

The Edge of the World

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From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

Lord Nellick's receiving room is cold.

The parlor fire has been burning for hours, but Jacob's knuckles still ache with the chill. The heavy brocade drapes, the scroll-legged tables, and the many framed landscapes speak of comfort and wealth, but all the money on the Plane cannot combat the night crouching outside, scrabbling hungrily at the wall. If the Innistrad gentry could have bought themselves out of the darkness, they would have done it already.

"Thank you for your punctuality, Mr. Hauken." Lord Nellick does not appear bothered by the cold. With a high forehead and a patrician nose, he is handsome in a narrow sort of way. He lounges in a wide-backed chair, grand and languorous and smiling. Considering the current atmosphere in town, he is downright chipper.

Jacob doesn't like it. He has the impression Nellick is telling a joke he is not in on.

"No need to thank me," he says. "I was in the neighborhood."



Art by: Aurore Folny

A lie, but he will add the stagecoach to the bill. He had to offer the driver a hefty bribe to even consider the trip. The villages along the Alrun River were inhospitable even before The Travails, but now well, Jacob just wishes that when the Plane decided to plunge itself into permanent night, he could have been caught somewhere that didn't reek of fish and rotting infrastructure.

But judging from what he's found since his arrival in Selhoff, the choking, heavy mantle of fear will feel the same no matter where he goes.

“Detective Wicker here assures me you are the best in the business,” Nellick goes on.

The Detective Wicker in question gives Jacob a tight nod. He is surprised she even remembers him. They worked briefly together three years ago, but that was before The Travails, in the old Innistrad. He never even learned her first name. He recalls her as unfriendly, unusually severe for someone so young, and prone to rookie mistakes. He figured she hadn’t thought very highly of him, either, but clearly, he was wrong if she’s brought him in to consult. He’s impressed she’s even thinking that clearly. Nowadays all anyone wants to do is chop their firewood, earn their coin however they can, and bolt their doors behind them.

“We’ll have a few questions for you, Lord Nellick,” Jacob says.

“Of course.” Nellick folds his hands. “What would you like to know?”

“Let’s begin with the dangerous horde of geists pillaging up and down Nephalia.” Detective Wicker sits with her pen poised over her journal, back straight, curly hair pinned neatly. Jacob, who has been wearing the same jacket and waistcoat since he left the Alrun, feels shabby beside her. “Lord Nellick, correct me if I’m wrong, but the stories I’ve heard insist all the targets of these attacks have been the morally bankrupt. Didn’t they knock the mayor of Havengul off this roof after he drove a block of families out of their homes?”

Polite amusement flickers across Nellick’s face, and he crosses his legs in interest. “I don’t see what that has to do with me.” He moves with sinuous deliberation, every motion considered.

Jacob leans back in his own chair. “I believe she is asking what you think you’ve done to make yourself a target.”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m a businessman, Detective Wicker. When I make money, someone else loses it.”

That was rather more candor than Jacob was expecting.

“But if you’re asking if I’ve dumped anyone in the bay recently—” Nellick laughs. “You can rest assured, I’m innocent.”

Wicker’s expression doesn’t relax, but she nods and jots down a note.

Jacob graciously allows Wicker to ask the preliminary questions. It gives him time to think. A swarm of unusually vicious geists roaming Nephalia, attacking politicians and merchants, draining their life energy to leave behind a desiccated husk. That’s odd, to say the least. But after The Travails there’s been more than enough novelty to go around. The Plane has been picked up and shaken, and all of its pieces are jostled out of their proper places. Jacob wishes he were still young enough for it to fill him with a sense of adventure, rather than just bleak exhaustion tinged with cold terror.

When Wicker’s questions are finished, Jacob offers his own professional advice. “Stay inside, Lord Nellick, though I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that nowadays. You should have someone set up wards.”

Lord Nellick rises from his chair. “You can’t do that?”

“No, unfortunately,” Jacob lies. The last thing he is going to do is air out old, musty rituals for this man. “Better off going to the church for that. They’ll charge you less than I would, anyway.”

Nellick laughs, although it wasn’t a joke. His smile doesn’t show his teeth. “Surely I can convince the two of you to stay the night. Well—so to speak, at least.” He lets out a polite little chuckle, as if the end of Innistrad is just drawing-room banter.

Jacob imagines spending one more minute in this chilly place and suppresses a shudder. Reminds him way too much of home. “That’s very kind of you, my lord, but I wouldn’t want to put you out. There’s a public house close by. I don’t predict any trouble.”

