

The Dusk Reborn

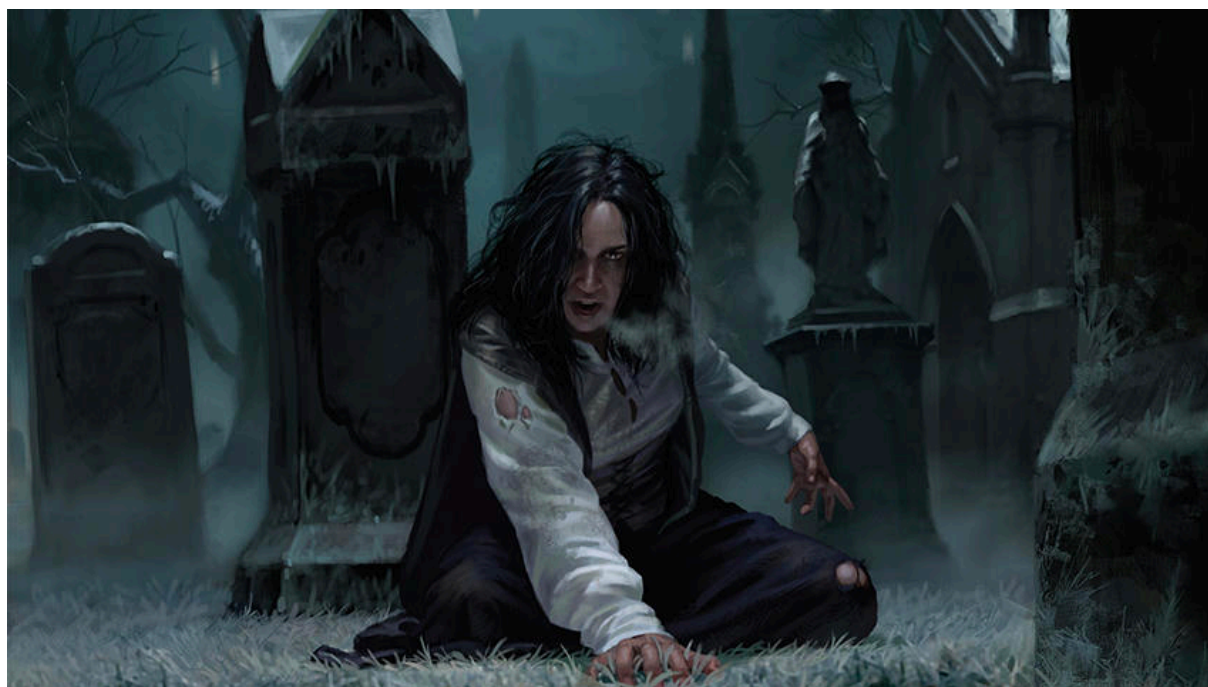
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From set *Innistrad: Midnight Hunt*

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The forests of Innistrad were not a welcoming place: thick, shadowed, the twisted trees' reaching branches and whispering leaves blotting out even the glimmering light of the winter full moon. Like much else on the moors, it was not meant for human life. The haunt of corpses and wraiths.

Yet Algli remembered a time when the roots had not seemed to wrench themselves free of the forest floor to trip her as she passed, when the feeling of being watched by hungry eyes had come only as she traveled deeper. Now, so much as a glance at the treeline from the paltry safety of town brought that prickle of fear down her spine.



Graveyard Trespasser | Art by: Chris Rallis

This change had come in Algli's lifetime. She and her husband had been tanners, living just outside of town due to the stink of their profession. Their tannery was small, but their work was good, and they were proud of it; her husband handled the skins while Algli fashioned the leather into armor, pouches, and wineskins.

When the first rumblings of trouble had started, they kept working, kept their heads down. For a while, business was good: everyone wanted protection. Werewolf attacks increased. Flesh-hungry ghouls became a common sight at the outskirts of town. But still, she thought that if they simply boarded their windows, kept strict hours, they would be safe. A foolish hope, dashed by an incursion of ghouls. No mere mindless zombies, these worked in concert, battering the doors, stirred to a ravenous frenzy by the scent of the flesh and oil.

Algli survived, but it had never been luck. Her husband and her youngest son threw themselves between her and the ghouls, and she set the tannery aflame. Her eldest died of the burns.

Some called her lucky; she had survived.

