
Episode 5 Broken Oaths

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Child Kellan to the castle ruins comes. Though his and Ruby's deeds have merited them the recent gift of ponies, he does not feel heroic astride his new steed. Far from it. As he surveys the once-proud hills and valleys around Castle Ardenvale, all he feels is resignation.

"Are you ready?" he asks Ruby.

She's atop her own pony, kitted in her namesake color, her cloak billowing out over its flank. There is good reason for such showmanship: a blade of eternal ice hides beneath the fabric. Hylda found Ruby's request for a sword "as big as she was" endearing rather than ridiculous. With the last bit of the crown's magic she'd granted Ruby the boon—and Ruby was only too happy, in most cases, to brag about it.

She is not bragging about it now. Who could, seeing the gloom upon Kellan's face? "Yeah, I am. But if you need more time to talk about it—"

"I don't," Kellan says. "We're going to do the right thing, and that's that."

Nary an enemy challenges them along the way to Ardenvale's gates. An eerie quiet rolls across the plains. Kellan's felt this before in the lead-up to a storm, the livestock all retreating hours before the people knew why.

When they see the battered state of the doors before them it is a sensible thing, a reasonable one: the proverbial storm that will consume them has torn the door from its hinges; the rotted, corrupted heart of the curse has eaten away at the wood; the dreamers that lurk behind it are the nightmares that plagued Kellan during their journey here.

This is not a place of succor or rest, nor a place of glory.

It is a place where wounds fester.

Kellan doesn't want to enter it. But he has given his word that he will, and something in his blood has affixed itself to this oath like enamel to a knight's shield.

"We can't go through the sleeping guards," he says. "We'll just be hurting them."

Ruby raises a brow. "Got a better idea?"

Kellan reaches in his cloak. In his hand, held aloft: the second bottle of frogification Troyan lent them.

Ruby grins. "You know, I like the way you think," she says. "But this time, *you* hold onto *me*."

There is something in Ruby's smile that reminds Kellan of better times. "All right, all right. Just bring us down easy."

"No promises," Ruby answers.

Kellan lashes the horses to a post. With two sacks of feed, they'll be set for the rest of the day—hopefully he and Ruby won't need any more time than that. After giving the horses a quick goodbye, he meets Ruby at the base of the castle walls.

They're in the air seconds later. Ruby isn't one to wait around for a cue.

Her landing skills are better than Kellan's, landing on her powerful amphibian legs only moments before she starts to revert to her human shape. Eriette must not have been expecting anyone to bypass the castle gates. There are no sleepers here standing guard, no closed eyes to watch them.

"Okay, okay, maybe Troyan wasn't so bad," Ruby says. She keeps her voice as hushed as their footsteps. "Where to?"

Kellan's brows meet as he thinks. "If I were a witch, I'd want to have the throne room to myself."

"Hylda said Eriette loved attention," Ruby says with a nod. "Probably got a whole bunch of people in there feeding her grapes and stuff."

Kellan tilts his head at her, but opens the first door he sees, all the same. "Why grapes?"

"I don't know. It's always grapes, though," Ruby says.

Ahead of them: a yawning hallway, dark and dreary, festooned with faded and defaced portraits. The stone floors and walls leave the air cooler within. Though there are plenty of torches in their holders, not one is lit. The only light granted them is that which filters in through the door—and the light of the curse along the floor.

Together the two heroes follow the winding cords of violet through the halls of Castle Ardenvale. Past empty bedrooms, ransacked war rooms, and raided armories they skulk. So open are their ears that the passing squeaks of mice are as loud as a dragon's dying cry.

It is thus no wonder that they hear the woman's footsteps before they see her. Soft, they are, but not soft enough: the creak of her leather boots, the scuff of sole against stone, even her belabored sigh gives her away.

Kellan and Ruby press themselves on either side of the door. Ruby is the first to peek, blade held at her side. When she gestures for him to do the same, it is with a stunned look.

He understands why. Standing before a lectern and surrounded by swirls of curse-clouds is a woman known even in Orrinshire. Rowan Kenrith, the daughter of the High King herself, has come to Castle Ardenvale.

Kellan cannot stop himself from smiling. She must have figured it out the same as they did. He can't believe their luck.

