

Episode 5: The Battle for Kaldheim

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From set *Kaldheim*

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Far above the Feltmark, wheeling between the columns of smoke that rose from the many chimneys of the Beskir Stronghold, a raven sailed through the air. A raven, it is known, can cover a hundred miles in a day, and this one had done just that. It had passed over the high ridges of the Tusk mountains, seen the fire giants scaling the cliffsides while Tuskeri braveswords rolled cut logs and boulders to knock them back to earth. The raven, with one black and inscrutable eye, had watched the Skelle gather in their marshes and swear oaths by blood, readying for war. It had followed the coast for some time, where longships dotted the horizon, the greatest fleet of the age riding the wind westward, to the one place in Bretagard that all flock to in times of crisis.



Bretagard Stronghold | Art by: Jung Park

The raven landed on a thatched roof in one of the inner courtyards, past the thick walls that ringed the fortress. Below, among the rising sounds of weapons pressed to grindstone, of mail brushing plate, two voices stood out. The raven, as was its way, paused to listen.

“We’ve lost the eastern fold, and it’ll be the whole damn Aldergard soon,” said the older one. His hair and beard were the color of fresh snow; everything else was weathered, leathery, rugged. On his back

was a broad shield made of a material that seemed to shimmer in the right light. “I’ve never seen so many trolls in one place. And working together, too.”

The younger one laughed. “The Kannah are having trouble with a few Hagi? One of mine brought down a *demon* yesterday. Now all the youth are trying to claim the next.” From the side of this one’s head jutted an odd, bony protrusion—like a sabretooth had tried to bite into his skull but lost their fang partway through.

“If it’s such a party, then what are you doing here?” grunted the older one.

The other shrugged. “A clan leader has certain obligations, you know.”

Two guards uncrossed their spears before the pair and pushed open a set of heavy wooden doors, each one taking the full weight of the warrior before they groaned open.

“Arni Brokenbrow, of the Tuskeri, and Fynn, the Fangbearer, of the Kannah,” one of the guards barked. Inside, four figures were seated at the table. Inga Rune-Eyes, leader of the Omenseekers, had already arrived, and this fortress belonged to Sigrid, God-Favored. The other two—a dark-skinned woman and an elf with red braids—were strangers.

Fynn, the older of the pair, grabbed the axe from his belt. “What in Koma’s breath is *he* doing here?”

The guards, partway through closing the door, scrambled for their weapons, but Sigrid held up a hand. “Inga?”

Rune-Eyes stood from her seat. “This is Tyvar, of Skemfar, and Kaya, of—elsewhere. They are friends. And we are in need of all the friends we can find right now.”

“No serpent-kissing elf can call himself my friend,” growled Fynn. “Least of all their prince.”



Fynn, the Fangbearer | Art by: Lie Setiawan

He hadn’t drawn his weapon yet, but he looked ready to. Tyvar hadn’t even risen from his chair, though. “It isn’t just the humans that will die if the elves go to war. But I suppose you’ll be the one to talk down my brother, then, when he arrives at the head of an army.”

“I’ll talk him down. About six feet down.”

“Enough,” barked Sigrid, her voice a gavel. “I didn’t invite you into my hold to insult my guests, Fynn. I invited you to discuss how our people might live out the week.”

Grudgingly, Fynn dropped himself into one of the chairs surrounding the long table. Arni joined him. “So! I’m assuming there’s some sort of plan, and that it will require acts of stupendous daring and bravery? I understand the odds are against us.” About this, he didn’t seem terribly concerned.

Sigrid smiled thinly. “Trolls, demons, giants—both frost and fire—rampaging through the realm. And now I hear reports of draugr, which means the Dread Marn, Karfell’s dead army, has returned. Yes, I would say the odds are against us. But we have weapons yet with which to fight.”

“Other than a mouthy elf?” muttered Fynn.

“Yeah,” said Kaya. From under the table, she lifted a sword that seemed to be forged from glass; caught within the translucent blade were an array of blues and greens that seemed to ripple and glow before their eyes. She set it on the table with a dull clink.

“Is that—” said Fynn.

“The Sword of the Realms,” said Sigrid evenly.

“Koll must have finally finished the bloody thing,” said Arni, whistling.

“He did,” said Sigrid. “But he took the secrets of how to wield it to the grave.”

A moment of silence passed between them. Fynn was the first to break it. “But without that knowledge, it’s nothing but a blade. A Tyrite-forged one, aye, but no number of fine swords that can stop a Doomskar.”

“There is one, yet, who can wield it,” came a voice from the darkened corner of the room where the light of the braziers didn’t quite reach. A fifth figure stepped from the shadows—an old man, in a long, heavy traveling cloak. There was a raven perched on his shoulder. “The god for whom the sword was meant. Halvar, God of Battle.”



Strategic Planning | Art by: Donato Giancola

From his eyes spilled a faint glow—the same light frozen inside the blade of the sword. Before Alrund, even Fynn was speechless.

“Halvar’s our man,” said Kaya. “But getting to him is going to take some doing.”

Arni, recovered from having met one of the gods of Kaldheim, kicked his feet up on the table. “A perilous quest, then. Now we’re getting to the good part.”

Halvar, Alrund had told them, wasn’t far from the Beskir fortress. He was, after all, the god of battle, and battle was all around them now. As the raven flies, he was quite close.