She buried their bodies in the tannery pit, praying in vain to the angels that the charcoal and earth would hide the scent of decay from the undead.

It did not. A ghoullcaller turned his cruel attentions to the town. The church's graveyard, the tannery, the bog, mourners in procession: all were playthings to him, and the tatters of her family danced to his words.

That was how she met Olutio. His daughter had been murdered and reanimated by that same ghoullcaller. They had worked together, using Olutio's forbidden rites, to slay the ghoullcaller and rebury the dead. Standing over their fresh graves, Olutio first spoke to her of the Buried Lord.

"Under the watch of the Buried Lord," Olutio said, "the dead stay dead. The grave is His; the dirt is His, and those interred will rest. Geists, ghouls, necromancers—our lord does not parley with those who disturb His domain."

For her family to have rest, to ensure that she would have rest when the Plane finally took her that was why she stayed, when so many others had abandoned their cause. Slowly, the number of people Olutio's pretty vows could bring out into the woods to raise a long-dead lord had dwindled, laid low by violence or cynicism, yet Algli had persisted.

Algli pulled her hood farther down over her head to hide her eyes from anyone, or anything, who might see her and her companions. The three of them had made this journey many times over the years, so many that despite her aching joints and the skinny, stubborn goat she had to coax along the new tangles of roots across the frosted deer trail, the clearing she stood in felt familiar. It still wrenched her heart to think of her family, especially in this clearing, bearing her torch on this dark march to bring a forgotten lord forth to shelter them in quiet oblivion.

It hurt to know that was the best she could give them. They had deserved so much more.

This night—this ritual—was their last chance to call forth the Buried Lord. Algli knew it; quiet Sruta with her crafts and tools knew it; and gruff Olutio had said as much, swearing and spitting to the side of the path even as he proclaimed that tonight—tonight was the fateful night they would finally summon the Buried Lord to save them all. Tonight was the last time that the stars had aligned, that the tearful moon was in the right position, and their auguries and calculations mirrored the ones of Olutio's tomes, told them that power gathered in their favor this night—and not again for a millennium.

The three gathered in the clearing and prepared the ground, and when the swollen moon filled the sky they carried out the rite in solemn silence. A goat, hooves and horns, in the image of a demon. Its blood into the earth a fresh grave; ashes and veils and Olutio's whispered rites in muted darkness.

As the last of the beseeching prayer left Algli's lips, the wind itself fell hush, and a dark thrill ran through her.



Ecstatic Awakener | Art by: Tuan Dong Chu

The three invokers waited, their faces pressed to the ground, their arms outstretched, for the Buried Lord to emerge from the smoldering ribcage of the goat or the bloodstained ground beneath. But no movement came, no stifling bog-scent, no drifting veils. The fires did not go out. The goat's blood slowly congealed to an ordinary rust color, smudging the runes drawn into it into an unreadable mess. They waited through the wind picking up again, through the moon moving to cast the shadows wrong over their sigils drawn in lime. It was Sruta who stood first.

"You were always a fool, Olutio," she said. "And you, Algli, for following. The wind itself makes the leaves mock our failure." With that, she turned on her heel, her hand on her belt, and stalked into the night.

Algli sat up, and she looked to Olutio hoping for some sign that he had seen which she had missed. Something foretold in his scraps of books.

His dark expression told her all she needed to know.

They had failed. For the last time, their pleas, their rites, their sacrifices. Olutio's rotting books, Sruta's sharp dagger, and Algli's goat's blood had not protected them. And now, standing in the ashes of their hopes, of everything they'd researched, as Olutio scowled and turned to follow Sruta into the night, Algli realized all of their efforts had been for naught.

There was no hope for Innistrad.

Algli knelt in the burned ashes and blood runes of the corpse of the starveling goat she'd scraped for months to afford, to bring here and be killed to raise their somber lord. Entrails and ashes and the death of dreams in this shadowed copse; and as the last of her companions departed her, she sobbed, and let the night close around her. Let her die here, with her failure. Let her rejoin her family, free of loneliness and shame.

No matter how she willed it through her tears, death did not come. The embers of the sacrificial fire dimmed and left her in darkness, and slowly Algli realized that she was not alone. Behind her, she heard rustling, breathing. A geist or ghoul? No, those did not breathe, and a bandit or corpsemonger would have attacked her while she was defenseless, distracted in her mourning. The memory of hope rose in

her, stronger than in the rote motions she'd gone through recently with Olutio and Sruta. Could this be Him? His final test? Algli placed her hand on the hilt of the sacrificial dagger on her belt nonetheless and turned to face her watcher.