The glad tidings overwhelm his good sense. Kellan dashes into the room, and Ruby follows, her sword hanging toylike at her side. "Rowan!" he calls. Then, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment when she looks up, he sputters. "I-I mean, L-Lady Kenrith! Be careful with the curse—"

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" she answers. Strange—Rowan's frowning.

"We came to defeat the witch, the same as you," Ruby says. "Is there some kind of spell keeping you in place?"

Kellan hadn't thought of that. Good thing Ruby came along; she's always thinking on her feet. There must be *something* binding Rowan in place—the curse, maybe. The way it's swirling around her, that must be it.

"We can find some way to break the spell," Kellan offers. There are no cauldrons here, no unmelting ice, no sigils he can spot. Only books, wands, loose pages and ink wells. He scans these for answers. "Me and Ruby have gotten really good at that."

"We're heroes," Ruby adds, helpfully.

But Rowan Kenrith neither laughs nor smiles, nor even thanks them for their assistance. She lays her hands on either edge of the lectern. Sparks crackle along her fingers.

"I think the two of you should leave," she says, her voice cool and level.

"Ha, I mean, you probably *could* handle it on your own. But I need to be with you, at least," Kellan says. "I promised I'd help end this curse."

"You can do that from outside," Rowan says. "It'd be best if you weren't here."

Something in her voice raises Kellan's hackles. His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, and he looks once more at the page before him. In red-brown ink, jagged handwriting spells the truth.

Attempt 23. Haven't been able to put anyone to sleep yet except the old-fashioned way.

He has no time to process what he's just read, for when he looks up at Rowan, she's wreathed in sparking light.

Kellan's vision goes white.

"Kellan! Kellan, wake up! Don't make me get the prison water, I swear I will!"

... What?

Before he can sort out what's going on, he's hit in the face with something very, very cold; Ruby is standing before him with an empty bucket at her feet.

"Are you back?" she says.

Kellan clears his throat. The rope keeping his hands together has been severed already, likely the work of Ruby's frosty sword. But wait ...

"Where are we? And how did you get that sword back?"

"Take a look around, hero. Syr Rowan knocked us both out. She was trying to work some kind of dream magic on you when I woke up, but then ..."

Kellan's eyes land on sleeping guards face down on the ground. Clattering metal and creaking wood echo down the stone stairs into their small cell.

"...the cavalry arrived. She went off to deal with it, so I got my sword and woke you up."

Kellan stands. He hefts the chains overhead and drops them to the ground, all save the shortest, only long enough to wrap around his palm. "She really turned on us?"

"She thought she was helping you," Ruby says, frowning. "Kept saying that while she was working. That if she got the spell right, you'd be thanking her for what she was doing."

"Yeah, well, that wasn't a very good dream," Kellan says. He lets out a breath. "She's up there?"

"I think the witch is too," Ruby says. "Someone shouted Rowan's name, and it sure sounded ominous."

"Then let's get up there," he says.

In her heart of hearts, Rowan Kenrith knew this dream could not last. Just as no amount of training prepared her to save her family, no amount of wishful thinking could extend this respite into eternity. Her time with Eriette, studying the magic that would save Eldraine, had always been fated to end.

But she hoped she'd have longer than a few weeks.

As her brother's knights burst through the gates, sparks crackle along Rowan's forearm. Eriette, seated upon her throne, strains to control the dozens of sleepers among the ruins, violet strands flying from her hands to warriors' limbs. Rowan struggled just to keep the children asleep and weave a dream for *them*. Eriette is doing it for a whole army.

The last thing she needs are distractions, but what she can use is help. Ashiok had left the Realm to attend to business elsewhere. Rowan is the only person Eriette has left. At least until Ashiok returns.

A phalanx of knights breach the doors. To counter them, Eriette fields her dreamers, positioned in two ranks before the throne. Eriette might be her better when it comes to dream magic, but Rowan's taken enough tactics lessons to know this is going to end badly. Two ranks won't be enough to counter a phalanx of that size.