If night creatures have become bold enough to attack in the middle of a city, surrounded by wards and armed hunters, well, then there's really no hope for any of them anymore. Better to submit to fate.

"I've lodgings elsewhere, as well," Wicker sniffs.

"Suit yourselves," Nellick says. He turns to Wicker to shake her hand.

"As Mr. Hauken suggested, an accredited mage would " She breaks off, going still, before dropping his hand.

Then, stiffly, she smiles.

A strange feeling hovers at the base of Jacob's spine, but before he can dwell on it, Wicker turns on her heel. "Come on!"

Perplexed, Jacob nods briefly at Lord Nellick before following Wicker down the hall. "Wicker, slow down!"

Jacob catches her in the echoing grand foyer, the shapes of hulking busts of past Nellicks glaring at them from the shadows. Wicker looks up at him from beneath dark brows, leaning in like she has a secret. "You can call me Eloise," she says, before a servant opens the door and bows them out.

Selhoff is a city on the edge of the world, and winter bites like a mad wolf. Frost etches glittering patterns into glass windows, and the Bay of Vustrow yawns dark and endless beyond the docks, like a piece of the Plane scooped out and discarded. Even before the fall of permanent night, this wasn't a place for the frail. When the wind blows, the city holds its breath and bows its head.

The tails of Jacob's coat dance around his legs, his hair whipping at his frozen cheeks. The cold seems to have sunk into Wicker's limbs as well, because her first few steps down the lane are unsteady. Jacob moves to catch her as she stumbles.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." She looks up at Jacob. He's short enough that most people don't have to do that, not even women, but Wicker—Eloise—barely rounds out five feet tall. Her lips twitch. "Nice hair."

Well, at least she's entertained.

"I can take the investigation from here," Jacob says, as they start down the road. From this high up, the moonlight glimmers on rooftops glazed with ice, all their flags and ornaments lowered to wait for a spring that might never come.

"Hmm?" Eloise glances back at him. "You don't want me anymore?"

Jacob doesn't know how to answer that.

She laughs. "What makes you think you're better suited to it than me? Your esoteric skillset?"

"You're the one who referred Nellick to me," Jacob says, annoyed. He wishes she would walk faster. The local vampires are busy preparing for a wedding and most likely won't be hunting on city streets, but that doesn't make being out in the dark any more appealing. Jacob's shoulders are stiff with unease.

"It's so ugly from the outside," Eloise says to herself.

"What?" He follows her gaze. Climbing above the city are the towers of industry, where the elite make their home. Most of them are beautiful, but the largest is a huge greasy-gray stone monstrosity, punching up at the sky like a fist aimed at the gods. Looking at it makes him queasy; the malice pouring off it is intense. It would have to be, considering Jacob can pick it out from the ambient malice in the air. "Quite the eyesore," he agrees. "What is it?"

“Oh, it’s vacant. A necro-chemist lived there, but not anymore. There was an incident a few months ago. A geistbomb misfired. Killed a bunch of people.”



Art by: E. M. Gist

“A what?” Jacob isn’t sure if he heard her right. “A geist bomb? What is that?”

Eloise looks up from beneath her bangs. “Exactly what it sounds like. An explosive device fueled with dead souls.”

The queasiness intensifies. “That’s “ He doesn’t even know what to say. Whenever he thinks he has seen the very worst Innistrad has to offer, a whole new realm of horror opens before him.

The wind whirls through the eaves, sending a crumpled, discarded ribbon tumbling across the street. A few market stalls are open despite the cold and the dark, their minders huddling behind them with heads bowed. Unsafe, but they likely have little choice. Even eternal darkness and the monsters that hunt inside it hasn’t been enough to convince landlords to lower their rents. Food must be bought. Medical bills must be paid.

Jacob remembers Selhoff in the height of summer—the colors and smells and drifting music. He’s no tavern-crawler, but he likes to watch the crowd. Anything to remind him that Innistrad isn’t dead.

As they round a corner into a desolate stretch of alley, his stomach tightens. Not an unusual sensation; he always feels spectral activity in the gastric system first. But this is strange.

“Steady on.” He touches Eloise’s shoulder, feeling her go perfectly still under his hand.

“Hm?”

“Listen.”

