

# Bound and Bonded

## Nicky Drayden

From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

"You're going to visit her again, aren't you?" Ambrellin says, standing in the doorway to my room. Technically, it's her room, but she's been letting me crash here the past few months, since the accident. Her voice is calm, but her eyes crinkle at the edges, deepening toward her temples where the smoothness of her skin turns to rough bark. It's an obvious tell for the frustration she's harboring, a tell she's had since we were kids.

"I'm just going to drop off a little money for the orphanage," I say. It's the least I can do.

"That's good, Terrik. It really is. But at some point, we're going to have to talk about what's healthy grieving and what's obsession. Eventually, you'll have to forgive yourself and move on, and it'll be a lot easier if your emotions aren't tied up with the fate of an orphan."

"Of course, you're right," I say, the words coming out like a reflex. Twenty-eight years of Selesnyan training has taught me to maintain harmony with my friends and community above all else, but how can I forgive myself for causing a building to collapse, killing two dozen people? I force a smile, then pull my cap down over the points of my elven ears, and pull my scarf up, obscuring most of my face. I'll need the anonymity where I'm going. "This is the last time I'll see her, I promise."

"Thank you. Oh, there's one more thing. I'm afraid the neighbors have been complaining again." Ambrellin cocks her head, the sudden movement making the finches nesting in the branches of her hair ruffle their feathers. "Are you sure you haven't heard any strange sounds?"

"More 'wurm noises'?" I roll my eyes.

"I know, I know. It's just that they're my neighbors, and if there's any kind of issue, I'd like to resolve it." Her fingers trace over the lacquered wood of the chariot cab I'd converted into a wardrobe. She opens the doors and kicks my old wurmcaller boots lined up across the bottom. A layer of dust has already accumulated on the worn black leather. She peeks behind the armored uniforms as well, remnants from my old life as a lead wurm trainer for the Selesnyan army, before I'd made the mistake that had changed everything. "They say they've seen the wurm, too, peeking through the stone ceiling. Said it had teeth the size of a butcher's knife!"

"I'm not trying to cause any discord, Ambrellin, but do you think it might be possible that your neighbors are over-meditating? Shamans have been calling the faithful to gather more and more often. Maybe your neighbors are seeing and hearing things in that heightened state."

She considers this for a moment, then she stoops over and lifts the edge of my bedspread.

"Ambrellin," I say, my voice tipping right up to the threshold of politeness and into aggravation. "I appreciate your generosity of taking me into your home, but do you really think I'd be able to fit a half-grown wurm under my bed?"



Art by: Wesley Burt

Ambrellin drops the bedspread and sighs. “You’re right. I’m being ridiculous. What kind of person would be delusional enough to keep a dangerous animal in a residential cooperative?”

I nod. What kind of person, indeed.

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The tall, dark spires of Orzhov cathedrals loom above, seeding tension throughout my body. The entire skyline looks as if it’s been smudged by soot, with arched stained-glass windows glinting orange as the sun starts its descent. The flavor of oppression changes from one cartel’s territory to the next, but I keep my head high, my eyes focused straight ahead, my fists clenched. I’d be better off taking the main thoroughfare a few streets over, where the streetlights are plentiful—as are the witnesses—but then I’d pass the site where the Basilica of the Opportune had once stood, one of the oldest churches in the Orzhov Syndicate. Well, it was until I’d ridden my worm underneath it, compromising its structural support, and sending the whole thing crashing down into a pile of rubble. It was being remodeled at the time, nearly fifty construction workers refitting broken stained glass, refacing pitted stone, and regrading the surrounding grounds so the spring floods wouldn’t pool up against the building and drip

down into the catacombs. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can still hear the screams of the people caught in the debris. I'd rather take my risks with a few ruffians than relive that day again.

"Oy!" says a voice. I look back and see a guy dressed in black leather with several strands of silver coins hanging around his neck. "I see you walking this way quite a bit," he says like he's chewing each word as it comes out. "Maybe you'd be interested in purchasing some insurance? You know, so you can be assured that you'll get to wherever you need to get in one piece."