"Under order of His Majesty the High King of Eldraine, stand down!" shouts a woman in the vanguard. Rowan narrows her eyes; the voice is familiar. Is that a wooden arm? Ah—the jet of fire over the heads of the sleepers confirms her suspicions. Imodane. Of course someone that foolish would think shooting fire at innocent sleepers is a good idea. She was careless at the mountain and she's careless here.

Rowan focuses on the sparks in her blood, lets them grow, lets them build. All of this energy she unleashes in a fearsome bolt aimed at Imodane's feet. Stone shatters; smoke rises from a newly made crater in the castle's flooring.

"There is no High King in Eldraine," she booms. "Turn tail and return to the pretender, Imodane, or I'll dash you across the rocks."

"You!" says Imodane. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Ahh, Rowan," says Eriette from the throne. "Will you keep the vermin away for me, child?"

"They won't get in our way," Rowan promises. As she steps to the raised dais, she spots her brother, and knows that—one way or another—all of this is going to end today.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

He rides atop his white horse behind the vanguard, his sword drawn. Rime coats his pauldrons, his vambraces. Despite riding into battle, he hasn't the sense to don a helmet. Seeing him ... Seeing him is seeing all the parts she least likes of herself externalized into someone else.

Worse still when he narrows his eyes, when he calls with his voice full of disbelief and ache, "Rowan? What are you doing?"

There is a lump in her throat, a pain unspeakable, when her brother looks at her like this. Like he's afraid of her. Like he wants her to be something other than she is, to wake up one day and return to being the woman he knew before. When will he realize the Rowan he knew is dead?

"I'm learning how to save the Realm," she says.

"Listen to yourself. Working with witches? Cursing the Realm? This isn't like you," he says. Is this what he thinks a High King should be—a man who is on the verge of tears atop his warhorse? "Please come home."

She wants him to understand. She wants so badly for him to understand that she's never going to be all right again.

But he won't.

She's charging them before she knows what else to do. Her sword beats back shields and snaps lances. In the thick of the melee her blood sings. Here, surrounded by steel's blooming petals, she is free from any thought save that which animates her limbs. Parry, riposte; dodge, blast.

When she reaches her brother, there is already blood on her armor. She levels her sword at him, he on his horse, and dares him to dismount. "Home is gone, Will!"

Cool eyes study her. When his feet finally touch the ground, his shoulders are doubled with the weight of his worries. He draws no weapon. "No, it isn't. Hazel and Erec need us—"

He's talking to her the way he talked to Imodane. His own sister. She can't stand another second of it. "Our parents are dead, the Realm is shattered, and you're acting like talking about it will help. It won't! Talking is *never* going to help!"

A rough slash to his chest will convince him to raise his sword. Even Will cannot compete with such a compelling argument—he raises his own blade to parry. It doesn't help him much. Rowan is stronger than he is. She's always been stronger.

Under a relentless barrage of blows he's beaten back, step by step, his warriors parting to let him pass. Whether because he'd given an order or because they fear her, the other knights do little to stop Rowan.

The only thing that *does* stop her is a bolt of ice. Will manages it between blows: she doesn't realize her feet are frozen to the floor until she tries to move them once more.

Rowan catches her breath. As the battle rages on around them—knight against dreamer, friend against friend—her brother fights back tears.

"Ro, I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't help you when you needed it."

It isn't what she was expecting from him. There's a sharp feeling at the corner of her eyes, a pain in her chest. An arrow flies over her head, landing in a dreamer behind her. She cannot look at Will for too long, or she's not going to be able to speak. She glances over her shoulder toward Eriette.

But it isn't just Eriette she sees. Rowan's heart sinks. The children must have gotten loose. Worse than that, they're attacking the throne. The girl in red is swinging a sword twice her size at Eriette; the boy fights with a whip of golden vine.

Eriette may be a powerful witch, but she's no fighter. She can't deal with the children and animate the dreamers at the same time.

Rowan looks to Will again. He's frowning, now. "You want to save *her*?"

"She's our aunt. This magic was always in our blood, Will," Rowan says. She's surprised at how young she sounds. "We can use it to save Eldraine. No one has to suffer anymore, no one has to die. We can keep them safe."

For a moment, she mistakes the hurt in his expression for sympathy. It is the longest moment of her life—a length of hope tied around her neck, a box kicked out from under her.