I only wish the old man hadn’t meant it literally, thought Kaya, grabbing a fistful of black feathers and tightening her grip.

The bird that rode on Alrund’s shoulder was named Hakka; Kaya knew that much. He hadn’t told them the names of the giant ravens that now carried them through the sky, great tracts of grassland whipping away with each beat of their vast black wings. Or maybe he had—admittedly, Kaya hadn’t been able to focus much during introductions, her attention inextricably drawn to those great glassy eyes. There was an intelligence in them she couldn’t deny, and a curiosity. Not to mention that great curving beak, which could probably snap her in two if it wanted. On one rode Sigrid, Fynn, and Inga—on the other, Arni, Kaya, and Tyvar.

“Look!” she heard Tyvar shout over the rushing wind.

The first thing she saw was the tear in the world, a streak of icy white cutting through the amber fields below. The perspective looked all wrong, like someone had laid another plane flat across this one. Steam billowed out as the air of that frozen place met the warmer air of Bretagard, and from the edge of the opening thin, rotting figures dragged themselves hand over hand into the human realm. Ahead of them, across a rolling carpet of yellowing grass, stretched a thousand shambling forms. Draugr, they had called them. *A zombie by any other name*. Towering above the rank and file were a few massive figures covered in long, ropy hair—Torga trolls, Kaya recognized, though these ones looked like they

had seen better days. Hard to tell from up here, but they had the same unsteady gait as the foot troops. Undead too, then.

All of them—draugr and Torga, big and small—shuffled toward the same thing: a thickly built wooden bridge, fording a broad white-water river. On the far side, Kaya could make out a hamlet of little huts, cobbled paths, a waterwheel. No people that she could make out, but that made sense with what was on their doorstep. It seemed miraculously whole, untouched. The solitary figure on the bridge had made sure of that.

From here, Halvar didn't look like much. He didn't radiate that spooky god-light in the same way Alrund did; compared to the gash in the world spilling blue, green, and purple light into the sky, he seemed hardly remarkable. A miniscule figure, from this height, in dulled iron armor. Before him, on the near side of the bridge, was a mound of destroyed draugr nearly waist-high.

"We have to get to the bridge," yelled Kaya, hoping Tyvar would hear it and the giant bird they were on would somehow understand it. There was no way to turn back the clock, to suck this undead army back into their frozen world, but the Sword of the Realms was strapped across her back; if they could reach Halvar, they could at least stop this from getting any worse.

But Tyvar's eyes, as he turned to face her, locked on to something else. A shadow passed over her, then—the bird's glossy black feathers grew marginally darker as something moved between her and the sun above them.

"Watch out!" said Tyvar, right before the blow struck; a crunching sound, an avian shriek, and suddenly Kaya was knocked from her perch and into open air.

She saw the rest in individual moments, separate frames as she fell: the raven, its wing bent into an unnatural position; Tyvar and Arni, arms wheeling around them as they started to fall, grabbing for handholds that weren't there; above them all, a massive horned figure with two leathery, ragged wings, carrying a heavy-looking, long-handled axe.



Varragoth, Bloodsky Sire | Art by: Tyler Jacobson

It was closer than she had seen him before; even falling down, down, away from the demon, she could make out the tangle of bruise-colored flesh that hung in the shape of a wild beard; she could see thousands of years of imprisonment boiling out of those crazy eyes. Varragoth swung again, driving his axe into the raven's side, and then Kaya was turning over and over, the wind deafening in her ears, falling, falling.

Think.

Think, think, think!

She looked down, squinting against the wind—below her, the river crashed and surged. Hitting water after a fall from this height wouldn't be much better than hitting stone. She could survive the fall, though—her ability to slip in and out of mortal flesh would make sure of that. Could Tyvar? She didn't know. She couldn't count on it. Kaya straightened her body and fanned out her arms and legs to slow her fall. She tried to focus on the sky around her rather than the ground rapidly rising below. Arni, it turned out, was close to her, maybe five feet off and bellowing some insane war whoop as he tumbled toward death. Tyvar was maybe twenty feet out, all that grace and balance useless as he spun through the air, totally out of control.

She grabbed hold of Arni, swinging one arm through the strap keeping his broadsword across his back. "Straighten your body and push back your arms!" she screamed over the roaring wind.

He did so, and she followed suit; immediately they were falling faster, angling toward Tyvar. Below, the grass was no longer vague yellow shading but waving stalks; she could make out the blocky steel blades of the draugr, their armor still rimed with frost. They were almost to the river. She couldn't miss—it had to be now.

They collided with Tyvar about five seconds before they hit the surface. Another second to summon up the energy she needed; one more to turn all three of them insubstantial. The last three seconds were just enough moments to spare.

Darkness and cold swallowed them—it wasn't just the chill of the water rushing all around them, either. The cold filled her, *was* her. No hot rush of blood through veins, no air in her lungs, no steady heartbeat reminding her with each thrum that she was alive. For those few seconds, Kaya knew what it was to be dead, and to linger on—a ghost, a spirit.

With effort, she pulled them all back to corporeal form, and at once, they were tumbling and turning in the current. Kaya had no idea which way was up, no clue where to swim. All she could do was cling to Arni and Tyvar, keeping them one big, drowning unit. She opened her eyes; all around her was rushing water. At the edge of her vision, in the greater darkness of the broad river, she thought she saw something move—a sleek, nimble body in the waves.

