
Episode 4: Don't Give Up

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The gleaming golden shadow of Kyodai led them onward—although “led” might have been the wrong description. It wasn’t clear the tiny dragon knew it was being followed or understood where they were going. It had started moving when the Wanderer asked it to help them find Nashi, but it hadn’t responded to any requests since then, not even when she asked it to slow down.

The glimmer could move through the House without fear. Winter said glimmers went out sometimes, or were extinguished, but not how or why that happened, and not whether there was some monster in the House dedicated specifically to the snuffing out of hopes. If there was, it moved in shadows, and no one ever saw it strike. The glimmer continued at the same pace, even as it undulated through rooms filled with writhing mist, past hulking things with skins like jagged obsidian spikes that ripped and tore at the remains of something unlucky enough to catch their attention, past eyeless masses of flesh and crawling masses of eyes. All those horrors ignored it, letting it go peacefully on its way.

Winter, Niko, and the Wanderer followed the glimmer, moving with less careless confidence of their own survival as they had to cross every room it drifted through on foot and without attracting attention. During one of the rare moments when nothing horrific was nearby, Winter muttered sourly, “Something should have jumped us by now.”

“Let’s not borrow trouble,” said Niko.

“I’m not,” said Winter. “If the House is letting us pass, that just means it has something planned.”

“So we stay sharp,” said the Wanderer, and the group kept moving, following her glimmer into a long gallery filled with gold-framed mirrors. Half were broken, shards of glass littering the floor. The other half reflected a strange, irregular distortion.

Niko had been on Kaldheim long enough to have seen the dancing rainbows of Esika’s ribbons refracted through frozen mist, shattered into a thousand individual specks of light and color. This was like that, but ... lifeless. It was just as brilliant, just as dazzlingly hypnotic, but at the same time, it was dead.

Winter kept going until he realized both his companions had stopped to stare at the mirrors. Only then did he pause and backtrack to see what they were looking at. Kyodai followed, showing awareness of the situation for the first time since their journey started. Winter stiffened when he saw the jittering color reflected in the glass. Swearing under his breath, he grabbed Niko by the arm and tried to drag them away from the mirror they were staring into.

“We need to move,” he said. “We’re too exposed here, we can’t just stand around waiting for them to finish manifesting.”

“Them who?” asked Niko.

"The glitch ghosts," said Winter. "They use reflective surfaces to enter the House. For the longest time, we thought it was proof that somewhere we'd find a bunch of mirrors that were actually windows and would let us get out, but no. Turns out you can only come and go if you're someone who died outside the House and somehow got as trapped as all the rest of us."

As if summoned by his explanation, a shuddering entity began to drag itself from the mirror frame, the shifting, refracting light moving with it as it resolved into a humanoid shape and reached for Niko. Echoes of its limbs followed along behind it, creating a jittering cloud of half-sketched distortions, like the figure was existing in every time at the same time, simultaneously spreading itself across probabilities. It didn't look solid, but it looked deadly all the same.

The vague impression of a face formed out of the smooth front of its "head," and its new mouth gaped wide, straining toward Niko even as it continued reaching out.

Niko's eyes widened. "No," they said, breaking out of their momentary fugue. "No, I do not think we'll be doing that." They reached into the empty air beside them and pulled out a glistening shard of blue-tinged magical force, spinning it on their palm before they flung it at the entity.

It struck without striking, enveloped without enveloping. The shard hit the entity, and the entity was gone, while the shard remained, now filled with a dancing, multicolored film of ever-changing light.

The mirror went dull, not reflecting Niko, but no longer filled with light, either. Niko plucked the shard from the air and spun it one more time as they studied its occupant, then lowered it, holding it close to their hip.

They turned to find Winter staring at them. They lifted a brow. "Yes?" they asked.

"That was ... you can't fight one of them," said Winter. "They take you and you die. Or you use a ghost-catcher to banish them outside, where they came from in the first place. What you just did isn't possible!"

"I guess no one told the mirror-thing that," said Niko.

The golden glimmer of Kyodai was still visible at the end of the hall, the Wanderer close behind. The glimmer had apparently managed to break her from her own fugue, and she was back to following it along the path that would hopefully lead them to Nashi. Niko and Winter hurried after them, and the four pressed on into the House.