"I don't know you anymore," he says.

Sparks coalesce at her fingertips. Rowan blasts the vanguard again, creating another rend across the floor. Another wave of anger, another wave of frustration, another wave of hurt. Over and over she fires at her faithless former friends. All these people who knew how badly she was hurting and left her to rot, all these people who saw her bleeding and rubbed salt in the wound—let them know her power.

Only when the dust of her rage settles does Rowan let out a breath.

And there, where she expects to see them laid low, she sees a cocoon of ice. Pitted, cracked, and scarred, it yet stands in the face of her onslaught.

Will dismisses it with a wave of his hand. "This isn't going to work," he says.

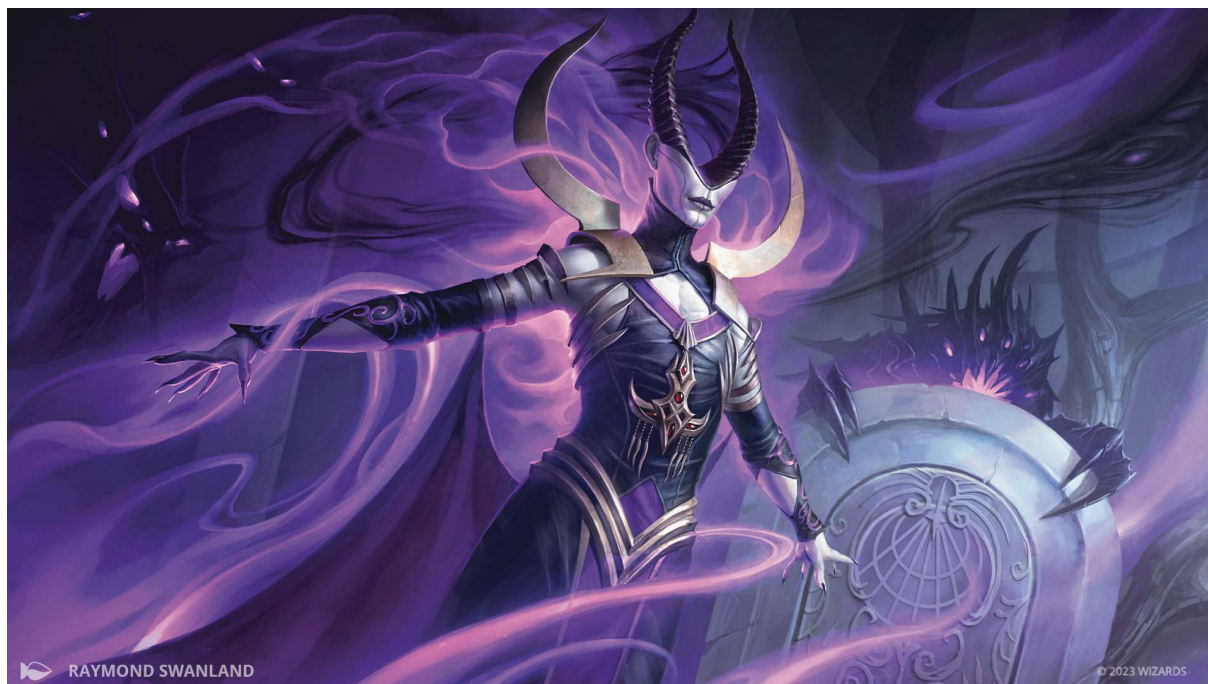
"You don't know that!" Rowan answers. Winded and desperate, she cannot hold herself back from charging at him. Her sword arm will succeed where her magic failed—she's sure of it. Will could never match her on the field.

She slashes at him, only for a familiar hardwood hand to catch her blade. Imodane shoves her back and Rowan stumbles.

“You don’t get it, do you, girl?” Imodane growls. Losing a weapon hasn’t seemed to stop her. She punches her wooden fist into her fleshy palm. “He’s going to be the one to reunify the Realm. Even I can see that now.”

“Don’t be so certain.”

Ice against the nape of her neck; smoke in her lungs; a haze that threatens to carry her to somewhere beautiful and far. Veils of black coalesce into Ashiok’s elegant form before the gathered army.



