

Episode 6: Don't Die

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From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*

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Drumming wasn't really an art form in Meletis. Unlike so many other places on Theros, the drums of war had never been known to sound there; when there was a call to fight, it was set to the rhythm of pounding feet and clashing swords, not strikers on skins. Niko had nearly jumped out of their skin the first time they heard the drums of Kaldheim begin to pound, calling the people of the plane to war.

And right now, their head felt like one of those drums, being beaten so hard that it was physically nauseating. They groaned, trying to move. By shifting position slowly, moving only between the drumbeats, they were able to lift their head. From there, it was a simple thing to force their eyes to open, blinking through the pain.

They still couldn't move their hands or feet. Those were tied securely to the chair they had been positioned upon, feet pressed to the hard stone floor and wrists affixed to one another with ropes of rough hemp that bit into their skin when they tried to move their arms. They were well and truly caught.

Gritting their teeth through the ongoing pounding, they turned slowly, slowly to look around them. Nashi was tied to a chair to their left; the people responsible for securing the young nezumi had wrapped him in so much rope that he looked almost like a cocoon with a rat's head poking out the top. The image was somehow disturbing, and Niko looked away, faster than they intended to: the motion sent a new wave of pain splashing through their head, making their stomach roil at the same time. They swallowed a groan. If their captors hadn't noticed them waking up yet, they didn't want to tip them off.

The Wanderer was tied up to their right, her arms and legs bound in a manner like Niko's. There was a table a few feet beyond her, pushed up against the wall of the room they had all been moved to, and on it their weapons were arrayed, placed with ritualistic care. The wall itself was some sort of dark wood, raw enough to be weeping trails of red-gold sap that smelled of sugar and death.

The Wanderer's eyes fluttered. Niko risked another glance around, taking in the rest of the room. There was a granite plinth at the center, roughly as tall as Niko's waist, and a large stone altar against the far wall, streaked and stained with sap, and with blotches of something too dark to have come out of the walls. Niko shuddered.

Those hard, angular chrysalises they had seen in the previous room were here as well, hanging around the top of the walls in nests of cottony white silk, twitching occasionally as their occupants stirred, either deep in dreaming or preparing to awake.

Niko didn't want to be here when they hatched.

There were no other people in sight: the three of them were alone. Niko looked back to the Wanderer.

"Psst," they said.

She opened her eyes.

"Can you hear me?" they whispered.

"Yes," she replied, her own voice barely audible. "So may others. Be silent."

Niko frowned. She was right, but her tone didn't sit well with them. Not when their head was pounding and they had been betrayed by their only ally inside the House. Still, they could see how well she was secured to her chair; assuming they were similar, a few moments to regroup and try to figure out the knots wouldn't go amiss.

There didn't seem to be any slack in the ropes; Niko tugged to no avail before summoning a small shard, no longer than their pinkie finger, and beginning to saw at the ropes, making no real progress as the seconds ticked away. They glanced at Nashi again. His eyes were open, reflecting the dim, seemingly sourceless light that filled the room. He didn't look frightened. More resigned to whatever was about to happen.

"Nashi?" asked Niko. "Are you all right?"

"They're all gone," said Nashi. His voice was dull, almost hollowed out.

"The cultists? That's good. It gives us a few minutes to figure out what happens next."

"No. My friends. My mother. They're all gone." Nashi gave them a suddenly fierce look. "I came in here with four of the Reckoners I knew from back home. They wouldn't let me go alone. They were all smart, and fast, and dangerous, and they're *gone*. This House took them, but *I* led them here. Without me, they'd be safe with their families, and none of this would be happening."

"You said they wouldn't let you go alone. That means this isn't your fault."

"If I'm the reason, it's my fault," insisted Nashi. "When Mother's scroll vanished, I just—I couldn't refuse to follow her."

"You followed her, and they followed you," said Niko. "It sounds to me like the ones who stole your mother's vessel are the ones to blame."