A dark-haired woman sat perched on a rotting log, just out of reach of the pale moonlight. She was clad in a warrior's padded gambeson, her hand to her side, covering a dark stain. Her other hand rested on a pronged spear in an old style. Older even than the spears Algli had seen displayed in church before she'd stopped attending and turned her faith to the darker corners of the Plane. The spear meant nothing on its own. Many of Avacyn's churches had been ransacked. A would-be robber, then, perhaps wounded by Olutio or Sruta? Algli shifted her weight, wary. She was old, but to be old on a Plane as cruel as this meant one was either clever or deadly. Algli may not look it, but there was still fight in her.



Liesa, Forgotten Archangel | Art by: Dmitry Burmak

The strange woman tilted her head, her expression peaceful.

"I mean you no harm," the woman said. Despite the wound, her voice was clear. She nodded at the dying sacrificial fire. "Your rites. Do you know what you have called forth?"

"A deathless lord to bring silence. To protect us from the vampires, the werewolves, to lay the risen dead to eternal rest," Algli said, unable to hide the quiver in her voice. Something about the quiet grace of this woman unsettled. Even unarmored and at rest, she exuded the ease of an experienced warrior.

"Deathless, yes," the woman said and shifted forward. "But the Buried Lord has never been one to protect. He is here, and he is hungry." In the flickering of the torch, Algli saw that the shadows behind the woman were patterned, white and gray—and as she watched, the shadows unfurled into the elegant frame of raptor's wings.

An angel sat before her.

Algli swayed on her feet, nearly falling to her knees again. The old depictions of Avacyn—light-haloed, savior, guardian—flashed through her mind.

"My lady," Algli said. Excuses bubbled up—for sacrifice, for grief, for losing hope—but she voiced none of them. "Are you here to judge me?"

“Not to judge but to parley.” The angel inclined her head. “I spoke with demons once. I was wind and I was silence. You will forgive me watching your sorrow and saying nothing.”

“Why here?”

“I know as well as you.” The angel gestured to the remains of the goat. “I was compelled to answer your call.”

Hope rose again in Algli, sharp, painful, foolish. “Are *you* the Buried Lord?” she blurted.

The angel’s smile was soft, not mocking. “No, but I too once sought to parley with him. To calm the undead, to banish geists, to bring peace; all that he has said and written. Be not mistaken: the silence he brings is only to amplify his voice, the shroud he lays only to muffle and bind others. The only joy in his stifled world is the joy he feels.”

Algli swallowed, her mouth dry, her hand tightening around the hilt of her dagger. “My family is dead. He will ensure their bodies rest.”

“You, too, deserve rest in your life,” the angel said, meeting Algli’s challenging gaze with sympathy, with trust, “and to be heard, without bloodshed.”

Algli felt her old knees wobble again. To hear that she deserved rest—that such a thing could exist in life—a half-remembered dream.

“And what am I supposed to do about it?” Algli asked. “Haven’t I done enough?”

“We must move swiftly. Your so-called lord is summoned and prowls these woods. Not as a savior, but as a demon, and he is ravenous. Your friends, I fear, are already dead.” The angel braced herself against her spear, and stood, but as she stood, the dark stain over her gambeson spread, and, like a mortal, the divine being flinched.

Algli thought of pepper-bearded Olutio, and scornful Sruta, in the woods, pursued; and of her husband on his deathbed, and she held out her hand to bid the strange angel to pause. “You can’t save anyone while you’re bleeding out. I may be a fool dabbling in works better left forgotten, but one of those works I’ve learned is how to staunch a wound. Sit back down before you go running off to certain death.”

Slowly, the angel sat again, her wings folding behind her. “Your wisdom befits your age,” she said, wryly. “A second death, having just returned, would be a waste, I agree. But I have been gone a long time, it seems. This forest is alien to me, the land perhaps more cruel. Pray tell me while you work, Algli: what has befallen Innistrad in my absence?”

“Your absence?” Algli asked. She pulled her cloak off from over her shoulders and set about ripping bandages from the hood. “You went mad with the other angels, I take it?” She asked. “No rest, even for the divine.”