"No, thanks," I say, using my least confrontational voice. "It's a short walk."

"Maybe. But still, ya never know when something might happen." He grinds his fist into his open palm. "I've got some really reasonable rates."

Suddenly, the weight of the coins in my pocket feels like a liability. He's already eyeing the bulge there.

"I'm good," I say, "I brought my own protection." I open my jacket, revealing the hilt on my hip.

The thug shrugs. "A little knife like that won't get you far in a place like this."

"It's not a knife," I say. I pop open the leather strap and pull out metal shears. "These will cut through the densest, most enchanted bramble. Do you know the kind of damage enchanted bramble does to flesh?"

But he's too focused on my pocket to reply. I turn and walk quickly, crossing the street, but he follows. I slip my hand into my vest, pull a leather satchel full of bramble seeds out, and drop a handful at my feet. When the thug steps over them seconds later, I call upon the magic infused through all things, force the spell behind me, and turn to watch as thorny vines erupt from the sidewalk, entangling my pursuer in their scratchy embrace.



Portcullis Vine | Art by: James Paick

I leave him there, screaming, and double my pace until I reach the orphanage. It's an awful place—a crumbling, oppressive building that would better be served as a place to melt down old coinage than provide refuge to children. But bit by bit, I've been donating my meager earnings to help improve their infrastructure.

There's a small gap between buildings where the rubble of the basilica is visible. I try hard not to look at it, but as usual, I fail. Jagged spires jut up through tremendous hills of blackened debris, like the remains of a long-dead campfire. Anything of value had been scavenged. Seems cruel that Bazda has to live here, within a stone's throw of where both her parents had died. I bite my lip and walk up the gray, dusty stairs and enter the front door. One day, I'll find the courage to talk to her, to apologize to her, but today is not that day. My mind's so preoccupied, I run right into one of the children, smacking him so hard that my scarf falls from my face. I try to hastily put it back, but it's too late. He's recognized me. He jumps up and plucks the cap from my head, and the points of my ears poke out. If there was any doubt of my identity, there isn't anymore.

"It's that wurmcaller!" the kid says, tossing my cap to one of his friends. "The thrull's ass who destroyed the basilica! No wonder, he still can't pay attention to where he's going!"

And just my luck, Bazda is standing within earshot, small for her age, nearly drowning in the gray institutional smock she'd been issued. Her black hair sits upon her head in two buns. She turns, sees me. I turn away, searching for a caretaker so I can drop the money off and get on my way, but as usual, there are none to be found.

"Your name is mud around here," the punk kid tells me. "Money's never going to pay off the debt you owe!" He spits on my boot.

"Hey," Bazda says, grabbing my cap from his friend and making her way toward us. "Leave him alone."

"And who's going to make me?" he asks.

Bazda pulls a six-inch hairpin from her right bun and jabs it at the punk, coming less than an inch away from his throat.

"Forget both of you," the punk says, sulking off.

Bazda looks at me, handing me my cap, then styling her hair back into a perfect bun. "I've seen you around before," she says. "You drop off a bag of zibs every week, then stand around watching me. It's creepy. Are you a creeper?"

"No! I'm not a creeper," I say. "Just a regular guy. You can ask anyone back home."

Bazda purses her lips. "Sounds like something a creeper would say."

"Look, I caused a terrible accident. I'm just doing my best to make it right."

"Can you give me my parents back?" she asks.

"No, but I'm sure they're in a better—"

"They're not 'in a better place' if that's what you were going to say. They're in the same place, but worse, because they're spirits now. They're so busy working off their debts they don't have time to visit me." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Oh."

"Seems to me you'd be better off trying to fix yourself rather than coming here, stinking the place up with your gloomy attitude. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I stammer.

"No job, no life, no friends. That about sum it up?"