"And joyously so," said a new voice. Niko stiffened, turning their head as far as the ropes allowed in a vain attempt to see behind them. It didn't work, but then, it didn't need to, as almost immediately, the head cultist walked between them and the Wanderer, still carrying his book. "The moth is lured to the light, but the light is blameless. The moth is only doing what it must. Instinct and hunger control all things. Blessed be the threshold, blessed be the flame."

A low murmuring broke out behind him, the other cultists echoing his words. Niko narrowed their eyes. They couldn't tell whether Winter's voice had been among the speakers.

"You are to receive a great benediction," said the head cultist. He was an unimposing figure, soft-spoken and of barely medium height, his spectacles clouded by tiny scratches. He stopped between his captives and the plinth, opening his book. "Your knowledge will be added to the great list, and with it we will guide the Devouring Father to his next feasting place. All things will know the light of his attention."

"What do you mean?" asked the Wanderer, speaking for the first time since cautioning Niko to silence.

The head cultist turned his attention to her, as three others walked between her and Niko, heading for the plinth. They were carrying a square box. When they put it down, the top snapped open, and Tamiyo's shade appeared.

"Mother!" cried Nashi.

The shadow of Tamiyo turned her face away.

"You carry the dust of as many worlds as there are rooms in paradise," said the head cultist, focusing on Niko. "Places that have not yet known the threshold, have not yet felt the flame. Through you, we will be led to them. Through you, our Father will be able to plant His foundations, and he will feast."

Niko stared at the man before tugging more fiercely against their ropes. Nothing budged.

"Stories are one thing, but to feast on the flesh of those who walked so very far—you are a blessing, and because this one," he turned his attention on Nashi, smiling serenely, "called you to us, we will grant him the gift of rebirth. His cocoon has been prepared, and he will live eternally in the Devouring Father's service."

Nashi bared his teeth. From behind them came a commotion, ending when Winter shoved his way to the front of the room, stopping directly in front of the head priest.

"And what about me?" he demanded. "You *promised* me—"

"I promised you what I promised my Marina, so many years ago," whispered a new voice. It was thin and wispy as the silk around the edges of the room, sliced into hundreds of layers that came together to form a terrible chorus. The pounding in Niko's head fell silent, extinguished by the whispering. No other sound could survive where that voice spoke.

The cultists dropped to their knees, all of them, bending to press their foreheads to the floor. Only Winter remained standing, although he didn't turn.

"I promised you your heart's desire," continued the voice. A slow illumination dawned in the shadows above them, emanating from the body of what appeared to be an enormous moth spun from the fabric of nightmares. His wings were melded with the walls around him, their substance dipping in and out of the stone like it had grown up around him, and the sight of him was accompanied by a frigid, frozen cold that sank into Niko's bones in an instant. The speaker turned his massive head, faceted eyes glinting as he looked solemnly at Winter.

"It's you," said Winter, tone caught between awe and horror.

Valgavoth didn't have the lips to smile, but he still managed to seem pleased as he nodded, feathered antennae twitching in time with the gesture. He extended one fibrous tendril of his own substance toward his high priest, nudging the man. It wasn't a kick. The priest still lifted his head and climbed to his feet, standing next to his god.

"Yes," said Valgavoth. "You know me. You have known me since I called to you in the darkness, for here I am the only source of light. You are the first since my Marina to answer my call with a proper sacrifice."

"Yes," whispered Winter.

"Four lives to secure your heart's desire. Four thresholds for me to cross."

Niko's head snapped up. "The friend you told me about in the woods," they said, making no effort to keep their voice low. "The one who's gone now. Your *best* friend."

"What about her?" asked Winter.

"There are only three of us."

Winter was silent.

"You sacrificed her to a monster for your own heart's desire."

"You'd do the same," said Winter. "Spend enough time lost in Duskmourn, and there's nothing you wouldn't do to find your freedom."

"Lies," snapped the Wanderer.