The wind screams. Before, Jacob imagined Nellick’s description of a “swarm of geists” to be an exaggeration. Artful hyperbole. Geists are solitary creatures by their very nature; they do not possess the intelligence or animal instinct necessary for cooperation. Every so often they will group, but never in the spirit of community, just shared interest in a spot or a source of power.

This is not like that.

The world around them explodes into the shivering fog of geists. They stream up from the ground, from inside the adjacent buildings, and down from the slate-gray sky. Cool, slithery magic paints over Jacob's skin, the smoky voices of emotion scrabbling to find a way inside him. Fear, regret, sorrow, excitement, and rage, rage, rage, burning bright and hot inside his chest.

A shriek builds in Jacob until his very bones are rattling. It's only through instinct that he manages to plant his feet and force his fingers into a clumsy warding gesture, pushing magic into the palms of his hands.

"Eloise, get behind me, just—"

The geists flow up in front of them, coalescing for one trembling moment into a woman's screaming face. The gale slams into Eloise, knocking her backward against the alley wall.

Jacob swears and thrusts his hands out again, summoning up every ounce of muscle memory. He hasn't met a spirit this powerful in years; usually all it takes is a few words and the twitch of a finger to settle things down. But that was before The Travails. Now all magic is harder. Everything is harder.

"Leave," he shouts, putting all of himself into the banishing command. "NOW!"

The screaming woman turns on him, finally solid enough for him to make out details. Wild hair, round eyes, strong shoulders, and a furious mouth.



Art by: Anato Finnstark

Then she's gone. The wind calms and the silence presses in on his ears. Strength leaves him like heat escaping an oven, and he falls against the brickwork.

Eloise groans. Blood pools at the corner of her mouth, and her eyes are hazy when she looks up at him. "Jacob?"

"I'm here," he says.

Luckily, there's an inn on the next corner. Neither of them is strong enough to carry the other in their current conditions. By the time they are installed in a parlor with a physician on the way, Eloise is

more or less lucid again, if muddled. As Jacob helps her to an armchair by the hearth, she smiles at him, slow and curious.

“How did you do that?”

Jacob removes his gloves and overcoat, hunkering down in front of the fire. He feels like he’s just come out of an ice bath.

“Do what?”

Eloise wipes at the blood on her mouth. “Command geists.”

“Oh. I grew up around them.”

Eloise laughs softly, a thoughtful noise. “You grew up around geists?”

“No. Well, yes.”

Eloise tips her head to show she is listening.

Jacob shouldn’t have said anything. Misdirection is always the wiser course, but his logic center is not working at maximum capacity just now. His skin is still shivering with the shock of absorbing and expelling energy so quickly. Lights sparkle in the corners of his vision, a veil between himself and Innistrad.

He looks into the fire. “The people who raised me revered geists. Almost worshipped them. The dead are easier to contend with than the living. Predictable, and easy to control.”

The firelight glints off the pin in Eloise’s hair. “I’ve never heard anyone talk about geists like pets.”

Jacob can’t manage a smile. “Geists have knowledge no living creature ever can. Not even a vampire can see behind the veil. The people I grew up with were convinced that only the dead can reveal true wisdom.”

Eloise’s eyes are very dark in the shadows. “Fascinating.” Her fingers twitch. “And what made you decide to hunt geists, rather than worship them?”

“I don’t hunt geists,” Jacob says, with a familiar pulse of annoyance. “I investigate geist-related incidents. I’ll leave the hunting to the Keepers of the Pale. I’m not interested in the church.”

“I see.” The injury makes Eloise’s gaze sleepy and slow and just the slightest bit sinister. “Then why investigate geists?”

“My friend. She—”

The landlady arrives with tea and a plate of thick, raisin-studded cake. Jacob busies himself, pouring Eloise a cup. She takes it, but then just balances the saucer on her thighs. She gestures for Jacob to go on as soon as they are alone again.

He shakes his head. “It isn’t interesting.”

Eloise huffs. “You’re the one who brought it up. You obviously want to keep talking.”

Jacob sighs. “My friend died when we were young. She was found strangled.” The pain is so old he barely feels it, as familiar as any other bodily process.

“Who killed her?”

Jacob adds sugar to his tea. They brew it too bitter in the south. “I don’t know. No one bothered to find out.”

Eloise’s brow furrows.

"I told you—my people revere the dead. My friend joined their ranks, who cared how? The elders gave it up as an accident."

Eloise snorts. "Did they all rush to join her?"

