

Trust

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Five Planeswalkers have come to Amonkhet to slay a dragon. As the Gatewatch, they had sworn an oath to protect the Multiverse from the threats that spanned the Blind Eternities, and the dragon Planeswalker Nicol Bolas was perhaps the greatest such threat. So they came to Amonkhet—a world of blasted sand and terrible monsters, exactly the hellscape they had expected. Until a god appeared, saved them from sandwurms, and led them in the direction of a city. What kind of city could prosper under Bolas’s reign? And what kind of god could live under his oppressive claw?



Gods? Here?

Gideon had been prepared for many possibilities in the planar lair of Nicol Bolas. To see gods wading amidst the horrors of the desert had not been among them. Were they the pawns of Bolas—was he so powerful that he could wield divine forces as his agents? Or were they an immortal force of opposition to Bolas and his power on this world, hunted by the monstrous agents of the dragon? Either possibility would lend weight to Ajani's warning about the sheer power of the dragon Planeswalker.

He paused in the slog through the shifting desert sand and rubbed his temples. Jace and Chandra were engaged in some light-hearted banter, egged on with the occasional sarcastic remark from Liliana, and the noise was starting to worm its way behind his eyes and put pressure on his brain. Or perhaps it was the dry heat and the harsh, unrelenting sunlight.

He scowled at Liliana's back as she walked past him, smirking at the success of her efforts to agitate Chandra and fluster Jace. She had pulled them out of the fire on Innistrad, no doubt. But since then she had been nothing but contrary and mocking. She had no sense of what it meant to be part of a team. She was just along for the ride.

And why not? he thought. *We're all in this for our own reasons. It's so damn messy—all of us, all our emotions and drives and goals.*

He felt a cool hand on his arm, and he took a deep breath before looking down to smile at Nissa. The pressure on his brain eased a little, and without a word he and the elf resumed their trek through the sand.



Art by Volkan Baga

The shimmering dome they'd seen from afar was close now. Sand piled up around it, blown by storms against the magical barrier. Worse, the wall was lined with . . .

"More zombies!" Liliana exclaimed. She sounded much more cheerful about it than Gideon felt. The desiccated creatures stood motionless in the sand, peering into the city beneath the dome.

He quickened his steps to catch up to the others. "Liliana, you get the zombies out of the way, then I'll try to break through the dome."

Jace arched an eyebrow at him.

"Uh, that's my suggestion, anyway. Other ideas?" Gideon reminded himself that he wasn't the general of this little Planeswalker army. Jace, at least, expected to have a say in leadership decisions.

And Liliana would do whatever she wanted in any case.

"It might be possible to simply break through," Jace said. "But given the things we've seen in this desert, I suspect that barrier is very strong. Assuming it's meant to keep sandwurms out and not to keep people in."

"Do you think you can find a way to bypass the magic?" Gideon asked.

"Of course I can. But I'll know more when I actually have a chance to examine it." Jace looked over his shoulder at Nissa, then his eyes glimmered with blue light, suggesting he had just begun a telepathic conversation with Nissa that Gideon was not privy to.

Messy, Gideon thought again.

What was *not* messy was their work as a team once they reached the shimmering magical veil. Liliana and Chandra cleared a path through the zombies, Jace and Nissa put their heads together and cast a spell, and a hole a little wider than Jace's outstretched arms opened to admit them. Gideon was the first one to step through the hole and enter a city that once again defied all his expectations of what Bolas's lair would be.



Art by Tyler Jacobson

He stood at the outskirts of town, where lush fields stretching off to his left abutted a sprawl of majestic stone buildings, wide streets, and slender obelisks. He couldn't see the god whose path they had followed here, but the Gatewatch's arrival had attracted attention: perhaps a dozen people, gathered in clumps at a safe or respectful distance, watched them carefully.

"Hello!" Gideon said, holding up a palm and stepping forward with a broad smile, even as his mind raced, trying to think of what he could tell these people about himself and his friends.

And about Liliana, he thought. How do I explain the way she commands the zombies with a wave of her hand?