"Truth," said Winter. "When all hope is gone, only the truth remains." He returned his focus to Valgavoth. "I would have given anything to finally get out, so I gave something better."

"What?" asked Niko.

"I gave everything. Now let me go."

Valgavoth laughed, a twisting, tattered sound, and spread his wings as wide as their melding with the walls allowed. When he folded them again, there was a door set in the base of his body, the point where his abdomen met the top of the stairs leading deeper down into the flesh of the House.

This door was made of the same cherry wood as the others, the frame carved with moths and harvest wreaths, a full moon where the peephole should have been, the traceries of tentacles peeking out from around its edges. Winter looked at it like a starving man faced with a feast but didn't move. He looked to Valgavoth instead.

"I can go?" he asked. "You promise?"

"I keep my word," said Valgavoth. Winter rushed toward the door. Too quickly—he tripped on a crack in the floor and fell heavily, landing on hands and knees. Neither Valgavoth nor the cultists moved to help him as he pushed himself to his feet. They only watched, silently judgmental.

Niko strained against their bonds. They were still as tight as they had been in the beginning and showed no signs of slackening. From behind them, they heard the distinctive sound of wood slamming into flesh, accompanied by a yelp, and then a familiar voice drowned out everything else, as Tyvar boomed, "Bad form, to start the battle without us!"

A cultist flew past Niko to smash into the wall, clearly having been flung across the room, and a terrible figure appeared next to them. It was shaped like Zimone, but unlike Zimone, it had skin made of water-damaged, splintered wood and rusting nails in place of teeth. It reached for them with its horrible hands, fingers like crooked hinges and palms like broken shingles, and Niko tried to shy away, moving as far as the ropes would allow.

"Calm down," said the figure, and its voice was Zimone's, and the figure *was* Zimone, somehow transformed like the wickerfolk. She reached for them again, and this time they didn't move as she hooked those hinge-fingers under the first loop of rope and began to saw away at it, cutting the fiber simply by flexing her hand.

Another cultist flew across the room, as the air behind them was shattered by shouts and peals of laughter. Tyvar, it seemed, was still having the time of his life. "At least someone's having a good day," muttered Niko.

Zimone offered them a horrible smile, the expression rendered nightmarish by the unfamiliar angles of her face. "I don't think he knows *how* to have a bad day for very long," she said.

The ropes on Niko's arms dropped away as Zimone moved behind them, fumbling for their wrists. Valgavoth roared, flapping his wings and setting the walls around him shaking and twisting, the whole house seeming to spasm with a sudden terrible vitality. Winter lunged for the door again, only to stumble back as a cultist slammed into it, preventing him from getting it open.

The ropes on Niko's wrists loosened, and they pulled their hands free, whipping two shards out of the air and flinging them at the Wanderer. They sliced through the ropes holding her arms and legs to the chair, and she rolled out of the chair to the floor. Niko was ready with another shard, cutting her hands free as Zimone worked on the ropes holding their legs to the chair. The Wanderer stepped quickly and lightly over to the table with their weapons, recovering her sword.

Just in time: Valgavoth had stopped roaring and was spewing clouds of acidic white webbing into the air. The Wanderer sliced easily through the webs as she virtually danced across the floor to Nashi, cutting him free and pressing a small, hard object into his hand. "You can change your fate," she whispered, and then she was gone, charging toward the body of the massive demon moth.

Winter tried for the door a third time, only for one of Niko's shards to hit him squarely in the back and envelop him, sealing him away from the freedom he'd so craved. Niko glanced back to the sounds of the ongoing brawl.

Tyvar was holding his own against a half-dozen cultists, skin rippling from flesh to stone and back again so quickly that it was almost like watching a cloud skate across the sun. He was laughing. Niko turned back to Zimone.

A cultist grabbed for her, and she slashed at him with hinged fingers, slicing through his cheek and driving him back, his face gushing blood. She moved toward Tyvar, pulling the box from Niv-Mizzet around in front of her and beginning to rapidly flip switches. Once she was close enough, Tyvar touched her shoulder, and the normal composition of her body came flooding back, chasing the temporary horrors away.