“I was killed,” the angel said. There was a pause to her voice which made Algli wonder what she was hiding. Perhaps she had returned from the twisting corruption that befell the others?

“I wandered, was scattered on the winds. You and your fellows were correct in one thing—the Buried Lord does not die. It seems that as a consequence of my dealings with him, neither will I. As for my sisters you say they are mad?”

“No longer mad, but dead. Many were lost, but the Flight of Herons remains. Not enough to protect all of us.” Algli bandaged the angel’s ribs firmly while she tried to condense her misery into easy sentences. The telling of The Travails was short, the fall of Gavony, the invigorated rise of the lordly vampires, the rampages of lycanthropes, geists, and witches—the ruin poured into a recounting far

shorter than the agony of living through them. She spoke of the fall of her sister angels, all but the archangel Sigarda and her flight; of the encroaching undead, the corpse-trade, the rampages of the once-pacified werewolves. Of the deaths of her family, first to violence, then raised from their shallow graves to serve the whims of a ghoullcaller. “And why not call upon a Buried Lord?” Algli asked, her voice raised in defiance. “Olutio and I deciphered the writings. We asked, who else is left to save us?”

The angel only gave Algli the barest of a smile, understanding, and the sharing of the burden alone made tears rise to Algli’s eyes again. “You need not believe me to walk beside me, Algli,” the angel said. “Even if it is merely to guide me to your lord, tonight you must raise your torch and your dagger to save yourself.”

She refastened her gambeson over the bandage torn from Algli’s hem, and stood, extending her hand to the elderly cultist. “I am Liesa, archangel who once lead the Flight of Dusk. Come, Algli. For the future of Innistrad, let us rebury this lord.”

Algli’s torch did little against the forest’s thick night, but Liesa was thankful for its meager light anyways. The Plane had changed in many ways, but some things had remained the same. Humans still displayed a stubborn willfulness. A tenacity that Liesa thought was not so different from herself. A mixed blessing.

How long had it been since her death at the hands of that vampire’s folly, Avacyn? A thousand years, or more? Long enough for a church to rise in Avacyn’s name. Though her sisters had condemned her, exiled her, and, slain by Avacyn, she had drifted on the aether for centuries, Liesa could not find it within her to feel anything but a muted sadness, a great weight at the news of her sisters’ passing.

They had never been able to come to an understanding, never even sought to learn why Liesa would seek out the company and conversation of demons, why she might wish to know how fiends navigated the Plane, what they might teach each other, and now now they had been robbed of that chance through the flash of the very forces Liesa sought to understand. Balance through meted violence had been the creed her radiant sisters had lived and died by. All but Sigarda—but that reckoning, or, Liesa hoped, conversation—would have to wait.

The Buried Lord had drawn her here, and through their bond, she felt his awakened hunger. For was it not natural to seek a feast after waking from prolonged slumber?

They found the gutted remains of Olutio first, the man Algli had described as their sect’s leader, the man with connections to scraps of grimoires and the researcher. His corpse was chewed and pulled halfway into the ground, his robes still wet with his own blood.



Infernal Grasp | Art by: Naomi Baker

“One of your order?” Liesa asked.

Algli turned the corpse over with her boot and grimaced. “Yes,” she said, and no more. Was it sorrow or resignation illuminated on the old woman’s tired face by her torch?

“We’re close.” Liesa looked to the canopy, listening for a disturbance in the ground, the Buried Lord’s domain. She felt it, a shiver through the firmament itself—

And then came the screaming.

“Sruta!” Algli shouted. She hesitated. It was Liesa who pressed forward, charging through the brush, frost-coated nettles and pines crunching like bones under her swift gait. She broke into a small clearing not unlike the ritual grove, twisted, half-sunken trees in a cold swamp.

The Buried Lord awaited them in a moonlit clearing. Liesa remembered him. She remembered speaking with him for hours—intelligent, calculating. Reasonable. A nobleman among demons, he had claimed, but a demon nonetheless.

Framed by the silver moon, the massive demon’s horns and the tattered veils of his wings were haloed by the gentle glittering of suspended moon-drops in the black sky. Dust shed from his crackling form like an embalmed saint shedding his shroud, and when he turned to look at them, his eyes were two cold stars in the void of his macilent face.

He was stooped over Sruta. The cultist struck again and again at the demon’s hand grasping her, each strike bringing an arc of dust up from the demon’s skin.