It was hard to call what they were doing "going deeper," because there was no sense of beginning or end in the labyrinth of rooms and hallways that spiraled out around them. Niko's attempts to use logic to understand the architecture had long since crumbled and fallen to dust, impossible to maintain in the face of the House's stubborn refusal to adhere to consistent rules. After the hall of mirrors, they crossed an echoing, empty ballroom whose ceiling was concealed by a solid mass of cobwebs that pulsed and shook as if something unseen moved overhead, aware of them but not yet attacking.

That room exited, not onto another clearly enclosed space, but into what looked like a slice of forest encased in the glass and metal filigree walls of an orangery. They towered taller even than the trees, forming a peaked dome overhead, and the air, while it smelled of loam and green, growing things, was as static and stagnant as anything indoors.

"We're still inside," said the Wanderer.

Winter frowned at her. "Of course we are," he said. "Everything is inside. Don't you realize that yet? There's no outside left. The House took it all years ago, and now everything is inside, except for the glitch ghosts and the emptiness they come from."

"Someone must have built this place," said the Wanderer. "They can't have done that if they were already trapped inside it."

Winter scoffed.

The glimmer was leading them toward the trees. The trio moved closer together as they followed, feeling small and inconsequential in the shadow of this captive forest. There was something so profoundly unnatural about the scene that it set their already unsettled nerves jangling, and Niko had to fight not to create a fresh shard, just to have a weapon in their hand. The Wanderer drew her sword as she walked, holding the blade low and braced ready in front of her.

The glimmer abruptly stopped and began to twine in circles in the air, glow illuminating the trees around it. The Wanderer paused, frowning, then walked toward it with her free hand outstretched, palm turned to what should have been the sky.

The glimmer stopped turning and settled, for just a moment, onto her hand. Then it rose and flitted to hang over her shoulder. She looked deeper into the trees and staggered back, barely managing to swallow a gasp.

"What is it?" asked Winter, voice low.

She shook her head fiercely as she turned to face her companions, then made a sharp gesture with her free hand. They looked blank. She made the gesture again, then sighed, and whispered, "Ahead. Make no sound."

Together, the three clustered to look through the break in the trees and beheld a nightmare.

A cold fire burned at the center of a seemingly natural clearing, its edges uneven and studded with rocks and roots. The sparks flying from the flames took the form of snowflakes rather than cinders, glowing blue-white as they drifted to the ground.

Barrel-shaped wicker cages grew around the "fire," appearing to have been planted rather than constructed; their trunks led to thick roots that pierced the ground like nails. There were seven in all, four of them occupied by humanoid rats who shied away from the bars surrounding them, snarling and snapping their teeth like the terrified captives that they were. Outside the cages, their captors danced and gamboled.

The captives were easy enough to classify—rat-people weren't something Niko was familiar with, but they were no true stretch when set against the satyrs and centaurs of their home. People with animal aspects were so common on Theros that it was a bit more surprising that there *weren't* rat-people. The captors were another matter. Spindly and strange, they looked more like constructs of wicker and bundled sticks than anything else. Some were decorated with flowers, mimicking hair or other ornamentation; one was wearing what looked almost like a gown woven from thorny briars. They moved stiffly, as befit creatures made of wood, and as they passed the cages, they reached out to rattle them, sending their captives scrambling to the other side.

"Nashi," breathed the Wanderer, eyes fixed on the smallest of the rat-people, who sat at the bottom of his cage, arms around his knees. He didn't snarl as the dancers passed his cage, only stared at them with silent fury, watching their every move. It was almost like he was trying to memorize them for later, whatever good that was going to do.

The other three rat-people were less restrained. One of them lunged at the hand that shook their cage, biting the air only inches from the creature's twig-and-tangle "fingers." In reply, the creature stopped dancing and began to snap, a strange, terrible clicking sound that nonetheless provided a small amount of cover as Winter whispered, "Wickerfolk. We should go. Your friend is already lost."

"We've heard that before, about other friends, in other places," whispered the Wanderer, sword raised and at the ready.

In the clearing, the wickerfolk opened the cage and reached out, grabbing the rat-person by the wrist and driving its fingers deep into the rat-person's flesh at the same time. The rat screamed, a terrible, wailing sound, but didn't bite at the offending hand. It was more like they were terrified of it.

The wickerfolk let go and stepped back, leaving gaping holes in the rat-person's arm. Holes that didn't bleed, but oozed a slow, amber-colored sap for only an instant before fresh green shoots burst out of the wound.