Art by: Raymond Swanland

Rowan can’t help but smirk. Eriette might have had trouble controlling so many at once, but for Ashiok it’s second nature. The gathered dreamers attack with new grace, swaying out of the way of incoming blows, and dealing their own with vicious precision.

“Will isn’t the only one with friends,” Rowan answers Imodane.

They can’t easily fight this off. Ashiok, at the center, is surrounded on all sides by their dreamers, and their dreamers are all too happy to defend. The phalanx must break if they’re to attack.

Imodane sends a haymaker Rowan’s way. She doesn’t bother to dodge—her nose cracks, the world around her spins, copper floods her mouth. Worth it, if it gets her closer. Because there is something Rowan understands, something they don’t know: the gathered knights cannot win against Ashiok. All she has to do is hold out long enough for Eriette to send all of them to sleep.

Rowan drives the pommel of her sword into Imodane’s face. A moment’s concentration is enough to channel sparks through the knight’s armor. She howls, splitting off from the fight to try to tear off her plate mail, but she isn’t the only enemy Rowan faces. A dozen knights at least have gathered to defend her brother while the others hold off the dreamers.

Thirteen to one.

Rowan likes those odds.

“All of these people are here because they believe in the same thing our parents believed in: a united Eldraine. You can’t just make people do whatever you want!” Will says.

“You’re only saying that because you’ve always been too weak to do it,” Rowan answers. “Would *diplo-*macy have stopped Oko? The Oriq?”

Three of Will’s guards collapse around him, their bodies joining the pile of the slumbering. An incoming slash from one of the others gives her another chance. Rowan lunges into the blow, turning aside at the last second. With the distance closed she can crack her pommel on the knight’s temple. Blood coats her knuckles as her opponent crumbles.

Halfway there.

In the distance she spots a flash of gold among Ashiok’s smoke. The boy from earlier, swinging some kind of golden chain. Small as he is, he’s managed to slip between the ranks.



Art by: Anna Steinbauer

Lot of good that will do. He’s one boy against Ashiok—what can he possibly do? The golden arcs of his makeshift whip might be flashy, but they won’t save him. Talking wouldn’t help him either. She turns her attention back to Will.

“If you’d *talked* to the Phyrexians, Will, do you think our parents would be alive right now?” She launches herself at Will once more.

For years they’ve sparred, for years they’ve known each other’s minds. She knows every trick he has, but he, too, knows hers. And with his back to the wall, he’s desperate. Chilling the air around her, conjuring shields at the last second, icing the ground to throw her off balance. “Does power matter that much to you?”

“Power is the only thing that matters,” Rowan says. She clips his elbow with a slash; he drops his sword. A lance comes her way, but one of the dreamers throws themselves in its path. Their counterstrike—a hammer to the knee—sees their killer fall, too. “Do you see that now? Bring as many people as you want, Will. It won’t matter. Look around you, your army’s fallen asleep.”

Will, the follower he is, does as he's told. Rowan watches him as he realizes there's no escaping them. He lets out one last, hopeless bolt of ice, one she easily avoids.

"It's over."

But then Will begins to smile. "What was the line? 'Don't be so certain'?"

It's the oldest trick in the book, yet she falls for it, turning to look behind her.

The bolt has struck its true target: Ashiok's chest.

The boy wasn't trying to beat Ashiok at all. Rowan sees that now. He only ever meant to lash them in place long enough for Will to land a strike. A potent one, too; Rowan's rarely seen Will put so much of himself into a bolt.

Ashiok lets out a howl of pain as the ice spreads through their body. Smoke swallows them, and then they are gone. *They still had their spark*, realizes Rowan suddenly, with a lurching sensation.

The smoke clears just in time to see the girl press her blade to Eriette's throat.

Rowan's heart leaps to her throat.

In this moment of distress, Eriette remains calm and collected. Across the ruins of the throne room her eyes meet Rowan's. A single thread of the curse—hardly enough to be noticed—links them.

Go from this place, Eriette says to her. *When the time is right, we will meet again.*

Rowan steps toward her. *But I can't lose anyone else.*

You aren't losing anyone. They won't kill me, darling. They're too soft. We bide our time.