His greeting was answered, not by one of the people nearby, but with a flap of wings in the air above him. Looking up, he saw a winged man, with a crane-like head atop an otherwise human body—an aven, he supposed, though without the hawk- or owl-like features of the ones he'd known on Bant so many years ago. Rather than alight and address him, though, the aven flew past him to the iridescent wall they'd passed through.

Jace was still holding the passage open for Nissa, and Liliana's attention was still focused on keeping the desert zombies from following them into the city. All three of them started in surprise when the aven squawked at them, "What are you doing?" He landed right beside Jace and nudged him with the butt of his staff—a staff topped with a pair of horns much like the ones still visible on the horizon, by the second sun. "Get out of the way so I can repair—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Jace let his hands fall to his sides, and the hole he had opened in the magical wall sealed itself back up.

"—the Hekma," the aven finished. He looked at Jace, blinked slowly, then let his long beak bob down and back up again as he took the stranger all in, from his pale skin and strange blue tattoos to his equally strange, equally blue boots. The aven took a step backward, then gave each of them a similar examination, lingering particularly on Chandra's red hair and Nissa's glowing green eyes.

“Hello,” Gideon said again. He had to work harder to force a smile this time, given the aven’s horned staff.

“What are you *wearing* ?” the aven said.



Art by Jakub Kasper

Liliana laughed out loud, and Gideon shot her a frown.

“*Let me handle this*, “ Jace whispered in his mind, while he stepped forward to address the aven. “Trust me,” he said, “clothes like this are the height of fashion in . . . “ He frowned. “. . . In the district of Sef?”

As a rule, Gideon wished Jace wouldn’t go prying into other people’s heads. In this circumstance, though, it was a gift, allowing him to say exactly what the aven expected him to say.

“What were you doing in the desert?” the aven said. “And what did you do to the Hekma?”

Jace turned and looked at the iridescent barrier. “Really? You haven’t learned this technique yet . . . vizier of the . . . Hekma Guard that you are? Well, of course, that’s why I’m here in the . . . Nitin district, to teach you. With Kefnet. Of course.”

“P—perhaps I—” the aven stammered.

“Perhaps you should summon Temmet,” Jace said. “He’ll know what to do.”

The aven nodded quickly, then spread his wings and flapped toward the heart of the city.

“Who’s Temmet?” Chandra said.

“Some sort of authority figure,” Jace said. “I’m sure you’ll love him.”

Chandra snorted.

“Listen,” Jace continued. “This is tricky. Vizier Eknet there had absolutely no conception of a place other than this city. That’s why I told him we’re from another district. We didn’t cross the desert from somewhere else—as far as these people know, there is nowhere else. Let alone an infinite expanse of other places.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to open their eyes,” Chandra said.

Gideon shook his head. “No. We shouldn’t draw attention to ourselves any more than we need to, at least until we know what we’re up against. Coming in and upsetting their entire view of the world is not going to help us find and fight Bolas.”

“And our friend Eknet is already suspicious,” Jace added. “I didn’t pry deep enough to be sure what he’s suspicious of, exactly.”

“What about Bolas?” Liliana said.

“I didn’t see anything about Bolas,” Jace said. “Not in his immediate thoughts.”

Nissa pointed in the direction the aven had flown off. “That must be Temmet,” she said.

“Can’t be,” Chandra said. “He’s what, like fourteen?”

“Shh,” Gideon hissed, turning to face the approaching figure.

He was young—probably closer to sixteen, Gideon figured—but he carried himself with poise and confidence. *And the balance of a well-trained soldier*, Gideon thought. *Or maybe a dancer*, he amended.



Art by Anna Steinbauer

“Hello,” Gideon said, mustering what little friendly cheer he had left.

And for the third time he was mostly ignored, as the young man turned his attention—as young men often did—to Liliana. “Good morning,” he said with a small bow. “I am Temmet. Vizier Eknet said . . . Well, what he said didn’t make very much sense.”

Gideon and Jace shared a look. “*Best I could do*,” Jace said in Gideon’s mind.

“*Not good enough*,” Gideon growled back, though he wasn’t sure Jace was still listening. “*This is about to get bad*.”

Liliana returned Temmet's bow and began slowly winding him around her little finger. "No," she said, "we had some trouble explaining to him the particular nature of our circumstance. I'm so grateful you've come to help sort this out."