The rat-person screamed again. The Wanderer, who was the only one to recognize the shoots as green Kamigawan bamboo, clapped a hand over her mouth. The shoots continued to grow, faster and faster, winding around the rat-person until they were completely obscured. There was a final, sickening crunch, and the screaming stopped. The rat-person was gone, leaving a woven wicker doll behind, lifeless and limp.

Until it started to move, jerky and stiff, and climbed out of the cage to join the other dancers around the frozen fire. It was shorter than most of the other creatures—but not all of them, Niko realized with dawning horror. Three others were short and slight, with "tails" made of twisted root or tangled briar that mimicked the anatomy of the rat-people.

The dance resumed, faster now, as if they had been revitalized by the addition of another of their own kind.

Niko began to turn to the Wanderer, only to see her leap, sword in hand, toward the dancing figures. She shouted something as she landed among them, a whirling vision of vengeful death. Her sword gleamed silver in the light from the "fire," hacking limbs and heads from the creatures, which stopped their dancing to advance upon her like the nightmares that they were.

She used her blade to cut open the wall of Nashi's cage and was spinning back toward her opponents when she froze, mouth opening in a silent scream. Blood began to blossom on the front of her tabard before tree branches burst out of her ribcage, rapidly consuming her as Nashi watched in horror, still trapped inside his cage. The sword fell from her hand as the faint golden light of her glimmer died, extinguished by the House. The creature that had been the Wanderer began to turn toward her former allies, still aware of their location but no longer their companion—

And the vision shattered as the Wanderer gasped, hand going to the pocket where she had tucked Aminatou's fateshifter. She stared at Niko, who stared silently back, neither of them sure what could be said about a choice almost made and barely averted.

Winter looked between them, frowning. "What's wrong with you two?" he asked. "This isn't a safe place to stop and gawk. We should go."

"That is ... not how I thought those would work," said Niko.

"No," said the Wanderer. "I don't think I'll do that."

"Well, you're going to have to do something!" said Winter, sounding terrified.

Niko and the Wanderer turned to look back at the clearing. The creatures were no longer dancing. Instead, they had turned their "heads" toward the trio, watching them without eyes. Their stillness gave the impression of motion about to erupt, of the pause before the strike.

"Right," said Niko, and pulled a clean shard out of the air, holding the empty shard in one hand and the shard filled with the shifting blue-white haze of captive glitch ghost in the other. Moving swiftly, they

dove forward and flung both shards in the same motion. The occupied shard struck the lead creature and burst, wreathing it in the howling form of the shattered-light specter.

The second struck Nashi, enveloping him as it flew onward, through the bars of the cage. It embedded in a nearby tree, safely clear of the circle, Nashi within.



Art by: Jarel Threat

Winter crouched low, trying to conceal himself, as Niko and the Wanderer both charged toward the clearing. The ghost was still consuming the lead creature, making a terrible sound, like rusty nails dragged over tin. The other creatures seemed confused, lashing out without any discernible intent.

The Wanderer dodged them easily, moving to cut the other occupied cages open. The captive nezumi fell out, scrambling to their feet and grabbing rocks to use as makeshift weapons. “Fire,” one of them gasped. “They fear fire.”

“Fire, eh?” asked the Wanderer. Niko was holding their own, hurling shards and stones with equal force, hitting their mark every time. She broke away from the fighting, running to the tree where the shard containing Nashi had landed. Pulling it loose, she ran on, skirting around the battle to where Winter crouched.

“Do you have a source of fire?” she demanded. “You’ve mentioned tools—is that among them?”

Winter fumbled at his belt for a moment before finding a small black rectangle about the size of his palm. He offered it to her. “You push the red button on top,” he said. “We use it to light fuses and make light.”

“Hold this.”

She handed him Nashi’s shard with all the reverence she could muster, then turned and dove back into the fray.

The creatures fell as Niko cut them down, but got back up again with remarkable, terrible speed. Only the ones they locked in shards were truly removed from the fight, and she didn’t know what the limit

was on that magic. Grabbing a fistful of rough grass from the circle's edge, she held the black box to it and pressed the button.

A tiny flame shot out, and the grass lit up, burning like a beacon. She flung the bundle into the midst of the creatures, which panicked, abandoning their attempts to attack Niko and the nezumi in favor of running deeper into the wood. The Wanderer returned to Niko, who was checking himself for injuries.