The thread snaps. In the recesses of her mind she is alone, watching once more as someone she cares about is held at sword point.

If she does not heed Eriette's advice, then her brother will surely take her in. He will imprison her, and there will be an endless parade of healers and tender-hearted fools to speak with her. To try to understand her. Meanwhile Eldraine will remain splintered, for though Will has gathered an army of many colors here, he has not gathered them all. And if she finally gives in, if she pretends to be all right, he will remain High King and she ...

She will always be the woman who rebelled. Worse, she will always be the woman he *graciously forgave*.

No—there is no going back now, no returning home.

She has enough left for one more blast.

Rowan Kenrith takes a breath. As she had on Strixhaven, she lets her power crackle through her. Light surges.

"Rowan!" Will shouts.

He reaches for her, too. But he's still afraid of her, and that's the problem.

Difficult to control her power when there's this much of it. Still, she has to try. Wrenching her brows, gritting her teeth, she twists the energy as it leaves her—instead of aiming outward, she aims it all down.

A boom louder than the fall of a giant.

Rowan's in the air.

From up here she can see the threads of the curse coming together, a spiderweb centered around the castle.

What was it Royse had said to her? *If you do not make time for rest, it will come to you when you least expect.*

It is the same for Eldraine. How many blows have they weathered by now? How many shattered dreams? If they are to be strong again—if they are to be unified—they need to forge those dreams anew. They need to rest.

As does Rowan.

One day, she'll bring that blessed slumber to the rest of Eldraine.

Afterward, there's much for Kellan to sort through.

High King Kenrith takes him and Ruby aside. He tells them he's never met children braver than they are, that they are invited to come to the palace whenever they like, that they will be welcomed like members of the family. But his eyes are stormclouds when he says all this, and he cannot stop looking to the horizon. Kellan thinks he's looking for Rowan. If it were him—if that were *his* sister who had done all that—that's what Kellan would do. So he doesn't blame King Kenrith for being a little distant. He must be hurting.

Ruby takes him up on the offer, on the condition she can bring her brother. The king's smile cracks. He agrees. Yes, he would love to have her and her brother visit, the both of them.

As they make their plans, Kellan slips away. There's something else he has to do. His friend deserves all the awards she could get. Facing down a witch with a sword of ice? That sort of thing sang well in a story. Edgwall will be out of red cloaks ere long. Let her revel; what he has to do will only lead her away from the glory she deserves.

Outside of Castle Ardenvale he steps into the Fae World.

A sleepy farm outside a sleepier village. A place that knows struggle only against the weather and soil. Here, among the paddocks and pastures of Orrinshire, there is no talk of heroes.

The quiet sits strangely in Kellan's ears as he walks the beaten path to his family farm. He's never been so grateful for distant bleats and wood-chopping axes. After everything he's been through, silence fits him like a shrunken coat. This whole place does.

When he walks by the Cotter boys, they glare at him just the same. The terrible thing is that part of him still fears them, even when he knows he shouldn't. But he knows he's strong enough now. He holds himself taller. He walks by them, and when they do nothing to harm him, he lets out a breath.

Hex is the first of his family to greet him. Bounding across the rows of neatly planted turnips he goes, dripping a trail of drool, yowling his familiar yowl. When Hex licks his cheek, Kellan lets out a small sigh of relief. No matter where he's been or what he's discovered about himself, Hex still knows who he is.

Kellan hefts the dog onto his shoulders as he makes his way up the hill. Hex won't stop barking, of course, so it isn't long before his family hears something's going on. Ronald emerges from around the

farmhouse, an axe slung across his shoulder. He drops it upon spotting Kellan. “Honey! Honey, he’s home, our boy’s home!” he shouts.

Ronald runs to him, and Kellan is so wrapped up in his stepfather’s arms that he does not notice his mother’s arrival until she’s embraced them both. Turning about on the fields, the gentle bleating of the sheep in his ears and the faint taste of earth on his tongue, his mother’s voice and his stepfather’s strong grip—yes, after all of that, he is finally home.