Arni was the one that caught the branch along the bank; with Kaya's help, they hauled Tyvar out of the water. He was still gasping for air, clutching his arms as if freezing. It was lucky, she guessed, that the draugr on all sides seemed too surprised to take a swing at them before she'd found her footing again.



Grim Draugr | Art by: Grzegorz Rutkowski

Kaya dodged the first blow, parried the second. She knocked away a sword swing meant for Tyvar, took the draugr's arm off at the elbow. "Get up, kid!"

They were slow, but there was no end to them, and on all sides, they were beginning to realize there were enemies in their midst. Kaya split a white, frost-bitten skull with one of her hand-axes and tugged it free barely in time to knock aside a spear thrust. She stepped backwards, nearly tripped—and immediately Arni was there in front of her, hacking off limbs with great wheeling sweeps from his broadsword. *Does that guy get turned ethereal every day?* Kaya thought, bewildered.

Arni thrust his blade into a draugr's ribcage, held it out at arm's length while it clawed uselessly at him, and turned back to her. Sure enough, he was grinning. "You two go on ahead. I'll keep this lot busy. Least I could do, after you broke my fall with that spooky magic of yours."

One warrior against all these draugr; those odds weren't great. *Then again, he seems like a man who likes to gamble.*

Kaya pulled Tyvar to his feet, and together, they ran through the gap Arni had carved out. In the distance she could see the bridge—almost close enough to touch, with nothing but an army of undead between them. She could rush ahead if she started phasing, but she had been immaterial for a long time during their "landing" and didn't know how much more her body could take. There was Tyvar to consider, too.

At least the draugr in this section of the field seemed less dense. Together they ran, pausing only briefly to shatter a ribcage or lop off a frozen limb, the Sword of the Realms jostling the whole time in its sheath against Kaya's back. Behind them, in the distance, she could see standards of the human clans as they clashed with the edges of the draugr horde, but there hadn't been time to marshal more than a few raiding parties, and more draugr spilled out of that rift with each passing minute.

Over the dead-choked fields rose a sound Kaya had never heard before. A few changes of pitch and tone, and it might have been the call of some vast night bird, the howl of a dire wolf; it had that wild and eerie quality to it as it carried across the plains, and Tyvar froze.

“That is no draugr horn,” he said, breathless.

It sounded again, and Kaya followed it to the gentle curve of a hill some ways off. A line of figures had begun to form—most carried shields of bronze, stained with the green patina of age. Some carried spears, some swords. Kaya only needed to see how Tyvar looked at them to know who they were: the elves of Skemfar, marching to war.



Harald, King of Skemfar | Art by: Collin Estrada

“Tyvar, we don’t have time for this. We have to move,” said Kaya, but Tyvar seemed rooted to the spot.

“Kaya, the humans aren’t the only victims of Tibalt’s treachery,” he said, turning to her. “I can’t let my people fight and perish for his lie. My brother stands at the head of that army—I know I can make him see reason.”

For all Tyvar’s bravado, he had a good heart in there. “Alright, kid. Get moving, then.”

“Will you be okay?”

Kaya grinned, tried to look confident. “I made my professional reputation killing the undead. I’ll be fine.”

He nodded. With that, he tore off.

It wasn’t a lie she’d told him, exactly—but this would have been much easier if the draugr were undead of the more spectral variety. Kaya pushed forward, hacking through when she needed to, running when she didn’t. The sounds of metal clashing against metal were all around her now, as well as the distant screams of men and women, and she found her heart beating louder and louder in her ears. Everything seemed to be happening slower than usual, each breath feeling like an hour, a year.

An earth-trembling footstep shook her from her trance, freezing her where she stood. Between Kaya and her path to the bridge stood one of the Torga trolls she had seen from the air. This close, she could smell the almost sweet scent of rot and see where patches of once mossy fur had gone brittle white or fallen out altogether. Something had opened a great gash in the creature’s flank—she could see three

slab-like ribs clear as day, a sickly blue light emanating from somewhere deep inside the troll. Its eyes were clouded, dead, but they seemed to fix on her nonetheless. It exhaled sharply, a gout of white mist hissing from between two blackened tusks.

Just as it began to move toward her, there was a splashing sound to Kaya's left. She saw, hanging in the air, the most unlikely thing: a dolphin. Oddly majestic, almost pristine in the middle of all the chaos and carnage. It was arcing through the air toward her, gray skin wet and sleek—it must have jumped from the whitewater rapids next to her, Kaya realized. Seamlessly, that shining skin billowed back into the shape of a cloak, and the creature landed on now human legs; the cloak settled on slender, brown shoulders. In front of Kaya and the troll stood a middle-aged woman with wild, unbound hair. She said nothing, only raised her hands. As her eyes glowed with shifting, multi-colored light, Kaya realized she was looking at one of the gods of Kaldheim.



Cosima, God of the Voyage | Art by: Andy Brase

Behind her, a wall of water rose from the river, white and thrashing like an animal. It swept over the undead Torga and a handful of draugr. The wave carried all of them off as it rolled down the field, one more combatant in the mad battle across Bretagard.

“Who are you supposed to be?” said Kaya, dumbstruck. She tasted salt in the air.