"I've got friends," I say. I prickle all over. It's strange being interrogated by a twelve-year-old, but she's got a lot of reason for her anger. Still, I feel the need to defend my own honor. "*Great* friends! Savaryn, he's a loxodon, brawny as they come and isn't afraid of anything. Kellim is an architect who designs



the most tranquil sanctuaries. He's human, but we don't hold that against him. And Ambrellin, she's a dryad who's an artifact broker specializing in antiquities. We meet up once a week to—"

"Wait she knows about artifacts? Like really old ones?"

"Yes "

Bazda sizes me up, then takes folded cloth from her pocket. She unwraps it and shows me a crescent-shaped piece of carved stone with a hole in the center and golden symbols etched all over. Even I can tell it's ancient. "My father gave me this a couple days before he died. He found it during construction at the basilica. I want to know what it is."

"I could show it to Ambrellin, if you'd like. I'm sure she'd be willing to help." Even under the weight of the gloom of this building, of the gloom in my heart, I feel my chance for redemption. I can only imagine how much this artifact means to Bazda, probably the last thing her father had given her.

She raises an eyebrow. "Can I trust you to bring it back?"

"You have my word that I will return it to you undamaged," I say. "I swear it upon the roots of Vitu-Ghazi."

The Selesnyan forests welcome me home, and as the peaceful sounds of nature penetrate my mind, the heaviness of the Orzhov Syndicate eases out of my muscles. My shoulders relax, my fists unclench. Evening services are already in full swing, and I pass several shamans calling upon the power of faithful congregants to enchant a series of stone signets etched with the blessed symbol of the Conclave.



Temple Garden | Art by: Titus Lunter

I'm nearly home when I get a sinking feeling I'm being followed. Could be any one of the Orzhov street thugs who'd tried to shake me down for insurance money on my way back from the orphanage. I toss another handful of seeds, then round a corner. I cast the spell, but I guess the assailant has avoided the brambles, because the footsteps keep coming. I go to pull out my shears as a backup weapon, but the leather sleeve is empty. I glance up as my assailant turns the corner, then sigh in relief. It's Bazda.

“Looking for these?” she asks, holding up my shears.

“You little thief!” I say, snatching them back. “How did you get those?”

“You thought I’d trust the word of a creeper? You have something valuable of mine. It’s only fair I hold something valuable of yours.”

“Here. Then take your artifact and go home. I’m not contributing to the delinquency of a kid!”

“Home? Nobody will even notice I’m missing, much less care. And besides, you’d have me traveling the streets at this hour? By myself?”

“I’ve seen you work a pair of hair pins. You’ll be fine.”

Bazda crosses her arms. “Probably. But I still want to know about the artifact. This is where you live?” she asks, looking up at our residential cooperative, a combination of polished white stone and tiered gardens, the topmost designed by Sadruna, the woodworker of the famed topiary grove. “Kind of a lot of branches and leaves.”

“It’s a Selesnyan thing,” I mumble. “Come on up, I guess.”

We cross through the gardens, up the stone stairs, through two atriums, passing the open doorways of other residents. Our downstairs neighbor waves. I wave back and hurry past, so they don’t have a chance to talk to me about the wurm noises again.

“Why aren’t there any doors in your building?” Bazda asks.

“Why would we need doors?”

“To keep people out.”

“All are welcome in our home.”

“Yeah,” Bazda says, her eyes shifting, “but what if someone tries to *steal* something?”

“That’s just not something we worry over,” I say as we climb the final sets of stairs. It’s easy to forget that much of Ravnica is focused on individual wants and gains.

The breezeway opens onto a spectacular view of the rolling vista. The sun’s dipped just below the horizon, the last remnants of day creating silhouettes of the loping risen sanctuaries roaming in the distance. To the right, where darkness has already settled, the branches of Vitu-Ghazi are aglow with firefly light. I’m eager to show the artifact to Ambrellin, but I stay a little longer, just so Bazda has a chance to absorb it all. Finally, she’s speechless.

“Come on,” I say, tugging her through the archway of twisted branches that serves as the threshold into our home. “Ambrellin,” I shout. “I’ve got something to show you!”