They welcome him in. Insist on it. Happy tears stream down his mother’s face. She presents him with a coat she has made for him. How long has she been spinning thread for this? How could she have possibly finished it in the time he was away? For every thread is vibrant and beautiful, from the deepest azures to the brightest yellows. Where gold is called for he is shocked to find thread-of-gold itself. Colors and material alone would beggar the village—but the details would beggar even a city like Edgewall. Embroidered throughout are elks frolicking among the elms and beeches surrounding Orinshire. Along the cuffs are primroses in bloom; below one pocket, a girl sits before a pond of clear water, her reflection staring back at her. And the lining! Here he sees the girl again, following a man whose skin is streaked with blue.

Kellan’s jaw hangs slack. He throws his arms around his mother again. “This is so beautiful, Mom, but I can’t accept it. I can’t wear this outside! It might get ruined!”

She laughs, smoothing his hair away from his face. “That’s thoughtful of you to say, Kellan, but I enchanted it.”

Kellan turns to the coat again. He presses his fingers to the fabric, as if magic is a thing that can be felt like grooves on an instrument. “Really?”

“Well, your mother didn’t spend five years as a witch’s apprentice for nothing,” she says with a smile. “Ronald, will you make us some tea?”

“Of course. But first I’ll have to go get it from the Browns, I heard Gretchen just got this new stuff in ...”

He’s already throwing on his own coat—far less fancifully made—and heading out the door. When it closes behind him, Kellan raises a brow at his mother. “Something’s up.”

“You’ve gotten cleverer, haven’t you?” his mother says. She looks over to the coat.

Kellan takes a seat across from her at the dinner table. He doesn’t feel much cleverer, but he thinks he has an idea what’s going on. Still, he wants her to be comfortable. “What did you want to tell me?”

“About your father and I,” she says. “Your birth father. I’m sure the Fae Lord told you what they know of him, but I thought you could get to know him as I did.”

Kellan smiles. His heart’s pounding, too. “The Fae Lord didn’t tell me anything about him, actually.”

“He didn’t? But your quest—”

“I told him I wanted to go home, to hear the story from you,” Kellan says. “Whenever you thought I was ready.”

Silence passes as tears well in his mother’s eyes. She squeezes his hand, and he squeezes hers, and when she is ready, she begins.

“I met your father during my training,” she says. “I was out in the woods, gathering nightshade, when I found a man lying among the blossoms as if they posed no harm at all. When he invited me to sit with him I thought he must have been joking, but he offered to give me all the nightshade I wanted in exchange for only a conversation. Knowing him for a fae, I made him promise that it was only a

conversation, and with that ... I spoke with him. He told me his name was Oko, and he told me that he was newly arrived in Eldraine. That he was not from any of the Realms I'd ever seen. He wanted to know more of the place, and from a pretty girl it was all the better."

The blue-streaked man on the coat's lining catches his attention anew. Oko. His father. A man among the nightshade blossoms.

His mother sighs with a hint of a dream. "It was the first time that anyone had ever said I was pretty. And I found the idea of Realms beyond our own so thrilling that, naturally, I asked him a thousand questions. Graciously he entertained them with answers, so long as I told him something of Eldraine in exchange. For hours we sat like that, talking among the flowers, until ... we realized we'd need to meet again."

"Another Realm ... Did he say what it was called?"

"He did, though if I am honest, the name's long since escaped me," his mother says. "But he said it was a land where fae ruled supreme. He found the idea that humans should challenge them very amusing indeed and lamented that he couldn't confront Lord Talion directly. Of course, all young men talk that way, and we were both young then."

She leans back in her seat.

"Over the next few years, I would hear his voice from crows, or trees, or sometimes even baked goods, and I would know it meant to meet him at the nightshade glen. He came to me in many forms and told me many things. Showed me many things. Without your father's aid I never would have escaped my mistress—he made me feel so bold and clever.

"For a while, it was wonderful. The two of us went wherever we liked and did whatever we pleased. I learned more of magic from him than I ever did from her. He whispered to me the secrets of the land and promised me a throne.

"The trouble started afterward. Though I'd been freed, no one in town wanted anything to do with me. Once a witch, always a witch, the saying went.