"You are a fierce opponent," she said.

"I never miss," said Niko. "You're not so bad at this yourself."

They walked back to Winter, the two nezumi following at a careful distance. The Wanderer handed him back his box, taking the shard in exchange.

"Can you release him?" she asked.

Niko nodded, taking the shard and dismissing it. Nashi was suddenly standing there, looking perplexed for only a moment before the Wanderer pulled him into an embrace. He pulled away and she stepped back, looking disappointed.

"You came," he said, whiskers quivering.

"Of course I came," she said. "I only wish you had come to me. I would have helped."

"We help our own," said one of the other nezumi.

The Wanderer's disappointment only grew. "I see," she said.

"I've been searching for my mother since I got here," said Nashi. "I think I know where she is. But we just lost most of the crew I brought with me. If I'm going to find her, I need your help."

The groaning continued to pour out of the walls, endless and echoing and grating in a way that shouldn't have been possible for a simple sound. Jace and Kaito stood back to back, making it harder for something to ambush them. The wall began to ripple like thick mud, until some terrible, shapeless, tentacled thing began to crawl out and into the room where they both stood.

It looked like something that would be found at the bottom of the sea, soft and formless, incapable of bearing its own weight. Of course, it didn't need to; it drifted above the floor as it pulled free, the front of its gelatinous mantle splitting open in a mouth filled with jagged teeth, in which the floating shapes of ghostly heads could be seen. They looked like they were made of smoke, or mist, something insubstantial and thin.

"What *is* that?" asked Kaito.

"It looks like ... but it can't be," said Jace. His eyes flashed blue-white as he turned his mind magic on the thing, then returned to normal. "It has no mind. The heads inside its mouth, they have minds, but they're not conscious of the thing. This is a nightmare given substance."

"Can a nightmare hurt us?"

"Better to assume it can than to assume it can't."

"Great."

The nightmare lashed out at them with two long tentacles. Kaito didn't wait to see if they would hit. He moved his hand in a slicing motion, and the little flecks of stone that littered the floor rose up in

a wall of debris that blocked the strike, deflecting it. The debris didn't fall back down. The nightmare observed it and continued to advance.

"How do you fight a nightmare?" he demanded.

"You take its dreams away," said Jace. "Keep it occupied for a moment."

His outline blurred, and then he seemed to disappear, blocking himself from view. Kaito swore and ducked away, rolling out of the path of another strike of those tentacles.

With Kaito being the only visible target, the nightmare focused on him, pursuing him around the basement while Jace did whatever he was going to do. Kaito dodged and rolled, occasionally deflecting a tentacle with his sword, but mostly trying to evade.

And then, with a guttural wail, the nightmare burst into a cloudy fog. The groaning stopped. The wall returned to normal. The nightmare's remains drifted to the floor, where they dissipated. Kaito turned to stare, disbelieving, at the room.

Jace reappeared, eyes glowing, looking winded.

"What did you do?" asked Kaito.

"A nightmare can't live without the fear that feeds it," said Jace, sounding faintly smug. "I reached into the dreamers I felt inside it and took their fears away."

Kaito kept staring.

"What?"

"Everything in this house wants to kill you! You don't think they might *need* to be a little bit afraid?"

"I didn't take away all their fear, or their capacity for the feeling. Only the specific fear that was trying to kill us. You're welcome, by the way."

"Remember how your nose wasn't broken before?"

"Yes ..."

"We can still try again."

Jace sighed. "I'm not here to fight, Kaito. I'm sorry I disappeared after the invasion. I won't say I had no choice, but of the choices I had, removing myself for a time was the correct one."

"If you're not here to fight, why are you here?"

"I've been traveling with Vraska and our new companion. I lost them, and I think they might be somewhere in this house. I have to find them."

"Yeah, you never could leave Vraska unattended, could you?"

"I know you meant that as a comment on my need for her company, and not her ability to care for herself, but no, I don't like to leave her alone. They need me. So, if you could stop hitting me, we could work together to find all our missing friends."

Kaito eyed him. "After what happened on New Phyrexia ... we're still *not* friends, Jace."

"I can live with that. But that means we both have to live."

Together, they moved deeper into the basement.

The creature wasn't following them anymore.

Somehow, that was worse than its pursuit. At least that had been predictable. But it had stopped several halls ago, leaving them to flee without anything to flee *from*. Zimone was winded and kept doubling back to recover dropped books. Finally, panting, she slumped against a wall and let her head fall forward.