The box immediately spilled a geometric cascade of blue and green lines into the air. They wrapped themselves around the nearest cultist and raced across his skin, multiplying exponentially, until he was swallowed by the light.

"Good capture!" shouted Tyvar encouragingly.

"I was top of my class in theoretical combat math," said Zimone. She pulled another cascade of lines from the box, lobbing it carelessly at Tyvar. When it struck his skin, it began to lace together into a sort of knotted armor, which deflected the next blow that would have hit him. Tyvar blinked, then beamed.

"Behold the power of math!" he proclaimed, turning and punching the cultist squarely in the face.

Valgavoth roared. The Wanderer had leapt up onto the stone altar, and was dueling the massive demon moth, slicing through his clouds of caustic webbing, blocking his attempts to strike her with clawed limbs. Her sword didn't cut through his deceptively spindly legs, but did knock them away from her, and as it absorbed more and more of the energy from his strikes, the blade began to glow a brilliant, blazing white.

Below her, Nashi scurried to the plinth, grabbing the box above which Tamiyo's image hung. He reached inside it, and as his fingers were about to close around her scroll, she turned to face him.

"Wait!" she cried.

Nashi froze.

"I'm here to save you," he said. "Mom, you have to let me save you."

"They've been stealing my stories, Nashi," she said. "Taking them apart and taking them away. I don't remember the things they stole from me. But I remember you. I will always, always remember you."

"Mom ..."

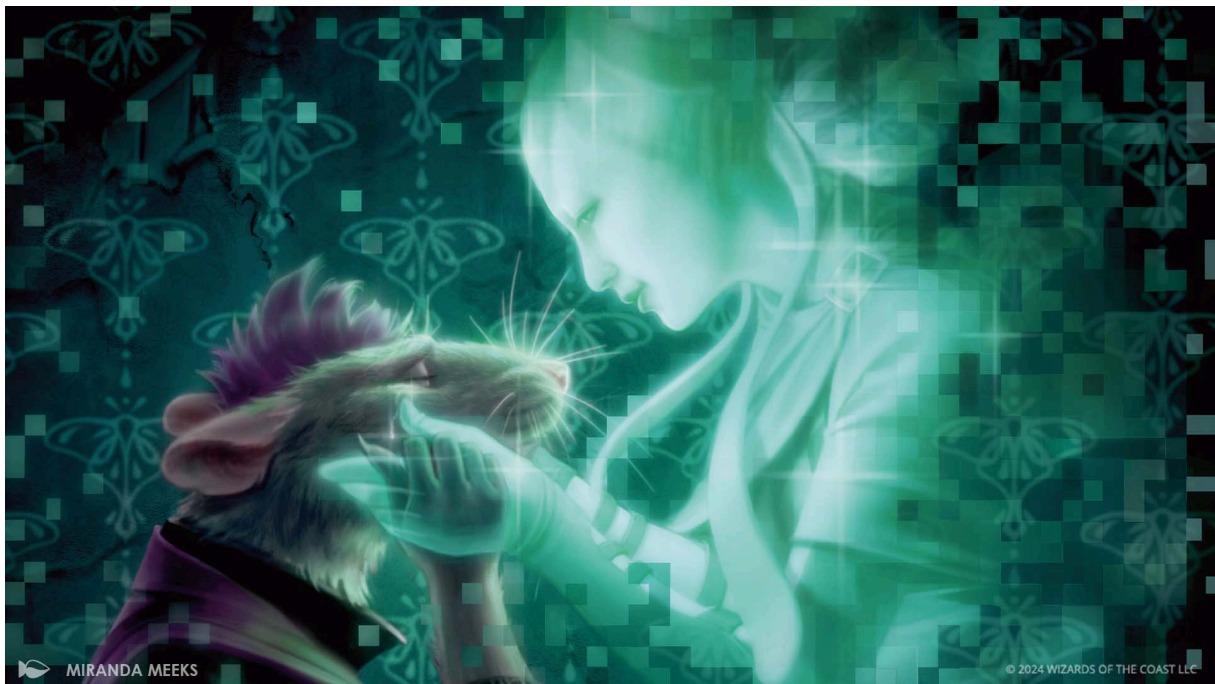
“Those stories were what let me exist in this form. They were my blood and breath and bones after all those things were lost, and now they’ve been taken. The people who took me have me connected to this ghost-trap to keep me here—that is the *only* thing keeping me here, Nashi. *They* are the only thing keeping me here. You can’t save me this time.”