"Your father ... was very upset by this," says his mother. "Part of me found it charming that a man should care so much about me. I wanted to go away with him, but he couldn't take me. And staying here was wearing on him. Eventually, he ... hurt people who had been unkind to me, and I realized that we couldn't continue as we were. No matter how much I loved him.

"I wasn't meant to be a queen, you see. After all that struggle, I wanted peace—but he wanted to raze this place to the ground for offending me."

"He visited again three years ago. I heard him calling to me while I was spinning one night. And though the girl within me wanted to go to him, the woman I've become knew what I'd be giving up if I did. I'm far happier here with you."

Kellan listens, too intent to interrupt, looking over the coat again and again.

"Could you tell me more about him?" Kellan says. "About what he was like."

His mother's smile is only a little sad. "Of course. Whatever you'd like to know."

He cannot sleep. There is too much story inside his head. Too many of his father's faces looking back on him. He wonders how many times he's seen him already. Mother said he was fond of changing shapes, so maybe they've already met.

But if so, why hasn't his father introduced himself?

That is the question that keeps him from rest, like a horseshoe badly struck keeps a mount from running. It hurts. The question keeps coming to him: *Why haven't you spoken to me? Am I not good enough?*

He hadn't been brave enough to ask his mother.

With little use for sleep, he decides on a walk, instead. Perhaps it will dislodge the thought from his traitorous head. Perhaps it will hurt less. Down he goes, wrapping himself in his fine new coat, out into the darkness and the wilds.

They used to frighten him. He knows better now. The woods will never betray him, so long as his blood smells of pine.

Hex follows him. Unlike other nights, Kellan can think of nothing to say to his old friend. To talk would be to make things worse; if he opens his mouth, he's sure he'll have nothing but questions. And he shouldn't ask questions of an old bloodhound.

But Hex has his own ways of helping. Only five minutes in he bolts off, as if he's caught a scent. Kellan can do little save run after him. His breath mists against the cool of the night; moonlight plays upon his skin.

Over the boughs, past a copse of yew that prickles his skin, he finally catches up to Hex. He barks once and assumes his pointing posture, aiming straight for ... a portal?

That must be what it is—a swirling series of interlocking triangles, something like a cloudy mirror, standing free beneath the swaying branches of the trees. It looks nothing like the portals into Talion's realm. The other side looks nothing like Eldraine.

Kellan's breath catches in his chest. Troyan told him about other Realms. His mother had, too, repeating the things his father had told her of them.

What if this is his way of reaching out? What if this is a test? His father dwelled somewhere other than Eldraine. What if he lives there, on the other side? Kellan could ask him why it's been so long without them ever meeting. Maybe they'll know of him there.

He steps forward.

It'll just be a quick look around. And he'll remember the way he came in. It should be fine, right? He isn't really leaving home, he's just taking a trip somewhere. It's no different than going to the market.

He isn't leaving home. He'll be right back.

Kellan pets Hex, and steps through the portal.



Art by: Volkan Baga

Awake. All is not yet lost. I have returned for you.

The voice is cool, familiar. Eriette wonders why it took this long before she heard it once more. When she opens her eyes, the jail cell stares back at her, but so, too, does Ashiok. Smoke billows from their evanescent shrouds, despite the lack of wind in the room.

“What took you so long?” she asks. Her chains rattle when she stands. If the guards outside hear, they say nothing, nor even stir. No doubt they’re dreaming of something far more pleasant than guarding her.

“Preparations needed to be made,” Ashiok answers.

“Where’s Rowan?” she asks. “Waiting outside?”

Ashiok’s lips purse. “She is not yet ready for what must be done.”

Eriette frowns. “If you give her a chance to learn, I’m sure—”

“Opportunity calls us in a new direction. One far from here. You will learn much, and if you wish, you may return to educate her. By then you will have a host of servants to tend your new queendom.”

Well. That certainly soothed matters. Rowan would be all right on her own for a while—and if Eriette secured new land for them, all the better. She holds up her chained hands.

Ashiok’s hand hovers over the shackles. “You will be far from here, Eriette. Very far.”

“Far from a jail cell? Darling, that’s a good thing,” she says.

They do not laugh. They never laugh.

Darkness falls on the cell. Shackles fall to the stone ground. In the morning, when they search the cell, she will be gone.