Jacob blows across the surface of his tea. "No."

"Sounds like they weren't very dedicated to death, then."

Jacob's laugh feels dragged from deep inside, leaving him raw, but he feels better when it's out. "Anyway, I realized I couldn't stay there. I just couldn't look at them anymore. Any of them. I decided to go into business with the only knowledge I had. I thought well, it sounds silly now, but I thought I could help people. And I did, I suppose. For a while."

"Not anymore?"

He snorts. "Are you serious? I haven't had a client in weeks. Surely you couldn't have seen much business yourself."

Eloise looks confused for a moment, before her expression clears. "Ah. Yes. Eternal night. A bit inconvenient, agreed."

"That's putting it mildly."

"How would you put it, then?"

Jacob puts his teacup down. "The end of Innistrad?"

Eloise smiles. "Dramatic."

"Not really." He shrugs. "It's only a matter of time before the vampire houses move in to pen us like cattle. And in the meantime, the night creatures pick us off one by one." It feels gauche to say it out loud. Like talking about sex, or childbirth, or taxes. Something everyone knows but doesn't speak about in polite company. The end of everything.

"Then why are you still here?" Eloise asks. She's still holding onto her full teacup. Maybe her injury made her queasy.

He looks down at the cake, but he doesn't much feel like eating either. "What do you mean?"

"There's a whole bay out there. It's very cold. You could jump in." Her voice is slow, almost hypnotic. "Find out those hidden truths only available to the dead."

Jacob stares at her. She isn't at all the way he remembered her. "I don't know," he says after a moment. "Habit, I guess. What about you? Things can't be much better in Selhoff than they are anywhere else."

Eloise leans in like she is telling him a secret. "I'm going to keep living until they drag me under."

He leans in, too, reflexively. She hasn't made any attempt to talk him out of his strangled pessimism, and it is strangely comforting. She understands. He can see it in her eyes.

She touches cold fingertips to his face. "Thank you for telling me your story, Jacob Hauken," she says, and Jacob feels something.

It slides beneath his skin, oily and slick like the film on a decaying corpse, moving through him. Searching, seeking. Forcing its way in.

Jacob recoils, dropping the teacup.

Eloise's eyes narrow. "Are you alright?"

Before he can dredge together a response, the physician finally arrives, pushing Jacob aside. He almost forgot he sent for one. He leaves Eloise to get her head checked and goes out into the hallway to try to clear his own.

It takes a few minutes of steady breathing for the slimy feeling in his bones to dissipate. He wonders if it could be a side effect of the dispelling charms he cast out on the street. Unusual, but magic's effect on the body changes as it ages, and Jacob isn't getting any younger.

The physician emerges a quarter of an hour later, ashen, and rather unsteady. Maybe Eloise had suggested casual suicide to her as well.

"How is she?" he asks.

"Hmm? Oh, muddled." The physician's mouth quirks up. "Well, she would be. A geist slammed her head against a wall. She's sleeping now."

"She told you that?" Bad form, to discuss an open investigation with someone who isn't an active participant, but he supposes allowances had to be made with an injury like this.

"She told me all sorts of things," the physician says, with another half-smile.

"Have we met?" he asks before he can help himself. Just the way she's looking at him.

"Met?" The physician tilts her head. "No, I don't think so. Take care, Jacob."

Despite the physician's words, when Jacob returns to the parlor, Eloise isn't asleep but rather sitting slumped in the armchair, slowly massaging her eyelids.

"Eloise, did the physician leave you with any instructions?"

She drops her hand to her lap. "I'm not sure, Jacob. Just sleep, I think." Her eyes dart from Jacob to the spilled tea to the uneaten cake. "What the hell happened to me?"

Jacob steps closer to the fire. "What do you mean?"

Eloise continues to rub a palm against her temple. "I remember the merchant in the tower. His hands were cold. Then, nothing after that."

"That's concerning. We talked quite a bit."

Eloise lets out a breath. "I have a concussion and a wrenched muscle in my back. I'll somehow manage to survive losing the memories of whatever thrilling banter the two of us shared."

Jacob finds himself half-expecting her to suddenly break character and start laughing at him again. But whatever strange mood had taken hold of her after her injury appears to have departed with the doctor. Jacob tries to ignore the hint of disappointment. He'd almost started to like her.

"Well, thrilling might be a bit of a—"

Jacob breaks off as he feels a thrumming beneath his skin. No. It can't be. What the hell is going on?