“Mom. No.” Nashi looked at her, whiskers flat and ears pressed tight against his skull, quivering in his confusion and mystery.

“Oh, my sweetest boy, there are stories whose endings can be changed, and those that can’t. My ending was written years ago. Your mother—your real mother—loved you so, so much, Nashi, she loved you so much that the story of her love is one of the only ones I haven’t forgotten. When they tried to take it, they found that without it, the rest of me would unravel and fade away immediately. They made me call out to *you*, Nashi, because you were the story that hung in my heart. They made me lure you here, hunters trapping the moon, and I am sorry. I am so, so sorry.”

“Mom ...” Nashi’s tears overflowed his eyes. The fight around them had faded into a background of shouts and clashing weapons, less important than his mother’s flickering shade. “Please. I need you.”

“You can’t save me, but you don’t need to. You don’t need me, Nashi, not anymore. Look at what you’ve accomplished! You made a hero’s charge into the heart of a demon house to save the unsavable. And look at the people who came to help you, simply because you needed it. You are more loved than you can know. Now go, Nashi. Go, and be as spectacular as she always knew you would be.”



Art by: Miranda Meeks

Nashi held up the small object the Wanderer had pressed into his hand. “She told me I could change my fate. She told me ... I could ...”

“No, my love. It doesn’t reach back far enough for that. My book is closed; my tale is done. I only ask one thing more from you.”

“What?”

“Let me go.”

Nashi stared at her, silent and horrified.

"I still have stories they could steal from me. Please, love, please. Let me go, so the work that was my life won't be turned to evil any longer. Free me, dear one. Free me."

Nashi turned his face away, back toward the chaos behind him.

Niko was fighting their way to the door, flinging shards into the bodies of cultists and stepping over those Tyvar had already felled. Tyvar was still swinging with reckless abandon, finally in his element as he battled the seemingly endless hoard. Zimone followed close behind him, guarding his back with her magic and machine.

Valgavoth roared, wings flexing. The walls shuddered, and cellarspawn and nightmares spilled out of them, pouring into the room. Tyvar grabbed Zimone, and the horror of the House swept over her again, transforming her. The magic stopped spilling from her box. She shot Tyvar a wounded look.

"It's the only way to keep you safe," he explained.

"None of us are safe," snapped Zimone.

"True enough," said Tyvar, and turned to beat back the nightmare squid creature that had been flowing toward them, tentacles grasping at the air.

Niko grabbed for the doorknob—an unknown plane would be better than this. They could find an Omenpath to get them out. Valgavoth roared again, and the door was gone, falling to dust under Niko's fingers. They lifted their head to glare at the enormous moth demon, readying another shard.

The Wanderer was half wrapped in clinging white strands, her arms still free and sword still moving, but her mobility was much reduced by her predicament. Niko started toward her, only to be grabbed from the side. They turned and found themselves looking down the blade of a viciously hooked knife, only inches from their face.

"For the threshold!" shouted the cultist and stabbed ruthlessly down.