The young man's chest puffed out ever so slightly, but despite Liliana's flattery, his voice was tight with suspicion. "Of course. What is the problem?"

"We have been out in the desert for some time," she said, "on a special mission for the Horned One." She gave the slightest nod in the direction of the great horns looming above the cityscape.

Temmet's eyes grew wide, and he spun to look at the horns. "May his return come quickly," he said under his breath, as if by reflex.

His return? Gideon thought. So he's not here. Did Liliana lie to us?

"Things here seem to have changed somewhat in our absence," she continued. "Would you be so kind as to be our guide into the city?"

"And may we be found worthy," Temmet said, frowning at her.

Liliana tilted her head at the apparent non sequitur, but Jace stepped in, repeating the young man's words. "Apologies," he added. "The sun has befuddled our brains."

"It's something they say," Jace's voice whispered in Gideon's mind. *"Whenever Bolas is mentioned. Play along."*

"Yes," Liliana said. "All the more reason we could use the assistance of such a knowledgeable and important young man as our guide."

Gideon saw suspicion in the young man's eyes. *This is all wrong,* he thought. *Any second now, he'll call for our arrest.*

At last, Temmet nodded. "Of course. But I believe you will find things haven't changed as much as you think. All things are ordered as the God-Pharaoh—may his return come quickly—" He repeated the formula pointedly this time, and paused to make sure they responded.

"And may we be found worthy," Jace muttered, and the others followed.

"—commanded before his departure, so we will be prepared."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Liliana said with a smile.



Art by Jonas de Ro

Temmet led them down broad, straight avenues past square homes, tall obelisks, and massive monuments that often defied gravity. Wide canals carried water from a huge river he saw in the distance, and verdant gardens flourished in defiance of the desert beyond the magical barrier. The city had the atmosphere of a park, smelling of fresh water and sun-warmed stone. Always on the horizon, the twin curving horns of Nicol Bolas—the so-called God-Pharaoh—stood as a reminder of Gideon’s purpose here, with the smaller second sun hovering perpetually, impossibly, just to the left of the horns.

The people of the city were a diverse lot. Besides humans and more aven, he spotted ram-headed folk similar to the minotaurs of Theros, jackal-headed people, and serpentine folk with cobra heads and no legs. What most caught Gideon’s attention, though, was their activity. He saw no shops, no artisans at work, no one performing manual labor of any kind. Instead, they were engaged in combat drills, athletic training, and study—the work of soldiers—and always in groups of about a dozen. Everyone appeared to be at the height of physical fitness.

Is that what Temmet meant when he spoke of being prepared for the God-Pharaoh’s return? Gideon wondered.

“What are they training for?” Chandra blurted as they passed a group of people paired off in wrestling matches.

Temmet followed her gaze. “I believe those initiates are preparing for the Trial of Strength,” he said. He nodded appreciatively. “I suspect Rhonas will find most of them worthy.”

With a stern glance, Gideon cut Chandra off before she asked another question. Temmet’s answer made it clear he expected the strangers to know what the people were doing.

Then, finally, Gideon saw laborers—of a sort. Temmet was saying something about the majestic monument they were building, but Gideon’s attention was focused on the figures hauling a large block of red sandstone toward the ongoing construction. Wrapped head to toe in white linen, the figures were shriveled enough to convince him that they could not be alive.

More zombies? he thought, imagining the delight that Liliana must have been feeling. *Mummies, dried out and preserved?*

Indeed, Liliana couldn't keep the enjoyment from her voice as she observed, "I have always been impressed with such a wise use of the dead."

"Indeed!" Temmet exclaimed. "The Anointed perform all the work here, so the living need do nothing but train. What system could be more perfect?"

"I can't imagine a better one," Liliana said, shooting a grin over her shoulder at Gideon.



Art by Florian de Gesincourt

They turned down an avenue, and once again Gideon found himself in the presence of a god.

Even before he saw her, he felt all his unease and anxiety melt away and a calm settle on his heart, accompanied by a warm shiver that started in his spine and awakened every nerve in his body.