Being targeted by the very geists he's been summoned here to investigate could be written away as coincidence once. But twice?

"What's wrong?" Eloise goes very still. "Hauken, what is it?"

The geists howl into the parlor, pouring in through the walls and ceiling and up through the floors. Wind tears at Jacob's hair and sends the tableware flying through the room like artillery. Jacob nar-

rowly manages to dodge a dinner knife. The geists don't attempt to scare or threaten this time but immediately resolve into the same screaming woman.

And just like last time, she ignores Jacob and makes straight for Eloise. Eloise shrieks, shrinking back in the chair.

"Don't let it touch you!" Jacob yells.

"How am I supposed to do that?" Eloise yells back.

The geist stops. Inside the tiny parlor, she seems to stretch from floor to ceiling, her edges indistinct. "Are you talking to me?"

Jacob's veins tremble with her voice. "Yes."

She tips her head. "No one talks to me."

"Well " He spreads his palms. "Surprise."

With great deliberation, the geist looks at Eloise. "I thought this was the one I've been looking for. It was. But now it isn't."

Eloise's eyes are round and huge. "Is this the geist that attacked me?"

"Yes," says Jacob.

"This is a lie," says the geist.

"Is she talking?" Eloise asks. "It just sounds like the wind."

Jacob swears. "I need paper—something to write on, anything—"

Eloise pats at her coat, pulls out her journal, and rips a page out with careful deliberation. Jacob picks up the knife left with the cake and drags it across his palm.

"What are you—"

He paints a series of sloppy symbols, swaying as he forces power into the seal. He's scraping the bottom of his reserves at this point. Shaking a few more drops of blood off his palm, he finishes the last symbol and waves the paper to dry it. Then he holds it out to the geist.

Jacob watches as she slowly realizes what he wants her to do with it. She takes it from him, fingers leaving an ethereal afterimage as she moves. Instantly, her edges become more solid, and she settles more heavily onto the ground.

"That was a lie," she says again, her voice firmer.

Eloise reacts visibly, her eyes getting even bigger. "Oh," she says. "I can hear her."

"No no, it was a lie, but now it's not." She looks back at Jacob. "Who are you?"

"I'm called Jacob. Who are you?"

The geist takes so long to answer that Jacob starts to think perhaps the spell isn't working after all. But then— "Millicent. That was my name. I was someone, once." As she speaks, her form continues to shrink down on itself, becoming more fixed, the blood seal helping anchor her in her memories. "We all lived together in a place by the river. Until he came. He used us. Fresh spirits."

"He? Who is he?"

"Someone we shouldn't have trusted. He knew the dead. They listened to him."

“Knew the dead do you mean, a necro-alchemist?” Information begins to compile in Jacob’s head, teasing the edges of his cognition, just out of reach. This used to be exhilarating, once upon a time, when the thrill of discovery was still new. Now he just feels tired. “Eloise, you told me a necro-alchemist lived in that tower. That he was the one whose geistbomb destroyed that town. What was his name?”

Eloise scowls. “I never told you that.”

“Right—” her head. “Right, you don’t remember, but you did tell me, on the way out of Nellick’s house. You told me about a necro-alchemist that set off a geistbomb in a village nearby.”

Eloise continues to blink at him. “No, I didn’t.”

Jacob shakes his head. “I know you don’t remember, but—”

“I never told you about a necro-alchemist who set off a geistbomb in a nearby village,” Eloise says, “because I don’t know anything about a necro-alchemist who set off a geistbomb in a nearby village. What the hell is a geistbomb?”

The wind howls outside, and Jacob tenses, but it’s just the ordinary kind. He forces himself to focus; he hasn’t been this jumpy in years. “You don’t know.”

“No, I don’t. I’d heard something about a town going through a disaster, but not what, or who, caused it.”

Jacob thinks. “That doesn’t make sense.” He’s missing a critical bit of information. “This necro-alchemist, where is he now?”

“I told you—”

“I’m not talking to you.” Jacob looks at the geist in the center of the room.

“He ended when we ended,” she says slowly.

“You mean he’s dead?”

Millicent hesitates. “I don’t know. He’s here. I’ve seen him. He was “ Once again, she looks at Eloise. And Jacob understands.

He thinks of Eloise’s lazy smile and the squirming feeling of filth forcing itself beneath his skin when she touched him. The physician who hadn’t even asked him to pay her. Nellick’s cold eyes.