The woman in front of her brushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes had gone back to a dark, earthy color. “You were on my ship not long ago. How did it treat you?”

Cosima. Goddess of the sea. “Oh. Uh, our acquaintance was brief.”

“She is a flighty one,” said Cosima thoughtfully. From under her cloak, she drew a long, curved sword. “Now then. Alrund did not send me to visit.”

Kaya merely nodded. *Badass sea goddess. Okay.* “We have to get to Halvar.”

“Lead the way,” said Cosima.

More draugr had assembled before them; these fell before the pair like wheat to the scythe. They were close now; not a hundred feet off, she could see Halvar at the head of the bridge, knocking draugr about with swings of his shield-arm, pitching them into the white river below. She was almost there.

She didn't register the shadow passing over her until it smothered her in darkness; suddenly something pulled sharply at Kaya's leather armor, yanking her to the side just in time to avoid the ugly iron axe biting into the dirt where she'd stood moments ago.

Cosima, having dragged her out of harm's way, was now pulling her up to stand. Between the pair and the bridge—ten, twelve feet tall, fronds of gray flesh curling and waving from his arms, his chest, his face, grinning a hideous frozen grin, was Varragoth. He beat his wings once, then settled on the ground.

"He didn't have wings last time," muttered Cosima.

"That blade. I know what you carry," he hissed, his voice rust and blood. "I swear on the endless lives I have taken that you will not trap me again in that desolate—"

The first axe, thrown, hit him on the brow, clipping one horn, causing boiling, tarry blood to bubble around where it had stuck. The second axe, this one in Kaya's hand, drove into his knee. Varragoth howled in pain and grabbed at her, but Kaya danced out of his grasp. She even managed to snatch her hand-axe from his forehead as he bent over. "I know you're some kind of scary story people tell their kids, but I'm not from around here," Kaya said, once she was a safe distance away.

Varragoth bellowed in frustration and lunged toward her, a single beat of those huge wings driving him half the distance. She'd landed two clean hits, but neither seemed to slow him down much.

Kaya ducked below a scything axe blow, feeling the wind of it whip across her face. Then Cosima was there, swinging her blade in great curving arcs, carving through Varragoth's iron armor like water. If the wounds bothered the demon, he showed no sign.

Behind him, more dark, winged shapes descended from the sky, landing between them and the bridge. She tried to ignore the deep weariness in her limbs, shifting her grip on the hand-axes. There was no time to worry about whatever was on the other side of Varragoth. If she couldn't get through him, nothing else mattered.

She and Cosima moved forward together; the sea goddess went low, and Kaya went high. Cosima caught the blunt side of the demonic greataxe on a backswing, sending her flying backwards, but Kaya chopped into his shoulder. He didn't fall or falter; instead, he grabbed her around one leg. If she hadn't phased—a considerable effort, now, even on a smaller part of her body—he would have beaten her against the ground, breaking her spine and more besides.

She tumbled free, coming up just in time to dodge another blow of the axe. How long could she keep this up? Behind him, through the crowds of draugr, more horned, hulking forms advanced. *It's not too late*, said a little voice inside herself. *You could always leave.*

Kaya set her weight into a balanced stance and took a deep breath. Yeah, she could. But that didn't mean she would.

The first of Varragoth's demons stepped out of the crowd, shoving draugr aside. There were two more behind him, and who knew how many beyond that. She bent her knees, prepared again to leap forward—and was interrupted by the familiar sound of a horn blowing, much closer this time.



Warhorn Blast | Art by: Bryan Sola

They crashed into the draugr and the demons both, from the east, where the rising sun shone on their armor and shields, making the ancient, tarnished brass seem—for a moment—new again. Elves, she realized. A line of pike-bearers set their hafts against the ground, forming a wall between Kaya and the demons. They were *helping* her.

“Need a hand?” came a voice from behind her.

Tyvar sat on what looked to Kaya like some sort of reindeer, festooned in the same greenish brass armor as the rest of the elves. Next to him rode another elf—taller and more slender, with the same red hair but a severity to his features she had never seen on Tyvar.

“Kaya, allow me to introduce Harald, King of the elves of Skemfar, uniter of the tribes of Wood and Shadow. Also, my older brother,” said Tyvar, grinning.

“Your Majesty, I am *very* pleased to meet you.”

Before he could speak, there was a metallic crunching sound and a scream. Varragoth had charged the line, crushing one elven pike-bearer entirely underfoot and cutting another cleanly in half with that massive axe. Several pikes were buried in the gaps of his armor; he didn’t seem to mind. Emboldened, the other demons were advancing now, crossing blades and hammering at shields with terrible strength.

Tyvar spurred his reindeer into motion, gracefully dismounting behind the elves holding back the demonic onslaught. He put his hands on the backs of their armor, and Kaya watched the plating seem to grow, contouring to perfectly fit their bodies, doubling over itself to grow thicker. One demon feinted past the shield, raking his sword across an elf’s reinforced breastplate, but the blow only threw up a shower of sparks as it skittered off. *Good friend to have*, thought Kaya.

More elves poured in from behind Harald, filling in the gaps in the line. Kaya allowed herself a moment to breathe.

“So,” she said to the elf king. “Your brother is—”

“A fool,” said Harald in a clipped, short tone. “And a braggard. But not a liar. He prevented me from making a mistake, here. I am thankful for that.”