Compared to the horizon-walking gods of Theros, or even to the godlike Eldrazi titans, the cat-headed god was small, but she towered over the people around her, whose heads didn't reach to her knees. She wore white and gold and held an enormous golden bow. At first, Gideon thought her feline face was a mask made from gold, but then the pale blue eyes blinked, and then the mouth bent into a warm smile and the god knelt to the ground.

The god . . .

Knelt.

Gathered before her were a group of young children, no more than ten. Each one held a staff in both hands and stood in a combat stance. The god ever so gently tapped one child's foot—yes, his stance was too wide.

"Oketra will know what to do with you," Temmet said, starting down the avenue toward the god. His voice suggested a threat, but Gideon could feel no threat in her presence.



Art by Chase Stone

In his youth, Gideon had once encountered the sun god, Heliod, who had put a hand on the young man's shoulder and invited him to become the sun god's champion. But that hadn't been Heliod's true form—his divinity was veiled, his statue reduced. Gideon hadn't even recognized him until he compared the man's likeness to that of a statue of the god.

This god was different. Even if this towering body was not her true form, her divinity was in no way veiled. Gideon felt it in every nerve; it shimmered at the edge of his vision as he gazed at her, and rang in his ears when she spoke. As Temmet led them closer, Gideon could see the adoration and devotion on the faces of the people around the god—the training children, the older ones supervising the exercise, and the others who appeared to have gathered just to be in the presence of the god.

If I could feel such devotion again . . . He shook his head. *How could I trust a god again?*

The mission Heliod had set before him had led to the death of Gideon's closest friends, his Irregulars. The god of death, Erebos, had destroyed them with a flick of the wrist, punishing Gideon's hubris. The idea of putting his trust in such a divine being ever again felt like a betrayal of their memory.

Then she looked at him. Reflexively, gladly, he opened himself to her gaze and she *saw* him. Still on one knee, she reached toward him and placed one finger on his chest.

"You're one of mine, Kytheon Iora," she said. She held him transfixed with her gaze while he felt his spirit burn with an incandescent glow. There was nothing else, nowhere else, no one else in all the endless planes of the Multiverse in that moment but himself and the god—Oketra, he knew her name as she knew his, his original name. She was unity, order, solidarity; she was hearts joined in common purpose and bodies working in cooperative action. Nothing about her was messy. She was precisely what she should be and it was good and right that she should be here, now, with him.

Then she looked away and he almost lost his balance. She cast her gaze over his companions and her smooth golden brow furrowed ever so slightly. "The rest of you, your fate has not been decided. Not yet."

She was finished. With perfect, smooth grace she rose to her feet, and as one Gideon and all the people around her fell to the ground and worshiped her—not out of fear or obligation, but because love for her swelled in their hearts.



Art by Cliff Childs

She walked away then, and the sunbaked air felt cold. Gideon stood and watched her until she rounded a corner and he couldn't see her any more. Then he stared in wonder at a towering temple he hadn't seen before, carved in her divine likeness, until Chandra shoved him.

Temmet was speaking to him now, no longer to Liliana, and for the first time the young man was smiling at him. Gideon tried to remember what Temmet had been saying, but he kept talking: "... two rooms nearby that have just become available. I apologize that we do not have more space at the moment. Follow me, please."

Gideon's head was swimming. They had come here to slay a dragon, and instead they had met a god. Jace and Liliana and Ajani had described Nicol Bolas as the most wicked of villains, and this was his home that he supposedly made, but he could not have made *her*. Not if he was as evil as they said.

Temmet led them to a nearby building. He pointed out a sort of mess hall or refectory inside, encouraging them to join the other residents for meals there. Then he led them up a long set of stone stairs outside, leading to an overhanging balcony that ran the length of the building. He opened two doors and gestured at the cozy rooms inside. "I trust you will be comfortable here."

Liliana swept into one of the rooms and closed the door without a word. Jace, Nissa, and Chandra went into the other, Jace protesting loudly. Gideon, still half-dazed, stayed on the balcony, looking out over the city. His heart leaped at the sight of Oketra walking down the street. The people parted to let her pass, but some of them threw flowers at her feet while others shouted her name. For a second time, Gideon watched until she entered her temple and the great doors closed to block his view.



