, and she had a job to finish. Watching Tiana's expression as the angel looked out over the deck, Jhoira said, "Once we get Radha and the others home, we've fulfilled our bargain with the Church of Serra." She steeled herself. "And I suppose we need to return Serra's Realm to you, so you can deliver it to the Church." If Tiana took the Powerstone, Jhoira would just have to think of another way to power the *Weatherlight*. But Jhoira didn't want to break up their crew. They felt right, felt like they were meant to be here.

Tiana's gaze was on the deck, where Raff and Shanna stood talking with Arvad. Raff said something that made Shanna laugh and punch him in the shoulder, and Arvad's expression was quietly amused. Slimefoot was giving its children a tour of the deck. Tiana lifted her brows. "Is that what the bargain was?"

Jhoira pressed her lips together to hide her relief and put a quizzical look on her face. "Wasn't it?"

Tiana shrugged a little. "I thought it was to eradicate the Cabal from all of Dominaria. I mean, Belzenlok being dead is going to help, of course, but there are clerics all over the world that are going to try to hang onto their power."

Jhoira tilted her head. "You're right, of course. But that could take years."

Tiana met her gaze, and they both smiled as she answered, "Yes. Yes, I guess it could, couldn't it?"

It was late in the day when Jhoira stood on the court with Liliana. The spirits had dragged away most of the bodies, and Jaya had melted the Stronghold's doors closed. Not that Jhoira expected that would stop whoever decided to occupy the place next. The sky was just as overcast, but the rain had washed the court's pavement clean.

In front of the Stronghold's broken doors, Gideon was giving Teferi the Gatewatch oath while Chandra stood by. Karn and Jaya had agreed to join the fight against Bolas, but hadn't agreed to take the oath. Karn because he meant to leave soon to continue his effort to destroy New Phyrexia, and Jaya because, as she had said, "I'm not a joiner."



Oath of Teferi | Art by Wesley Burt

Liliana shook her head slightly and said, "Gideon and his oath. I don't know how Teferi keeps from laughing."

Jhoira smiled at her. "Did you laugh when you took it? Somehow I have trouble imagining that."

"I laughed on the inside." Liliana eyed her. "We couldn't have done this without you."

"Likewise." Jhoira nodded. "You'll go with them to fight Nicol Bolas now?"

"Yes. That was the deal I made with Gideon." Liliana rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "Though I'm rather looking forward to it now. Killing Belzenlok whetted my appetite."

Finally they were ready to leave, and Jhoira said her goodbyes to Teferi and Karn. She hugged Teferi and said, "I'd tell you to be careful, but I know you too well."

"I could say the same to you," he told her with a smile. "I'll return to visit you as soon as I can. Have a good time raining destruction down upon the Cabal."

She turned to Karn, and hugged him too, despite the hard edges of his metal body. "Take care. And remember the Phyrexians are in the past. You have a great future to look forward to."

Karn didn't comment on that, but said, "I too will return to visit you, as soon as we destroy Bolas."

Jhoira had said her goodbyes to the other Planeswalkers already. She waved, and climbed the ladder up to the *Weatherlight*'s deck.

She swung over the railing and signaled to Tiana at the wheel, and the ship curved away from the Stronghold and its smoking volcano. Shanna and Raff stood on the bow, looking into the distance, with Radha and the other warriors they were returning to their homes. As Arvad rolled up the ladder, Jhoira clapped him on the shoulder, and went to join the others.

As the *Weatherlight* sailed away into the clouds, Liliana was ready to be done with Dominaria. She stood with Gideon, Chandra, Jaya, Teferi, and Karn. They were finally bringing the help Jace and Ajani had asked for, but she didn't expect either to be pleased to see her.

They would just have to get over it; Liliana intended to stand over Bolas's corpse. And hopefully make it dance for her amusement, if anything was left of it when they were finished.

Gideon had the Blackblade slung over his shoulder, tucked into its scabbard and wrapped in canvas to hide it. It still radiated dark energy that Liliana could feel in her bones. Gideon glanced around at them all and said, "Are we ready?"

"We were all born ready," Teferi said, with an ironic smile. Chandra grinned and Jaya rolled her eyes. Karn just nodded.

Gideon left first, vanishing in a storm of gold light. Chandra and Jaya went next, in a brief conflagration of red flames, then Teferi in a blue whirlwind. Karn simply vanished with a sharp metallic sound.

And Liliana still stood on the pavement in the deserted court, the smoke-tinged breeze stirring her hair. She stared down at herself, baffled. She had meant to follow Gideon.



Swamp | Art by Titus Lunter

She tried to step out of the plane again, but again, nothing happened. "What How " she began in dawning horror, afraid she had somehow lost her spark without realizing it. Had it been the Blackblade? Too many uses of the Chain Veil?

Then she saw the dust in the court rise and swirl into a whirlwind. A dark form grew at the center of the maelstrom. "No," she breathed, as sick realization settled on her like iron chains. "Oh, no."