“I’m pretty thankful myself.”

“He says you must get to the bridge.” Harald extended a hand down to her. “I can bring you.”

“What about Tyvar?”

They glanced back to the battle, where the elves clashed with demons and draugr; Tyvar, his arms now gleaming that ancient brass color, danced around a furious Varragoth. He actually managed to leap *over* one long, sweeping strike to crack the demon across the jaw with one metallic fist.

“I’m certain he’s having the time of his life. Now come,” said Harald.

He pulled her onto the reindeer. It immediately bounded forward; she had to grab hold of the elf king’s waist just to keep herself mounted.

The creature moved through the chaos of battle with the grace and nerve of any trained warhorse. Sometimes draugr not engaged with the elven army would lean over to take a swing at them; Kaya knocked away the stiff attempts with her hand-axe. Off to the side, a demon with a gnarled black bow drew back its string—but before he could fire, Harald waved a hand and the bow sprouted flowers and vines that grew rapidly around the surprised demon’s arms and up toward his throat.

Before she knew it, they were there. Aside from the pile of draugr corpses arrayed in a fan around, and covering, the entrance, the bridge would have fit in anywhere; it looked utterly normal amid the total pandemonium around them. On the first few wooden planks, looking as tired as she felt, was a man in simple, stripped-down armor, carrying a wooden shield ringed with steel. He looked up at them as the reindeer clopped closer. “You’re not here to try and cross this bridge too, are you?”

“No. You’re Halvar?” asked Kaya.

“Aye. That’s me. I recognize the king of Skemfar, there. Who does that make you?”

“I’m Kaya. I’ve got something that I think belongs to you.”

She pulled the sword from its wrappings across her back; in the strange light of the Doomskar, it seemed to shimmer all the stronger. Kaya tossed him the sword, which turned end over end through the air, finally landing in his palm as if it had always belonged there.

“The sword Koll was forging before—before he fell.” He shook his head. “I never thought it would be an elf returning it to me.”

“And I never thought I’d be helping one of the usurper gods,” snapped Harald. “But it seems you’re the only one who can set this mess right.”

Halvar nodded. “Yes. With this sword, I think I can. But I’ll need time.”

“We can give you that,” said Kaya.

“Hold the bridge until I can separate the realms once more.”

“What is so important about this accursed bridge?” said Harald. “What, precisely, is on the other side?”

“People,” said Halvar simply. Then he sat, cross-legged, the sword across his lap.

Kaya slid off the back of the reindeer. The draugr, it seemed, had finally reacted to the elven army at their flanks and were pushing back. They had greater numbers, and the difference only grew as more poured forth from the great rift in the world. In the distance, she could see the banners of the

Tuskeri, the Beskir, the Omenseekers, the Kannah—but they were far from where she stood. Halvar, on the bridge, had gone deep inside himself. His eyes were closed, and the sword began to glow from somewhere within.

The closest draugr had formed into ranks, marching toward Kaya and Harald at a steady pace. Towering over the draugr, she could see more undead trolls lurching in their direction, the flesh of one's head peeled all the way back to reveal a bare, ice-encrusted skull. Above them all, demons pulled themselves aloft on leathery wingbeats.

"This is folly," muttered Harald, taking a tighter grip on the reins as his reindeer shuffled back and forth, sensing danger.

"Yeah," said Kaya, pulling the axes Tyvar had given her from her belt. "Probably." She wasn't going anywhere, though.

She was watching the demons rise on those black wings—that's why she saw it. A roiling, stretching pattern across the sky, like the very air was wearing thin. It began to tear, spilling that divine light—another rift in the world, like the one the draugr still spilled out of. There was something different about this one, though. Where the sky was held taut, she could make out something, pressing into the back of the developing rift like a hand against cloth. With a sound like thunder, it tore open.



Koma's Coil Token | Art by: Simon Dominic

The thing that emerged from the rift had features she recognized—flat nostrils, a coiled body, arcing fangs laced with venom—but at this scale, they appeared alien and strange. It wasn't simply massive, it was *continental*. Not just a snake, but *the* snake; anything else a pale imitation, a lesser copy. It looked big enough to coil around any of the branches of the World Tree. *Which it probably does*, Kaya thought.