"Friend Zimone?" asked Tyvar. "What are you doing?"

"I need to breathe," she said. "Just give me a second."

Reluctantly, Tyvar moved to stand beside her, looking back the way they'd come. The House had continued to rearrange itself throughout their flight; looking back never showed the room they had been in a moment before, but something entirely new.

Tyvar almost appreciated the constant transformations. It kept them from getting complacent, from forgetting that this place was their enemy. It felt like they were running through the gut of some vast creature, something on the scale of Koma, too vast to comprehend or reason with. All they could do from here was survive.

The wall in front of them began to pulse and twist in a way Tyvar was starting to recognize. He pulled himself upright, preparing to fight the creature back again, almost relieved to return to the familiar pattern of attack and defense. The twisting continued, and what pulled itself free was not the spindly, terrible attacker, but an elegant elf woman with her hair pulled into a high knot atop her head, spectacles framing intelligent eyes, and a faintly transparent overall appearance.

"Zimone," she said. "*There* you are, naughty girl. You've been absent from my classes for *weeks*."

Zimone's head snapped up, eyes going wide. "D-Dean Kianne?" she asked. "But you—I *saw* you—"

"Phyrexia? The invasion? I let them take me, darling. I had to prove my theories of mana transformation and reflection, and I proved so much. Completion unlocked the final doors on my research, and I finally understand everything. As you would, too, if only you had continued coming to class."

"No, but you ... when Phyrexia was defeated, you died. We lost you, and you died."

"Nothing that's remembered dies, dear. Memory is a form of magic, and magic exists to be used." She reached one long-fingered hand toward Zimone. "Come here, and I'll show you."

Zimone sniffled, and started to take a step toward her, only for Tyvar's hand on her shoulder to pull her to a stop. She shot him a sharp look.

"Let me go. That's Dean Kianne."

"Who you saw completed," he said. "Who you saw *die*. Why would she be here? Why would she be trying to convince you to come to her?"

The shadow of Kianne narrowed her eyes, glaring at him. "You interfere where you have no business, stranger."

"I have every business. Without her, I'll never make it out of this house. I refuse to let my story end here, unfinished and untold."

"So you interfere out of selfishness."

Tyvar scowled at her, still holding Zimone back. "I interfere because you're a trick! A trap! She'll see the truth of you when she recovers from the shock."

"Will she?"

"You can't be Dean Kianne," said Zimone, voice shaking. "She ... she died. I wish she hadn't, but she did."

"Oh, is *that* how it's going to be?" Kianne's face lost its last traces of gentleness. "Smug little scholar only thinks she can survive because she has a 'hero' to feed into the meatgrinder, but they're always dying to protect you, aren't they, Zimone? How much of your own college didn't make it out because they thought weak, sweet little Zimone should be spared from Phyrexia?"

"That's not fair," moaned Zimone.

"It's not fair that you're *alive*," snarled the phantasmal dean, and lunged for her. Zimone shrieked and shied away, hiding behind Tyvar, who stood his ground.

Dean Kianne's outline rippled as she moved, and Tyvar took a half-step back, still shielding Zimone from her attack. The clawed hand of the creature that had been attacking them before appeared through the translucent chest of the Quandrix dean, catching Tyvar across his unprotected midsection, slicing through skin and muscle with ease. Tyvar staggered back, feeling things slosh and slip loose, sliding out of the gaping wounds.

"Tyvar!" shouted Zimone, as Tyvar fell, open eyes staring into nothing—

And the moment shattered like the ice at a river's edge on a winter morning, leaving Tyvar gasping, one hand going to the fateshifter he had tucked into his belt. Dean Kianne had yet to move. There was no sign of the creature.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked. "Aminatou said they were supposed to roll us back when we do something wrong."

"You stood and fought," said Zimone. "That isn't Dean Kianne. We have to run!"

"No," said Tyvar. "When it cut me, I felt ..." He adjusted his stance, looking defiantly at Dean Kianne. "Fight me, if you dare, phantom."

She snarled and lunged again. This time, he stepped back, and when the creature's claw appeared from her chest, he grabbed its wrist before it could make contact, his knowledge of the fight he hadn't actually lost yet telling him exactly where and how to stand. It howled. He tightened his grasp on its wrist, as what looked like plaster began to crawl up his hands, engulfing his arms. Still he held on, the transmutation spreading faster and faster, until his entire body was the color of the creature's skin.