Ambrellin greets me with a wide smile. “Terrik! You’ll never guess who’s come—” She stops, looks at Bazda. “Oh, hello, dear. Welcome to our home. I’m Ambrellin.” She curtsies, her branches nearly touching the ground. Her finches flutter around Bazda in greeting, chirping happily.

“I’m Bazda,” Bazda says, with a cute curtsy of her own.

Ambrellin’s eyes flick to mine, searching for explanation without appearing rude in front of her guest.

“It’s fine,” I tell her. “She’s got this artifact she wants to show you. Maybe you can tell her more about it?”

Ambrellin takes the cloth-wrapped artifact from Bazda and gently unfolds each corner until it’s exposed. She gasps.

“My father found it digging at the basilica,” Bazda says. “Is it old?”

“Very. These golden symbols, I’ve seen them before on ancient Izzet machinery, technology from thousands of years ago, when they were still working heavily with stone and mana-infused circuits. Rare enough as it is, but it’s a mystery how it would have ended up buried under an Orzhovian basilica.”

“Valuable?” Bazda asks.

“Priceless,” Ambrellin says with a heavy breath.

Bazda shakes her head. “Everything has a price.”

“I’ll speak with the brokerage magistrate tomorrow to see which guild holds the proper claim to this,” Ambrellin says. “This is only a small piece to something much bigger.”

“Maybe someone’s already found the rest of it,” I say.

“I doubt it. Word travels fast among antiquity brokers. I would have heard *something*.”

“Terrik!” comes a voice from the dining room. Out steps Savaryn, his trunk raised in excitement. He hustles over to us, arms outstretched. “Peace and tranquility to you, my friend.”

“Peace and tranquility to you, as well,” I say, carefully angling myself between his tusks, and falling into a warm embrace. “How are you? It’s been nearly a week!”

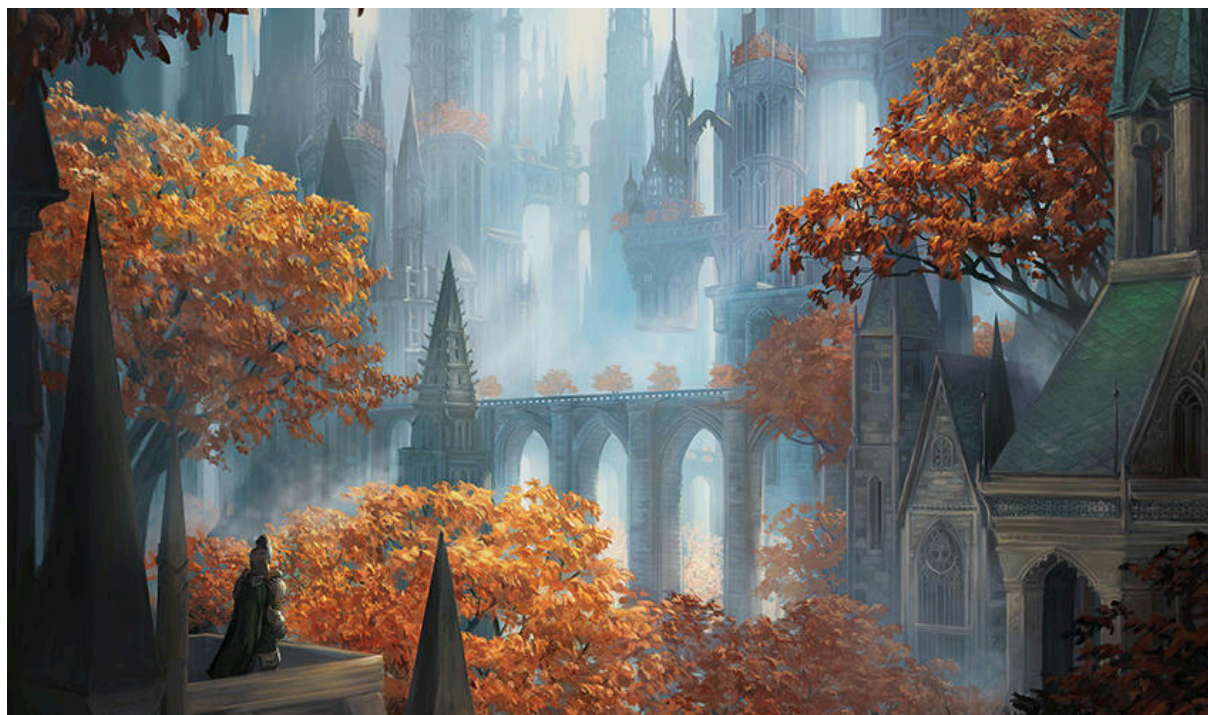
“Kellim and I have just come to share a bit of blessed news. I’ve been granted a promotion. The Kasarna training grounds have reached maximum capacity, so they’re planning a new facility on the other side of the North Ridge Forest. I’ll be the director, and Kellim has been hired to design it.”