Nicol Bolas materialized out of the darkness, his huge scaled dragon form looming over her, the sheer weight of his presence drawing all the light and air out of her world.

“You really should have read the details of your pact more closely, Liliana. You seem unaware that with your demons dead, your contract defaults to its broker. *Me*.”

Liliana stood frozen, fury and dread closing her throat as a gratified smirk stole across Bolas’s face. That was why the lines of the pact hadn’t faded from her skin with Belzenlok’s death. The contract still controlled her, and now she belonged to an entity more vicious than any demon in all the planes of the Multiverse.

I thought I was setting myself free, she thought, the shock threatening to overwhelm her. *I was playing into his hands all along, making it possible for him to own me*. Everything she had done, every demon’s death, every battle, every betrayal, every manipulation. It was all leading to this, to enslavement by Nicol Bolas. And fool that she was, she had never suspected it.

She hardened her jaw. *But what if I disobey?*

As if he had plucked the thought from her mind, Bolas said, “No. If you disobey my orders in any way, the pact will kill you. You will age hundreds of years in a moment, a desiccated husk to be blown away on the wind.”

For a moment, Liliana considered it. It would be better to die than to serve Bolas; that she knew in her bones. But part of her refused to give up. There had to be a way out of this, a way to escape this fate. *You can’t free yourself if you’re dead*, she thought, cold resolve settling over her.

Bolas watched her with complacent satisfaction, confident his trap had made her helpless to resist. “Now come. We have work to do.” The sky split with lightning and the world warped around him as he planeswalked away.

Sick at heart, bound like a prisoner to a new incarnation of a fate she had schemed so long to cheat, Liliana followed in his wake.



In Bolas’s Clutches | Art by Zack Stella

The others stepped into the new plane, the darkness around them lit by the colored flashes of their appearances, as Gideon waited in growing consternation. “Where’s Liliana?” he said.

Chandra lifted a tiny fireball, driving the shadows back, revealing more of the alley they had arrived in. “Maybe she went to the wrong place?”

Jaya turned, studying the dark sky with narrowed eyes. “I don’t see any Planeswalker traces. I don’t think she got here at all.”

Teferi frowned and exchanged a worried look with Karn. “There may have been some trap we missed, something hiding at the Stronghold that attacked as we left.”

Karn nodded. “Urgoros was still unaccounted for. We thought it vanished when Belzenlok was killed, but perhaps not.”

Gideon was afraid they were right. “I’ll go back—” he began.

“Don’t bother.” Jace Beleren stepped out of a shadowy doorway. “I told you, she can’t be trusted. She never intended to come with you.”

“No, Jace.” Gideon shook his head in frustration. “She wouldn’t do that. She’s changed.”

“Yeah, Jace,” Chandra added, her forehead creased in worry. “She wanted Bolas dead, and she wanted to help kill him. She said she was going to dance on his corpse or something typical.”

“Don’t be so naive.” Jace’s gaze was hard as he looked around at them. “She used you, just like she uses everyone. Whatever she told you, it was a lie.”

Teferi eyed Jace skeptically. “She had plenty of opportunity to betray us, yet she risked her life over and over again.”

Jaya folded her arms. “She saved Jhoira when Yargle attacked the *Weatherlight*. I saw her. And, by the way, don’t call me naive, kid.”

“All because she needed you to kill her demon.” Jace shook his head, still certain. “You served your purpose and now she’s done with you. Look, I’m sorry you had to learn this for yourselves, but it’s the truth. Now we have to go. So much has happened here already. If we’re going to have a chance against Bolas, we have a lot of work to do.”

Jace turned away, walking back into the shadows. The others turned to Gideon. Teferi said, “One of us needs to return. If she’s trapped there—”

Gideon nodded sharply. “I’ll go. Wait for me here.”

When Gideon walked back onto the paving in front of the Stronghold’s broken doors, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting.

What he saw was an empty court under a hazy gray sky, stone and metal debris from the shattered gates still scattered around, just as they had left it minutes ago. Smoke drifted in the air, and there was no sign of movement, not even a stray spirit. No sign of Liliana.

Gideon narrowed his eyes and pivoted, searching for aether trails. After a moment he saw Liliana’s, leading away. She had left Dominaria, but she hadn’t followed him and the others.

It was an unexpectedly sharp blow to his heart. He thought she had changed, had been so sure of it. Even now, with the evidence of his own eyes, it was hard to believe. *She said she was coming with us. Why lie? She could have left any moment after Belzenlok was killed. Why wait while we liberated prisoners from the Stronghold?* It didn’t make sense.

But this was Liliana. Maybe at the last instant, she had changed her mind. Maybe, in the end, her old self had gotten the better of her.

Gideon hesitated, desperate for some sign, some hope, that Liliana hadn't betrayed him after all. But Jace was waiting, and he knew that plans were already in motion to attack Nicol Bolas. He needed to get back to the others.

Aloud, he said, "Wherever you are, Liliana, I hope you know what you're doing. And I hope I see you again. Truly."

Then he turned and walked away from Dominaria.