He released it. It didn't swing for him again. Instead, it turned toward Zimone, a snarl splitting its face as the false Dean Kianne drifted back into the wall. Tyvar lunged for Zimone. So did the creature. Zimone screamed as Tyvar wrapped his arms around her, jerking her into an embrace that was no less terrifying for coming from an ally. His magic washed over her, and she felt her own skin begin to change.

Abruptly, the creature turned away and began to lope down the hall, leaving them.

"What ...?" asked Zimone.

"The creature—beast—whatever it is—it can't be killed because it doesn't live," said Tyvar. "Not in the way we recognize life. It is of the House. So is the image of your lost friend. They're made up of the House, wood and plaster for the one, dust for the other."

Zimone frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Their flesh is the House's flesh, and now ... so are we."

Zimone blinked. "What?"

"Until I release the magic, we are made of the House, and the House doesn't see us as invaders. Its natural defenses should leave us be."

"I ... oh." Zimone gathered the rest of her books and stood, trying not to look at her own transformed, unsettling hands. "How long can you do this?"

"Right now, I feel like I can do this forever."

Zimone decided not to question it. The hall ahead of them was straight and clear, and so she beckoned for him to follow as she resumed walking.

The House no longer seemed aware of them, or to care where they went. Nothing changed or shifted as they walked, and doors that had been closed led to the same rooms when opened again. They continued onward, until they reached a circular chamber with a hall at either side filled with cherrywood doors. Each of them was ornately carved the way the door on Ravnica had been, but in subtly different motifs.

"This looks like the embellishment on the Quandrix study wing," said Zimone, looking at a door.

"This is the design on my brother's feasting hall," said Tyvar, looking at another door.

"It's spreading," said Zimone. "The doors ... it's setting lures in places where it might be able to attract more people."

"But why?" asked Tyvar, looking at another door, this one etched with moths and hedrons, half-blocked by boards hammered across its frame, like this door among them all was not permitted to open. Zendikar might be on the other side. Dangerous, delicious Zendikar, ready to be devoured.

Wait. *Devoured?* He stopped, frowning. "The House is ... hungry," he said.

"Houses can't be hungry."

"This one is. It will spread, and seize, and swallow everything weaker than itself. It will be all. There will be nothing more."

"Tyvar? That doesn't ... you don't sound ..." Zimone stopped as she realized he didn't sound entirely *wrong*, either. There was something appealing about the idea of ripping the entire Multiverse in two, of taking it and pulling out the soft pieces, the delicious sweet centers ...

Flashes of the Phyrexian invasion filled her thoughts, monsters spreading through her beloved campus, monsters that had been friends and classmates and professors only moments before. She scrambled to claw at her own plaster-hard skin, remembering their porcelain transformations. *Was this really so different? Was this just another form of Phyrexia?*

Was there any way out? As the resounding *no* echoed through her thoughts, she screamed and fell to the ground, body breaking from the inside as it blossomed into a new, smaller version of the creature from before, finally consumed, finally home—

And she was looking at the door to Strixhaven, her fateshifter a burning coal against her skin. She whipped around, grabbing Tyvar's arm.

"Let the camouflage go," she begged.

"But why? It protects us, keeps us strong—"

"It's *eating* us!"

Tyvar frowned. A hero would protect her, and yet he wanted to devour her. "...yes," he said, reluctantly.

The plaster bled out of their skins until they were themselves again. Zimone exhaled in relief. “Okay,” she said. “We have to look like part of the House, or it attacks us, but we can’t stay that way forever, or it attacks us in a different way.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tyvar, sounding stricken. “The things I was thinking of doing to you—I’m so sorry. A hero should never.”

“Come on.” Zimone grabbed his arm, hurrying across the room to the exit. There was a long hall beyond, much like all the others they had seen. “You can still hide us: we just can’t hold it for too long. We need to fool the House in other ways.” She shifted her books to hold under one arm and grabbed a boxy device from the floor where it had fallen, slinging it over her shoulder. “Find something you can carry—or better, wear. Maybe if we look like we’re from this place, it won’t want us so badly. You could use a shirt or something.”

Tyvar rummaged around the nearest set of shelves, pulling out a tattered vest. He shrugged it on. “Will this suit?”