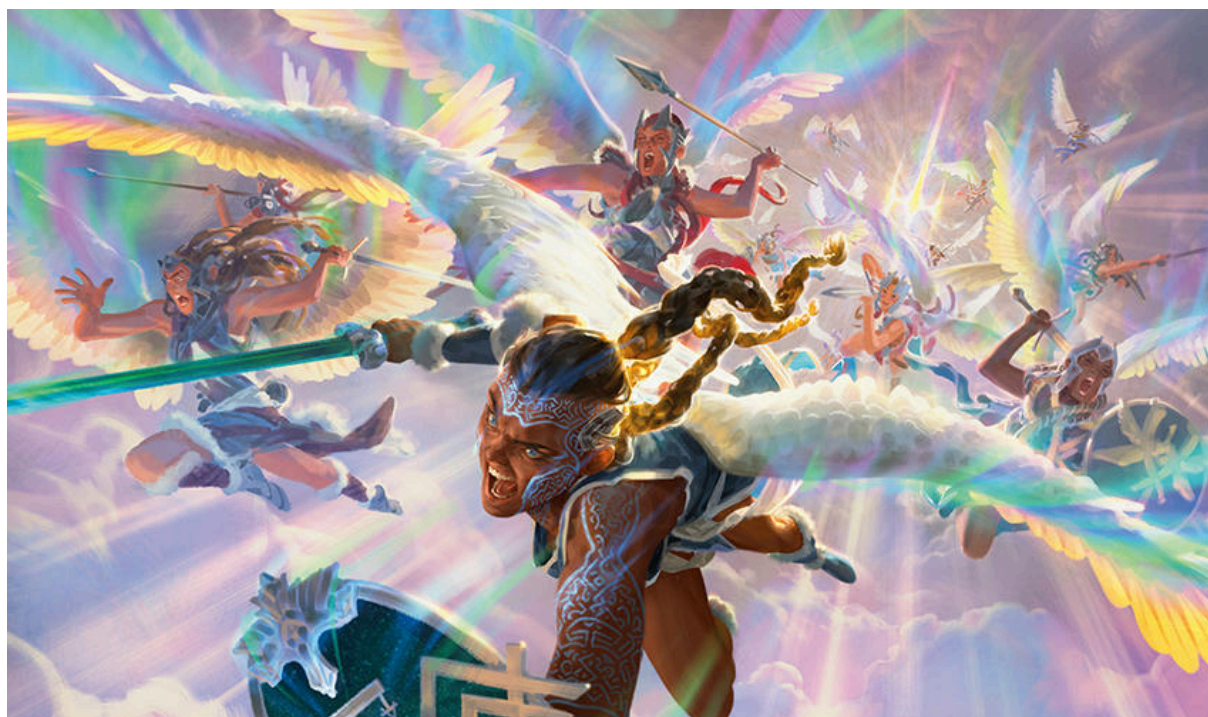
"By the Einir," whispered Harald, next to her. "Koma. The Cosmos Serpent."

Even gravity seemed to fear that thing—it moved through the air almost inquisitively, casting a shadow across half the battlefield as it glided overhead. Kaya saw it snap a hulking demon out of the air as if

it were a mosquito. All the chaos of battle slowed and quieted as everyone—undead, elf, and human—seemed to hold their breath while it passed.

As the serpent reached the rift into Karfell, it paused. Those great gaping nostrils flared once, then twice. With terrifying and sudden speed, it plunged into the tear in the world, crushing dozens of nearby draugr with an incidental sweep of its tail. Endless tracts of serpent seemed to slide into the icy rift before it was finally gone.

Kaya's relief was so great she almost didn't notice the other beings spilling out of the rift Koma had just torn open. Angels, it looked like, with great feathered wings of white and black and brown and red, armed and armored, many of them roaring with sudden and startling fury. Not angels, she realized after a moment—Valkyries. Inga had told her about them. Arbiters of judgement, guardians of the heroic souls forever fighting and feasting in Starnheim. They slammed into the demons from above, feathered wings tangling with leather membrane as they tumbled out of the air together or rebounded off clashing steel.



Starnheim Unleashed | Art by: Johannes Voss

Only one figure among them wasn't winged; they dangled, in fact, from the arm of a Valkyrie, who was carrying them down close toward Kaya. Just before they reached the ground—maybe ten feet up—the wingless one let go. The air around them seemed to harden, then, condensing into solid, reflective shards of—something. With a juggler's speed, they grabbed and threw three of them. Each one sunk into the chest of a massive, undead Torga. The trolls didn't just go down, though—they shattered, as if they'd been glass under a hammer.

"Neat trick," said Kaya. "Who are you?"

The stranger whirled on Kaya, another mirror-like shard in their hand. Kaya put her hands up on instinct; she'd seen what those could do.

"Who are you?" said the stranger. They didn't notice the draugr behind them, hefting a chipped and ancient-looking greatsword. "Behind you!" Kaya shifted the grip on her axe and threw.

The stranger twitched their head away from the arcing weapon—in the right direction, thankfully. The axe slammed into the draugr’s skeletal face, knocking it to the ground. After a moment, they both let out a breath.

“I’m Kaya,” she said. “You got a name?”

“Niko. Niko Aris.”

That didn’t sound like the name of a Kaldheimr. “Great. We’ll handle the rest of the introductions later.”



Shard Token | Art by: Aaron Miller

Kaya turned back toward the mass of draugr and demons. Something was surging through the crowd toward them, knocking corpse-like soldiers into the air as it barreled their way. Varragoth—who else?—crashed free of the ranks of draugr, looking more like a wild beast than a demon jarl now. The iron armor he’d been wearing was warped, gouged, and broken; somewhere along the way he’d lost his axe. He was bleeding from a dozen different wounds now, but he was still upright. Clinging to his back, red hair darkened with blood and eyes unfocused, was Tyvar.

Harald hissed a word; snakes sprung from the ground, their scales stitched with the same runic lettering she’d seen over Tyvar’s own magic. They wrapped round Varragoth’s legs, binding him—until he ripped them apart bare-handed. Niko threw a mirrored shard toward the demon, but he caught it on one of the iron plates still affixed to his arm, and it bounced off harmlessly.

As Varragoth stalked forward, Kaya saw Tyvar jab that brass blade of his into the demon’s wing. He roared with pain and fury, reaching back to grab Tyvar—and taking his eyes, for a moment, off the rest of them. Which was just the opportunity Kaya needed.