Niko felt the blade pierce their eye and continue through the thin barrier of their skull, slicing through muscle and bone with equal ease, until it penetrated the tissue of Niko's brain, disrupting thought and slicing memory away, until all was dark, and silence, and they were dying so far from Theros, they would never see the underworld, they would never reach the afterlife—

The world snapped like a tightened bowstring, and Niko was looking up at Valgavoth. They danced away before the cultist could grab them, slinging a shard that encased the man in gleaming magic. They were readying two more when they were grabbed from behind, yanked off balance.

With a roar of triumphant fury, Valgavoth ripped one wing partially out of the wall, knocking the Wanderer to the ground before it was pulled back into the wood and stone. He pushed her fallen sword away with a tendril, the ceiling seeming to dip to the floor as he leaned closer to address her.

"I will swallow everything you are, and I will unmake your world in my own image," he hissed, voice suddenly soft. "You lose."

"So do you!" yelled Nashi. Valgavoth looked at the young nezumi just in time to see him reach into the ghost-trap and lift Tamiyo's scroll free. She smiled at him, tears running down her translucent face, before she dissolved into moonlight and was gone.

"We don't need her," said Valgavoth. He turned his attention back to the pinned and struggling Wanderer. "Now I have all of you."

He opened his mouth, revealing a maw filled with teeth like broken needles and shards of glass, then leaned toward the Wanderer again, preparing to bite down.

There was a glimmer of blue-white light from the wall behind him, noticeable only because it was so out of place, and Valgavoth froze. He made a small choking sound and straightened again, filling the entire world. The House went still around him. He looked down at his chest. The blade of a katana protruded from it, glistening with ichor and hemolymph, glowing with bluish magical light.

Valgavoth tried to speak but made no sound.

The blade withdrew, leaving a leaking wound behind, and Valgavoth was jerked up as the webbing which supported him drew taut and yanked him toward the ceiling. The great demon's removal revealed Kaito, holding his katana in both hands and breathing heavily. Behind him on the wall was a door formed from blue-white light; the frame was covered in a pattern of interlacing triangles, stylized dragons, and tiny moths that somehow invoked hope, where the moths scattered throughout the House invoked only despair. The entire pattern blazed brightly, beating back the gloom.

The door slammed abruptly open, revealing a short hall on the other side, connecting to a second door. Proft appeared in the entryway, gesturing violently.

"Through here!" he shouted. "I can't hold this for long!"

Niko grabbed the Wanderer's sword, using it to cut her free of the cocoon before handing it back and pulling her to her feet. Together they ran for the door. Nashi followed, the empty shell of his mother's scroll under his arm. Across the room, Zimone pulled on Tyvar's arm and gestured to the others. He swept her off her feet, boosting her onto his shoulder as he ran after them.

They were almost there when a nightmare lashed out, clawed hand arcing toward Tyvar's head. Zimone screamed. Half a dozen shuriken slammed into the hand, then pulled themselves free and flew back to Kaito, reassembling into his sword as he nodded to Tyvar and stepped through the door.

Tyvar dove through, Zimone carried in his arms, and the door slammed shut behind them.

"Hurry, hurry," said Proft, gesturing for the others to move quickly down the short hall. "This space isn't exactly stable."

"What is it?" asked Niko.

"An artificial Omenpath," said Kaito. "My spark, Proft's mind magic, Aminatou's fate-twisting, and a piece of the House that I took with me when I had to planeswalk away. As soon as Proft lets it go, it will dissolve back into the Blind Eternities and be lost. I'd rather we not be lost with it."

Nashi stopped walking.

The others were almost to the second door before the Wanderer looked back, frowning.

"Nashi?" she asked.

Nashi looked at the empty scroll in his hands. "Your body is on Kamigawa, with us," he told it. "But your spirit belongs to the Blind Eternities. I know that. I hope you can rest now. I hope you know you did the right thing. Your story's done, but mine's just starting. I love you."

He put the scroll down on the hallway floor and ran after the others, stepping with them out into the light of the Ravnican afternoon.

Proft was the last one to exit. As soon as the rest of them were free, he made a sharp gesture and the door slammed shut, vanishing in a spray of white light shaped like tiny, glittering moths.