Zimone looked at him, his chest and midriff still exposed, and swallowed a sigh. “It’s great,” she said. “Let’s keep going.”

No longer concealed from the many eyes of the House, they began moving again, away from the room of doors, heading for an unknown destination.

Nashi led the way, with the rest of the group close behind, the glimmering shape of Kyodai floating over the Wanderer’s shoulder as they walked. Niko hung back, keeping pace with Winter, who they watched warily.

“Have you been alone here all this time?” they asked.

Winter frowned. “How long do you mean?” he replied. “I’m not from here. Not originally. My best friend and I, we walked through one of those doors years ago. We spent a long time navigating the House on our own. She’s ... she’s gone now.”

The pain in his voice was impossible to ignore. Niko grimaced sympathetically, looking away. “I’m sorry,” they said. “That must have been hard. But you’re with us now. We’re going to find a way out of here, and we’ll take you with us, if you’re ready to leave this place.”

“I’ve been ready since I got here,” said Winter.

At the front of their group, the Wanderer turned to Nashi. “I wish you would look at me,” she said.

“Why?” he asked. “I know what you look like. We go this way.” He turned, and the rest of them followed.

“Because I’d like to see your face while we discuss what’s to be done next.”

“There’s nothing to discuss. This house took my mother. We’re going to get her back.”

“Nashi ...”

“Phyrexia took my mother, and she came home. Then *you* took my mother, and she came back. She doesn’t leave me. That means I don’t leave her.”

“Nashi—”

One of the remaining nezumi touched her arm. She looked over. “We tried. When we realized the door was a lure, and this was a trap, we tried. He won’t hear you. His mourning isn’t over yet.”

The Wanderer looked at Nashi, lips pressed into a thin line, and said nothing as the group continued on.

No more nightmares had come to attack Jace and Kaito. That was a good thing. The basement seemed to go on forever, worming its way deeper and deeper into the earth. Stairs went down but never up. No windows appeared.

Basement gave way to boiler room to underground storage to an empty atrium whose glass ceiling looked out upon a sky spangled with unfamiliar stars to a great cavern that would have seemed natural if not for the patches of bare brick showing through the broken stone. There was a door on the far end. Jace and Kaito started toward it and were halfway there when the floor gave way beneath their feet and they fell, not into nothingness, but into a pit filled with some thick, gelatinous substance that stung their skins and clutched at their limbs, making it difficult to move.

Rungs on either wall of the pit seemed to offer a way out. Kaito worked his way toward the nearer of them, Himoto chittering encouragement in his ear, the gel slowing him to a crawl. Straining, he managed to brush his fingertips against the metal and shouted as he felt manacles clasp around his ankles.

Jace gasped, and Kaito glanced at him. "It just grab you?" he asked.

"Shackles," said Jace. "We're properly trapped."

"Maybe." There was enough give to whatever was holding them that Kaito was able to work his way back over to Jace, then look down, using his telekinesis to shove the gel away and form a narrow tunnel. He was panting by the time the other man's feet came into view.

"That's ... all I can ... I can't hold the gel *and* work the locks," he said. "But Himoto can."

The drone ran down his arm to leap onto Jace's leg as the chains on their ankles lurched downward, pulling them deeper. A few more tugs like that and they would drown.

Himoto began working at the locks on Jace's shackles, manipulating the tumblers until they clicked open. Jace pulled his feet up, grabbing for the nearest rung on the wall. This time, nothing came to grab for him. He reached back, offering Kaito his arm. "I'll help hold you up," he said. "Keep your focus, and we'll get us both out of ... here ..."

His voice trailed off as he stared at something overhead. Kaito tilted his head back, following Jace's gaze.

There, projected on the ceiling, was Vraska, shielding a small, orange-furred creature with her body as she shied away from a group of creatures that appeared to be made entirely from blades.

"I can't," said Jace. He looked back at Kaito. "I'm so sorry. He's too important."

Before Kaito realized what was happening, Jace began to climb. Every time he touched a rung beyond the first, the manacles on Kaito's ankle jerked him farther downward.

"Jace! Come back here, you—" he howled, before he was pulled under.

He felt Himoto latch onto his leg. The manacles gave another jerk, pulling him deeper. He couldn't open his eyes without getting the gel in them, and he couldn't breathe.

I am so sorry, my friends; I should have broken his nose when I had the chance, he thought, and planeswalked away, back to Ravnica, back to the beginning, where he might yet survive.