“Oh,” Jacob says. “Shit.”

“What an unexpected delight.” Nellick is just as elegant as he was this morning, still sitting in his cold parlor. The hollow-eyed servant who brought Jacob up says nothing, simply bows and leaves as fast as she can. “What brings you back so soon, Mr. Hauken? Is this a social call?” The corner of a sharp canine gleams. “It’s really too late for business.”

Jacob matches his smile. “Recently, it’s always too late for business. Fortunately, these sorts of investigations rarely keep regular hours.” The fire is unlit, and so are the candles. Lord Nellick was sitting in the dark. “I was wondering what you could tell me about Cyril Rav.”

Nellick’s smile doesn’t droop. “Hm? I’m not sure, I haven’t spent much time with necro-alchemists.”

“But you do know he’s a necro-alchemist.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard his name, here and there. If he’s someone important, mention of him will have crossed my desk.” He steps forward, gold brocade robe tied loosely around his waist. He hadn’t bothered to dress before meeting Jacob. “Seriously, you can’t just be here to ask me that.” Nellick’s feet

make no sound on the rug as he moves closer. His eyes look like ice floes. He raises a hand, brushing his fingers across Jacob's cheek. "So, tell me what can I do for you?"

At first Jacob feels nothing but soft, chilly fingertips and thinks that he must be wrong and will now need to find a way to extricate himself from a supremely awkward situation.

But then he feels it. Oily, pressing fingers wiggling their way under his skin, coating his throat and the roof of his mouth with smoke.

Instead of pushing Nellick away, he pulls him closer, hand on the back of his neck. "Have you ever possessed a geistmage before? I promise you won't like it."

And then he pushes back.

Nellick's body goes rigid before he staggers away with an inhuman hiss. His legs tangle in his heavy robe and he falls, barely catching himself on his elbows. He wipes at his mouth, which has begun to drip thick, black blood.

"You didn't take many pains to hide it," Jacob says.

"Still took you long enough. I thought you were a detective."

Jacob doesn't show the hit on his face, but he feels it.

He hadn't noticed, and he should have. Just, he'd been so shaken by Millicent's attacks, and, the truth is, no one in Innistrad has been at the peak of their powers in the last few years since The Travails. The changed magic unbalances the weather, which unbalances the Plane, which unbalances people. Still, he should have noticed that he's only truly spoken to one person since arriving in Selhoff.

"This is rather awkward for me, I admit," Rav says, gesturing at himself, sprawled in the brocade gown on the floor.

Jacob backs up a step. "Get up, then."

"Hmm? Oh, no. I just meant, I hired you without even knowing I was speaking to one of the exalted Vizag Atum. The geist-talkers. Terribly rude of me."

Jacob doesn't blink. "I left that group a long time ago."

"Yes, because of your friend. Fascinating. How cruel people can be."

"You would know, wouldn't you?"

Another flash of rage flickers across Rav's face, the same one Jacob had seen in Eloise's eyes when he'd spilled the tea. "That was a mistake. An unfortunate misstep."

"Was it?"

Rav tugs the neck of his robe closed with great dignity. "Of course. I would much rather my geistbomb succeed than fail. Why would you think anything different? What, did that geist tell you something else?"

"She wasn't killing corrupt officials, was she?" Jacob counters. "She was looking for you. That mayor you pushed off a roof—"

"Oh, that. I didn't like that body; I don't think it suited me."

"You only steal the forms of influential people."

“How else would I influence anything?” Rav’s eyes glint with humor. “And yes, she’s been bent on revenge since that whole unfortunate affair. Can’t imagine why. It’s not as if I’m any less dead than she is.”

“Except she doesn’t steal other people’s bodies.”

Rav snorts. “That’s because she can’t. I have an affinity with death, much like you do. Most geists can’t possess a living body, especially not without that body’s permission. I’m simply exceptional.”

“Modest, too.”

“It was a statement without a value judgment. I am an exception, much like you are.” He sighs, seemingly perfectly content to stay on the ground and keep looking up at Jacob. “Nevertheless, I wish you’d just destroyed Millicent, instead of listening to her list of grievances.”

“Bad luck, then. You shouldn’t have possessed my colleague.”

Rav rises from the ground with unexpected grace. He seems to wear this body better than he did Eloise’s or the physician’s. “Well, yes. True. I just couldn’t resist watching you work, Jacob. I like you. And that’s why I’m glad you’re here.”