Behind Liesa, Algli froze under the malevolent gaze of the demon. But the Buried Lord’s attention was not for the old gray-haired woman, or even the younger shrieking fury he held in his hand. No, the one he turned toward was Liesa herself.

“Liesa the dusk-winged,” the Buried Lord said, his voice a smooth sludge, the invitation of quicksand, of an empty grave. “What a pleasure to see an old friend here, of all places.”

“Drop her,” Liesa ordered, closing the distance between them. She leveled her spear at him. “You’ve killed a man already. I remember you speaking of parley, of peace, of knowledge. Here is your chance to put your words to action.”

The Buried Lord’s face split into a needle-fanged grin. “Oh, but I find knowledge is of meager use to the hungry!” On the last word his teeth sunk into Sruta, snuffing her screams with a gruesome tear. Liesa’s spear struck his shoulder, but too late.

The Buried Lord swept her spear aside, swallowing the last bloody traces of his summoner. His neck cracked as he straightened and lunged for Liesa. He stank of death.

The wound in Liesa’s side twinged, almost causing her to stumble as she dodged aside. She was fortunate—they were both slow from their summoning. The Buried Lord’s tail swept her path, and he wrenched himself around.

“Ah, that’s cleared my head a bit.” His voice was an amused growl even as his talons dug into the frost-covered loam, claws flashing by Liesa’s head. She darted from the shadows into the moonlight to flank him, to angle herself to pierce him at the neck or belly.

“Did you intend understanding on an empty stomach?” The Buried Lord taunted. “Come now; don’t let the fragile lives of these few optimists who brought us together again sway your resolve. Their blood has served us.”

Liesa called on her light, let power crackle down the pronged blade of her spear. This blow struck true, glancing from the demon’s back and slicing loose one of his flapping, shriveled wings. This time his sly grimace was one of pain. The ground itself buckled under her. Liesa leaped, and the ground crumbled; ashes, rot where there had once been growth. She spread her wings.

“I am forgiving,” the Buried Lord called. “But I am hungry. Give me the third, and she will be my last. We will form that alliance you crave. We’ll nurture the poor little humans. Dark and light: a prosperous kingdom of dusk!”



Lord of the Forsaken | Art by: Kekai Kotaki

Liesa shook out her arms, sore from disuse, spear-tip pointed at the Buried Lord’s upturned face. Her wings ached. Her side ached. For a moment, she only wanted to agree. What was one life in the face

of many? In the face of a cataclysm? An old woman who had already lost all she had, searching for the same impossibility that Liesa had?

It was everything.

“Your actions have shown your priorities,” Liesa said. “But I will grant you another chance, Lord of the Interred, in another thousand years.”

Flight felt clumsy, but the crisp air was rejuvenating. She called on the old power within her, half-remembered, all that had traveled with her when she was nothing, and poured it into her blade. Like a falcon she swept down, and though the Buried Lord slashed at her wings, he was yet slow.

Liesa drove the spear deep into the demon’s spine. His shriek split the earth beneath him, and he disintegrated, folding in on himself—and with a shiver of the last veil of his wings, he was gone. Not dead, but gone—for now.

Liesa touched down next to the shallow grave he had left.

Algli stared at the angel, backed against a tree at the edge of the clearing, the torch she held trembling.

Liesa tilted her head. Something was wrong—the ground moved.

The ground breathed, a hungry exhale.

Liesa called a warning, but it was too late. The ground erupted around Algli, dirty claws seizing her. The Buried Lord wrenched himself free of the roots of the tree he had displaced in his escape. Sand poured from the wound of his neck, glittering, obsidian. His cruel face was a rictus now, a snarl.

Algli shouted, hoarsely, fragments of words from a language so old even Liesa no longer remembered it. Spells she had uncovered in her search for a savior, undoubtedly; and as if answering her call, the shadows gathered around Algli’s torn robes.

In her panic, Algli called the rites she’d known, the supplications she had uttered in her darkest moments. Appeals to the Buried Lord, odes to his prowess, his strength. As the cultist chanted, the darkness soaked into the demon. His wounds began to close, his severed wing to sprout gauzy tendrils of regrowth.

“Algli, fall silent!”

“Old fool,” the Buried Lord said, with a dismissive laugh. He shook Algli, and in his grip, the cultist went mute and limp. “Oh, come now, fragile thing; suddenly too shy to praise me?”