Yeah, she was trying to do the hero thing now. But Kaya had spent a long, long time as an assassin.

The motion was fluid, easy, almost effortless; it required no phasing or magic powers. Kaya slipped in, past Varragoth’s free arm, and swung an axe clean through his throat. The demon stumbled forward, both hands going to the mess of tarry blood suddenly spilling from his neck. He took one more step, reaching out a claw—and collapsed.

Kaya didn't even have time to exhale. Behind them came a sudden rushing sound, like water; above, the sky rippled with a wave of color, the same divine greens and purples and blues that surrounded the gods. She watched it sweep over the great rift on the battlefield—the one draugr were still pouring out of. Slowly, like a healing wound, the rift began to shrink and close.

Kaya didn't know if the draugr were mindless undead, but they were at the very least slow-witted; they didn't notice their reinforcements cut off. Across the field, she saw the demons who weren't engaged with the Valkyries take flight, panic finally overcoming their bloodlust. She turned to find Halvar standing, the Sword of the Realms pointing straight up into the air. Light poured from it in a dazzling, kaleidoscopic rush. Behind him, something caught her eye: motion, in one of the windows of the village across the bridge. There, the moony, wide-eyed face of a child stared, open-mouthed, as the god of battle sealed up the holes in the world. *Yeah*, thought Kaya. *This one will make a pretty good saga.*



Halvar, God of Battle | Art by: Lie Setiawan

"By the end," Tyvar was saying, as they crossed the now-quiet battlefield, made muddy from the tramping of countless boots, "I *personally* slew close to a hundred draugr, and three demons. It is my guess, though, that they will be telling tales of you for a long time. The woman who killed Varragoth—Slayer of the Bloodsky Sire. Why, I can almost hear it now!"

"Well, you make sure they get the details right," said Kaya. Everything hurt, every inch of her felt exhausted, but she still could not hold back a smirk.

"Actually," said Tyvar, pausing where he stood. "I'm not sure I'll be around to correct them."

Kaya raised an eyebrow. "Going somewhere?"

"I'd like to see what there is to see, out in your Multiverse."

"Oh? I thought you weren't interested in planeswalking."

Tyvar shrugged. "I rushed to judgement. And you've taught me its value. Had you not been here, I don't know what would have happened to our worlds. Chaos and destruction, I imagine, on an even

greater scale. Perhaps there's a plane—a people—out there who need my help. As Kaldheim needed yours."

"What about being remembered? You're leaving all that glory on the table," said Kaya.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that anymore. I don't believe the people here will ever forget about what you did here," he said. That could still take her aback—that damned earnestness of his. He was guileless, this kid, an open book. *But he saved me. More than once.* She figured he'd be okay.

"Well," she said. "Maybe I'll see you out there."

"You will," said Tyvar, confident as ever. "And next time, it's *my* deeds that will go down in the sagas."

They came to a kind of crossroads—what had once been a crossroads, anyway. Now it was littered with the detritus of war: swords and spears, axes and helmets, the dead everywhere. Draugr, yes, but humans and elves, too. A moment of silence held in the air.

At the crossroads waited Inga Rune-Eyes, along with the other leaders of the clans of Bretagard—Arni, Sigrid, Fynn. By the Kannah leader stood that lanky stranger, the one who'd fallen from the sky. Niko, their name was.

Harald, too, was close by, flanked by a retinue of brass-armored honor guard. He and Fynn were staring at each other with open contempt, but at least weapons hadn't been drawn. With the Doomskar over, the gods had vanished. Off to other tasks, other duties—this corner of Kaldheim was hardly the only one that had suffered, Kaya supposed.

"Kaya. Tyvar," said Inga, by way of greeting. "You appear unharmed."

"More or less," said Kaya.

"I am glad."

"We broke the draugr lines and drove off their main body," said Sigrid. "Our scouts are pursuing the stragglers, but we'll never catch them all. Unless draugr melt in the warmer months, we'll be dealing with them for years. But any trouble they cause will be nothing compared to the demons that escaped."



Sigrid, God-Favored | Art by: Johannes Voss

“It’s the same all across Bretagard. Probably all across the realms,” said Inga. “The rifts were open for a long time. There’s no telling what slipped through.”

“I, for one, can’t wait to find out,” said Arni, grinning.

“As you say, all the realms have been changed by what happened here. The elves will return to Skemfar, to care for our own,” announced Harald. “It will not be simple, even with the Doomskar finished. But the spells of our ancestors are capable of such feats and more.”

“I suppose we’ll have to get along until then,” said Fynn, his jaw clenched tight.

“What will you do, Kaya?” asked Inga. “You still have a monster to catch, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Kaya. She hadn’t forgotten about the thing in the cave, even though it seemed like a hundred years since her voyage with the Omenseekers. “No telling where it ended up after all this, though. And I’ve got a hunch that it can travel a lot farther than just between realms.”

“What’s beyond the realms?” asked Niko.

“The planes. It’s all a bit complicated,” said Kaya, waving her hand. She was too tired to explain it all again.

But Niko stepped forward, an odd eagerness in the stranger’s eyes. “These planes. Is there one called Theros?”

Kaya looked at them in surprise. It was hard to believe that name mentioned here, now—but then, what about her day had been easy to believe? *Another one*, she thought, and sighed. “We should probably talk.”