Art by Wesley Burt

He lingered there, enjoying the view of the city, the light of both suns shimmering on the river and the canals, and the iridescent haze of the protective dome, the Hekma. The great horns on the horizon, next to the second sun, were the most prominent reminder of the apparently absent Nicol Bolas, but from this vantage he could see other expressions of the same two-horned symbol: a carving at the top of an obelisk, the negative space between two halves of a huge monument, even a row of them along the outside of the balustrade he was leaning on. He couldn't reconcile the city's obvious devotion to their God-Pharaoh with what he had been told of the dragon Planeswalker—and what he had encountered in Oketra.

"Heya, Gids." Chandra emerged from the room and stood beside him at the railing.

With a smile, he clapped a hand on her shoulder and they looked out over the city together.

She pulled away and looked up at him with a grin. "So—what did she call you?"

"Kytheon," he said. "Kytheon Iora." The name felt unfamiliar in his own mouth. "That . . . was my name. On Theros. A long time ago."

"Kytheon, Gideon. Not too far off."

"No. People on Bant heard it wrong or couldn't say it right and it just sort of stuck. Gideon's my name now."

"Nah, Gids is your name, as far as I'm concerned."

Gideon laughed, shaking his head, and turned back to the city.

Chandra's voice was suddenly more serious. "So what *is* a god, actually?" He blinked, and she rushed ahead. "I mean, are they like angels? Or Eldrazi? Or just really big people? Liliana said that she and Bolas were like gods once—are they Planeswalkers?"

Gideon frowned. He hadn't seen evidence of any gods on Kaladesh, at least not like the ones on Theros, so he supposed it made sense that she would ask the question. But it was still a hard question to answer. He leaned on the balustrade and scratched at a sideburn.

"Nissa used to talk about the soul of Zendikar," he mused.

"She used to talk *to* it, yeah. I think she misses it. Was that a god?"

"Maybe, sort of. I'm not sure. I think gods are part of the fabric of a plane, sort of like that. But they embody an aspect of the plane, like the sun or the harvest. Only they're also *people*. They think, they talk . . ." He paused, thinking again of his experience with Helioid. "And on Theros, at least, they can be just as petty, vindictive, and whimsical as humans. And care even less for the value of human life."

"You think the cat-god is different."

"I'm pretty sure she is."

She laughed. "I don't know, the gods of Theros sound a lot like cats."

"Oketra is . . . she embodies an *ideal*, not something like the sun. She is solidarity—she's all about working together, being part of something bigger than yourself."

Chandra turned around and leaned her elbows on the balustrade, looking back at the rooms where their companions were arguing about the sleeping arrangements. "Well, that part I understand at least."

Gideon nodded. That's what the Gatewatch was—an acknowledgement that being a Planeswalker meant more to them than exerting their power and following their whims across the Multiverse.

"But if gods are part of the plane," Chandra went on, "and Bolas made this plane like Liliana said, I guess I still don't get how you can be so keen on the cat-god."

"Didn't you feel anything? When we met her?"

"I'm pretty sure that was a special moment between you two."

Their eyes met, then she looked away and Gideon was struck once again by how complicated, how confusing, how messy people could be.



Art by Grzegorz Rutkowski

Shouts in the street below grabbed his attention. He scanned the cityscape, looking for the source of the agitation—so seemingly out of place in this tranquil and lovely city. The other Planeswalkers joined them on the balcony.

It was Nissa who finally pointed out the origin of the commotion. A lone human figure, a woman, was running through the crowd toward them, pushing people and what Temmet had called the Anointed out of her way, causing as much chaos as she could. Behind her, a gang of soldiers (including a towering minotaur) were gaining on her despite the disruption. Most of the shouts were coming from the woman, but at this distance Gideon couldn't make out the words.

Chandra was already starting down the stairs. "We have to help her!"

Gideon leaped after her and blocked her path. "Hold on, hothead." She didn't, but instead ducked under one of his outstretched arms. He spun and caught her around the waist. "Remember what I said about not drawing attention to ourselves?"

She kicked his shin and he set her down gently. "But she's in *trouble*," she said.

"Probably for good reason. We don't know. It doesn't make sense to jeopardize our mission when we don't even know what's going on."

The woman was close now, but her pursuers were gaining on her. "It's all a lie!" she shouted as she ran. "The trials are a lie! The gods lie! The hours are a lie! Free yourselves!"