Liesa could feel her despair, a bitter taste in the air. Defeat. Hopelessness. The woman clutched her torch in both hands, teeth gritted against the pain. All her pain, all her effort. All of it for naught.

The old woman looked up, but not at her death. She met Liesa’s eyes, and in Algli’s gaze, the angel saw not hope, but defiance.

“Liesa! Even if it’s my life you ask,” Algli shouted, “then I give it!”

With both hands, Algli thrust her torch into the roof of the Buried Lord’s gaping maw.

Liesa crossed the grave in a bound, pulling that fire, that fight, that *hope* into herself. Hope was fuel like no other, and it shone through her, a light as bright and warm as the dawn: a flame that seared winter’s frost from the trees, and with it, Liesa fanned the fire and pushed it through. Through her spear, her blade, her arm itself—into the throat of the Buried Lord.

The demon did not have the chance to scream. There was a snap, a gurgle, and his body folded in on itself again, vicious, crackling, shedding grave dust. Final. The Buried Lord collapsed with a heavy

thump, pulling Algli to the ground with him. Liesa yanked her spear free with a twist, ripping through the heavy neck to tear the Buried Lord's head from his body entirely.

His body did not crumble. Liesa felt a pinch in the base of her neck. They were still tied. She folded her bright wings behind her and stepped forward.

Algli rolled free of the demon's claws. She staggered. Liesa offered the old woman a hand, and she took it, pulling herself to her feet with a wince and a limp.

"I appreciate your help," Liesa said. She gestured at the carcass of the vanquished demon. "Quick thinking."

"Not as quick as I used to be," Algli muttered. "He talked too much for his own good. Olutio *would* summon a chatterbox. Oh, Olutio " The woman covered her face with her hands, choking back a sob. "All this, all this and you died for it fools. We're fools. If only we'd been charlatans, too!"

"You did what you felt best," Liesa said, gently. "You did not raise the knife to your friends. You came with me to save them. Their deaths are on the claws of the Buried Lord. Don't blame yourself for being unable to predict the outcome. Were the writings you found about his spite, his hunger?"

"No," Algli muttered, through her fingers. "A hidden lord who dealt with light. A clever being who only asked silence, who despised the risen dead foe trodding on his domain."

"Yes. I too commiserated with him, once," Liesa said. "If you had not called, I would not have come. Your voices were the first I'd heard in centuries, Algli. Your work wasn't for naught."

Algli shook her head, but her cracking sobs quieted. Liesa studied the fallen demon.

"His body should have dissolved," Liesa murmured. "Perhaps he is material so long as I am, bound to the Plane. I hesitate to leave his remains here. Who knows what power it still might "

Algli raised her head, and behind the trail of tears on her weathered face, Liesa saw that spark again, that glimmer of hope. "Carry him with you," Algli said. "Forge him into your armor. A body is leather and bone, isn't it? I was a tanner, years ago. We haven't let anything to waste these days. I've got Olutio's books, Sruta's tools. Let me serve you, my lady Liesa. You saved my life."

Liesa let the words, the idea, sit with her for a moment. She thought of her sister archangels, how followers had flocked to them while Liesa had stood alone with her small flight and no others. How her sisters had been strengthened by their bonds with humans, and how, only minutes ago, Algli's very hope had surged through her. That loyalty was not what she sought—but here laid bare before her was an oath made from understanding. A connection forged in darkness and strife.

Perhaps that hope, that oath, could be brought to others. A new order for a new Plane.

"It is not your fealty I seek, but an alliance. A host renewed and reborn." Liesa rested the butt of her spear in the mud. "An alliance to bring not stifling silence, but peaceful balance, to this wounded Plane. A chorus of voices, known and heard. Will you aid me in this cause, Algli?"

With a gasp, Algli fell to her knees again. Not in pain, not in grief, but in hope, before her glimmering angel. "You have it," she said. "As I breathe and hope, my lady Liesa. You have me as your ally. As long as I live."

Liesa had returned at the darkest hour, a time of struggle, called by the desperate and the lost. More and worse lay before them, this small covenant. In the cold moonlight, Liesa felt that old hope rekindle in these words, in their shared knowledge. An oath of grief. An oath of hope.

On a Plane of endings, here, at last, came a new beginning.