Epilogue

Esika was dying. That wasn’t supposed to happen—she was a god. It was by her hand, in fact, that the gods were freed from their mortality, from aging, from that final closing in of the dark. It was Esika

who brewed the potion of divinity from the sap of the World Tree, the draught that kept death at bay, and yet she could feel the life escaping her. Running down her arms, her body, her face. She couldn't move her legs—she would have fallen to the ground by now, if the monster who had done this was not holding her up with one raw, flesh-colored claw. It tilted her to one side, regarding her with those dark, empty eye sockets. It had found her, this thing, in her sanctum, the place where she drew the sap and brewed the Cosmos Elixir. Nobody—nothing—had ever found her here.



Esika, God of the Tree | Art by: Collin Estrada

A voice rose from the creature's throat, then—an odd amalgamation of tones and deliveries, as if the words had been stolen from other voices, synthesized into something new. "Not enough hunger in you. Not enough fear to survive. Soon, though."

It dropped her, then, and stalked back toward the well that ran to the heart of the tree.

Esika tried to raise her arms—she had never been a warrior, not like Halvar or Toralf, but she would fight with everything she had left to defend the World Tree. Her arms wouldn't obey her, though. She tried to shout, to call for help, but the only thing that came out was a bubbling, wet croak.

She watched, helpless, as the monster reached the well. What poison would it use? What corruption would it seed in this most sacred place?



Tyrite Sanctum | Art by: Volkan Baga

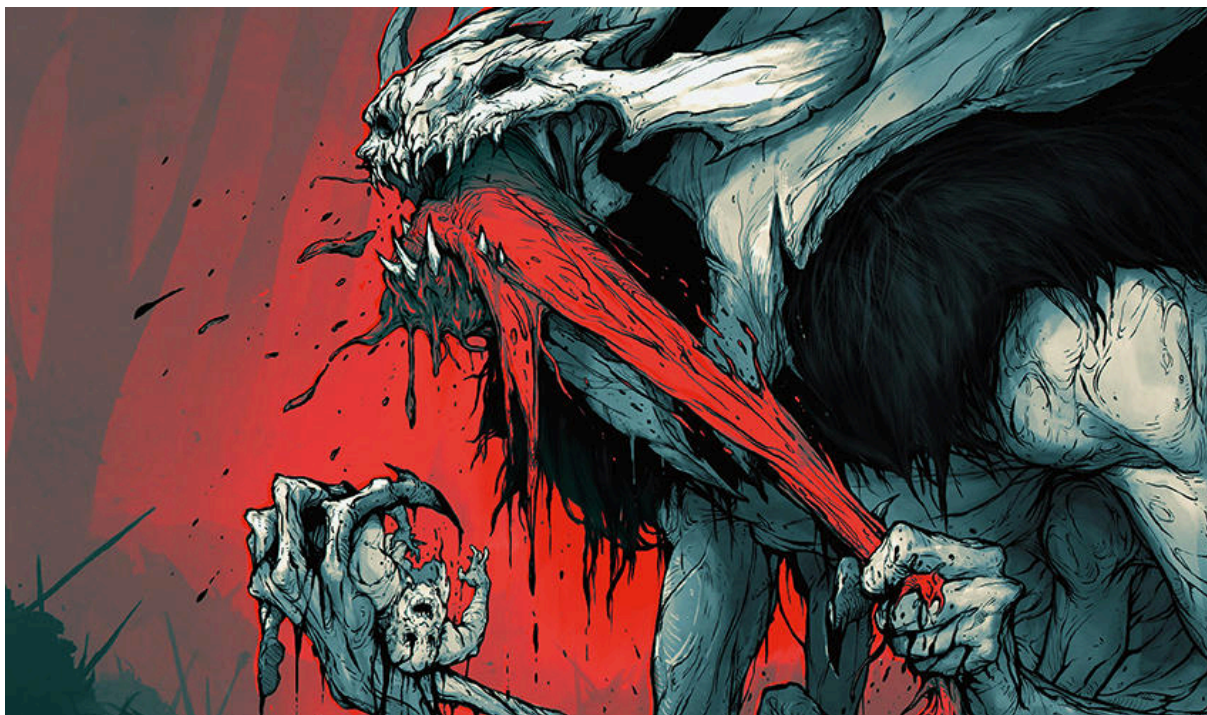
To her surprise, it produced one of her own bottles. It must have taken one from her during their fight. She watched it dip the bottle into the well and hold it up to the light. Inside, the sap of the World Tree shimmered with all the colors of the realms. The most beautiful thing in this world—in any world, as far as Esika was concerned. If the monster was moved, it showed no sign.

“Sample acquired,” it said, in that stitched-together voice. “I am ready to return.”

To whom it was speaking, Esika had no idea.

The light in the room seemed to be fading, or maybe that was just her vision going out around the edges. Suddenly, there was a bright, strobing light in the center of the chamber—a hissing, sparking red glow that began as a single star and spread, slowly, into a circle. The circle widened—this was no Omenpath, she could see now. It was magic she had never seen before.

From the other side of the portal came a sound so unearthly and strange, she almost didn’t recognize it as a voice: “*Welcome back, Vorinlex. We step ever closer to perfection.*”



Vorinclex, Monstrous Raider | Art by: Richard Luong