Gideon put a hand on Chandra's shoulder before she could start down the stairs again. He yanked his hand away when her shoulder grew suddenly hot.

"Do you hear her?" Chandra said. "She's a freedom fighter!"

"We're not on Kaladesh anymore," Gideon said gently.

"No, we're in *Nicol Bolas's house*!"

One of the pursuers managed to hook a curved staff around the woman's foot, and she sprawled on the ground. In an instant, the soldiers were on her, holding her arms and hauling her to her feet.

"You'll see!" she shouted. "The return will bring only devastation and ruin!" Then the minotaur's hand clamped over her mouth and her shouting ceased.



Art by Aleksí Briclot

To her credit, Chandra stayed on the stairs, though Gideon could feel the heat of her anger coming off her in waves. "We should have helped her," she muttered.

"Look," Gideon said, putting himself in her line of sight. "We'll ask some questions. Quietly. We'll figure out what's going on, what lies she was talking about, and we'll help her if that turns out to be the right thing to do. I promise."

"And what if your precious cat-god is the one lying?"

"She's not."

"So much for asking questions. Seems you already know the truth."

"I don't know about the woman, or the trials, or the hours. But there is no deception in Oketra."

"You seem very sure of that," Jace said, joining them on the stairs.

"Don't you agree?" Gideon said. "Surely you were reading her mind the whole time."

Jace shook his head. "I make it a practice to avoid peeking into brains that are . . . bigger than mine, unless it proves necessary."

"Chandra is right, Fearless Leader," Liliana said with a smirk. "The only gods I've ever known of were Planeswalkers with pretensions of divinity. Full of lies."

Gideon pushed past them, back up the stairs. "You don't know what you're talking about," he said. "None of you."

He stopped short on the top stair, face to face with young Temmet.

"I'm sorry for the disturbance," Temmet said. "An unfortunate incident."

Chandra was beside the young man in a flash, and she grabbed his shoulder and wheeled him to face her. "Unfortunate incident? What was that about? What did she do?"

So much for asking questions quietly, Gideon thought.

Temmet shrugged. "She proved herself unworthy of life among us."

"What does that mean?" Chandra demanded.

Gideon saw Temmet's eyes narrow, suspicion returning to his gaze. Clearly, Chandra should have understood this—which meant that it was not an uncommon occurrence.

"I'm afraid I don't know the exact nature of her crime," Temmet said. "But those were viziers of Bontu pursuing her, and if I'm not mistaken, her crop was supposed to undertake the trial of Bontu today. Perhaps there was an incident at the temple." He shook his head. "And her crop showed such promise."

Gideon steered Chandra away from the young man. "Thank you," he said to Temmet. "I think we should rest now."

"Indeed," Temmet said.

Gideon led Chandra into their room, and the others followed.

"Now what?" Nissa said. "I don't know what to make of any of this."

"We have a lot to sort out," Gideon said.

"Her *crop*," Liliana said. "As if they were meant to be *harvested*?"

Jace nodded. "He was thinking of a group of about a dozen people, who've been working together for a long time. They went through three trials together, whatever that means."

Chandra flopped face-down on one of the three beds in the room.

"Rest does seem like a good idea," Nissa said. She sat on a different bed.

"Right," Gideon said. "We'll sort it all out in the morning."

"Whatever you say, General, sir," Liliana said. She swept out the door and into the neighboring room.

"Am I the only one wondering why Liliana gets a whole room to herself?" Jace said.

Gideon shrugged and sat down in a corner, leaving the third bed for Jace.



Art by Noah Bradley

Sleep eluded Gideon as he tried to think through the tangled mess of it all—the revolt on Kaladesh, Tezzeret and his planar bridge, Nicol Bolas and the plane he supposedly made, the return of the God-Pharaoh, the lies of the hours. He always thought better when he was moving around, so he left the room quietly and wandered through the city in the weird half-light of the second sun.

He found Oketra outside her temple, just as the larger sun broke above the horizon.

“What are you seeking, Kytheon Iora?” she asked him, kneeling again.

Answers, he thought. *Meaning. Stability. Faith.*

“You,” he said.