“Am I supposed to be flattered?” Jacob asks faintly.

“I wouldn’t mind,” the necro-alchemist says. “A little flattery never hurt anyone.”

“I’m not going to destroy Millicent,” Jacob says. “You’ll have to deal with her on your own.”

“Oh, I don’t care about her anymore. I just took your advice and had someone from the church put up wards. Very kind of you.” Another sharp-toothed grin. “No, you shouldn’t be asking what you can do for me, but what I can do for you.”

He walks over to a dusty sideboard and selects a bottle seemingly at random, pouring a splash of liquor into an equally dusty glass. “Drink?”

Jacob grits his teeth. “No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” He settles in a chair beside the empty fireplace. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“I’ll stand.”

Rav shrugs. “I think we should go into business together.”

Jacob waits for the punchline.

“I can help you, Jacob Hauken. With me by your side, you won’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Of course, you are. You just spent an hour in that inn telling me all your fears. The night, the monsters, the yawning dark of the bay.” He swirls the amber liquor in his glass but doesn’t drink. His eyes look like jewels. “You should be careful who you open up to, in the future.”

Jacob says nothing.

“The days of humanity are gone,” Rav says. “And the night is getting colder. Imagine if you didn’t have to worry. Let me help you. I can protect you. Just come with me.”

Jacob blinks. “Where?”

“Anywhere. I can set up a laboratory anywhere on Innistrad. You can solve your geist crimes, whatever you want.” He looks up, thoughtful. “Or we can find the people who killed your friend, and we can make them pay. Together.”

Jacob stares at him, trying to tease some meaning from between the words. “Why? What’s in it for you?”

Rav rubs his fingertips across the shining wood of the chair. “I’ve been alone for a long time.”

Jacob can’t explain why, but he believes him. “Why me?”

“Why not?” He shakes his head, as if Jacob is bothering him with silly trifles. “I can’t do anything to you. You’re a geistmage. I can’t take your body, and you can banish me if I do anything you don’t like. What’s the downside? If you don’t like looking at this body, I can just take another one.”

Jacob thinks of all the things he should say, all the things he would have said only a few years ago. He doesn’t make deals with killers. He has a duty. Or he did.

Then the whole Plane broke.

“Don’t try to take a high road,” Rav goes on. “You’re from Innistrad, like me. You know better than to turn down power when it’s offered to you. What do you do this job for? Justice? Please. You’re too smart for that. Money? We can get money anywhere.”

Jacob closes his eyes. “I’m just tired.”

“I know,” Rav says.



Art by: Jarel Threat

Lord Nellick’s mansion looms out of the dark, stately and silent. Despite the danger, Eloise Wicker is glad of the night. Her head hurts. Besides, it makes the ethereal form standing beside her easier to see. Millicent still clutches the blood seal Hauken made for her, staring at the house with a rage that would be terrifying even if she wasn’t a geist.

“I cannot enter,” she says.

Eloise sighs. “Well, I can. Wait here.”

She's only inside for a few minutes, as long as it takes to check the place from one end to the other. She finds two unconscious servants in the kitchen, and a body in the parlor: Lord Nellick. Jacob Hauken is nowhere to be found.

Eloise returns to the geist and tells Millicent what she found.

Millicent stays quiet for so long that Eloise begins to fear the blood seal has stopped working. But then she says, "Rav must have taken him, after taking a new body."

"I didn't find any sign of a struggle."

Millicent looks at her sharply.

"This is my job, after all. If he left, it was likely under his own power. Or, it's possible he never made it in the first place." She shrugs. "A lot of monsters roaming the street these days."

Millicent smiles faintly. "Like me."

Eloise knows she means it as a joke, but she doesn't find it funny. "You aren't a monster," she snaps, surprised by her own vehemence. "You just need someone to fight for you."

Millicent is quiet for a moment. "Do you think he went willingly," she says at last. "Would he?"

Eloise looks off into the gloom of Selhoff's streets, as if Hauken will show himself suddenly at her behest. "I don't know. I don't actually know him that well."

Millicent nods, then she drops the blood seal.

"Wait!" Eloise catches it before it can hit the ground, shoving it back into Millicent's hands. "What are you doing?"

"I don't need this. I will continue my search."

Eloise sighs, rubbing at her aching temples. "Keep the seal."

Millicent looks at her, head tilted like a dark bird.

"I've never worked for a geist before, but my rates are very reasonable."