"You can put me down now," said Zimone.

"Sorry," said Tyvar, unrepentantly.

"Tyvar, what are you *wearing*?" asked Kaito.

Tyvar looked at his vest, then shrugged. "Zimone said it would help me hide within the House. But there's no need for hiding now."

He shrugged out of the vest, looking to where the Wanderer and Kaito were standing with Nashi and Aminatou, Yoshimaru dancing around them in the ecstasy of reunion, his plumed tail waving wildly.

"It seems all has been revealed," said Tyvar, almost philosophically.

Valgavoth dragged himself down from the ceiling, looking around the wreckage of the ceremonial chamber. Bodies of cultists littered the ground; the cellarspawn had already rotted where they fell, and the nightmares were retreating, unable to find any fear to feed upon.

The wound in the great demon's chest was still oozing viscous, unspeakable fluids, and Valgavoth hissed. He would need to feed, then return to his cocoon to heal. Life would renew him, and the stories his faithful had harvested would set anchors for his questing lures. All he needed was patience, and the prey would come. The prey always came.

And not all of his prizes had escaped him. He reached into the attic above him, wrapping a tendril around a squirming, shivering bundle of orange fur and pulling it down into view. The creature snarled and bared its teeth. Valgavoth gave it a good shake, until it stopped trying to threaten him. This thing was valuable. It would serve him well.

Soon enough. Right now, he needed to stem the bleeding. He looked around the chamber, seeking a cultist with even a flicker of life remaining, and paused at the sight of Winter, huddled against the wall where the door to the cursed moon's benighted land had been opened and abandoned. The man was loose, somehow, and unarmed. He would do well.

Winter caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Valgavoth's tendrils extending toward him. He screamed and scrambled to his feet, but not quickly enough; they caught him around the waist, pulling him off his feet to hang suspended in the air, helpless.

"I promised you freedom," said Valgavoth, in a voice like the creaking of an ancient foundation, heavy and old. "I will give you freedom. Of a kind."

Pulling Winter higher to his leaking, punctured chest, Valgavoth melted into the ceiling, and all in the House was silence.

The Wanderer stood on the edge of the courtyard, Yoshimaru to one side, Kaito to the other, watching as Nashi spun the story of their adventures to a crowd of rapt youngsters. "He has a gift," said the Wanderer.

"Yes, he does," said Kaito. "None of these kids are going to go opening mysterious doors."

Eyes glinting with mischief, the Wanderer looked at him. "Would a little horror story have stopped you, back in the day?"

Kaito laughed.

Nashi glanced around, smiling at the pair, then returned to his story. Yoshimaru pranced in place, tail wagging, then lit out across the courtyard to the group of children, flopping to the grass next to Aminatou, who ruffled his fur with one hand as she continued to listen. The others had gone with Zimone back to Strixhaven; Tyvar and Niko had seemed excited about the prospect of a game called “Mage Tower.” For a moment, they could pretend that everything was right in the Multiverse. That everything was okay.

At the very least, it was a beautiful day on Kamigawa.

With Niv-Mizzet’s mapping project finished and the Omenpaths largely secured, Proft and Etrata had been freed back to their normal duties, which for Proft meant late nights in his mental recreation of his idealized office, studying the evidence of his latest case. A flawless recreation of a broken statue was laid out in front of him in shimmering blue pieces, positioned like a jigsaw puzzle with several pieces missing, precisely as he had seen it earlier that day.

He didn’t notice when the blue-white surface of the wall behind him began to subtly distort, the shape of a doorframe slowly appearing out of the shelves and photographs. As it finished forming, the space at the center smoothed, becoming a door engraved with white-winged moths. The eyespots on their wings were narrowed, seeming to glare at him out of the image.

Even more slowly than it had appeared, the door swung open, and a cool wind blew through the office. Proft stiffened.

When he looked around, there was nothing there.