“Congratulations,” I say. “North Ridge? That’ll be a huge commute! You’ll spend an hour easy trying to get across the concourse.”

Savaryn exchanges an anxious look with Ambrellin. After a long, thoughtful moment, she nods.

“We’re not commuting,” Savaryn says. “We’re moving to be closer to—”

“Moving!” I shout. I bite my tongue and try to be a good Selesnyan, ignoring the pain tearing through my heart, and instead, nurturing the tranquility within me. “I mean, moving. Of course. That would definitely be more convenient for you.” I smile so hard, I feel like my teeth are about to shatter. Finally, I just can’t take anymore, and I storm off to my room.



Pause for Reflection | Art by: Alayna Danner

“Terrik,” Ambrellin says, easing her way in as the others crowd in the doorway. “It’s going to be fine. We can visit any time.”

“I know. But it won’t be the same.” Our group is dissolving. This news hits me harder than losing my job and my reputation had. I can’t let this be it for our friendship.

“What if we could have one last adventure together?” I ask them. “Before everyone is spread all over Ravnica.”

“That’s a great idea,” says Ambrellin. “We can visit the topiary gardens next week. We’ll pack a lunch and—”

“That’s just an outing. I want to do something we’ll never forget. I think we should go find out what else is hiding under that basilica. Why can’t we be the ones to discover it?”

Ambrellin shakes her head, then takes a seat on the edge of my bed. “Something that old is likely buried very deep. It’d be impossible to dig for without the whole of the Orzhov Syndicate converging on us.”

“What about a worm?” I ask. “We can dive as deeply into the ground as we want. No digging.” I channel a calling spell, something like a whistle to our ears, but like a bright homing beacon to a worm. The mattress shifts under Ambrellin, and she jumps up, watching as my bed becomes a lumpy mess.

“You *were* hiding a worm under your bed!” she says.

I shake my head. “Not quite. The worm *is* the bed.” The bedspread is tossed off, and so is a thick layer of quilting covering a wooden palette. “Everybody stay calm,” I say as the worm uncoils from the tangle of sheets. Her beady eyes are trained on me, and her mouth hangs open, saliva dripping from row upon row of razer-sharp teeth. “Good girl,” I say, tossing a stick of raktusk jerky into her open maw. She’s young, just over a year old and already one ton of pure muscle.

“Amazing” Bazda says, daring to step near. “Can I pet her?”

“Sure,” I say.



“Absolutely not!” Ambrellin says, snatching her back.

“She’s harmless,” I say. “To friends, anyway. I raised her from a hatchling.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been hiding that thing in my home!” Ambrellin says, real irritation in her voice. “And now you want us to follow you into one of the most corrupt areas of Ravnica, looking for treasure with a runaway orphan.”

“I’ll go,” Savaryn says. “Terrik’s right. A major bonding event in the form of an adventure would provide a positive transitional structure to a long-distance friendship.”

“I’ll go, too,” says Kellim. “I’ve got to admit, I’m curious about what lies beneath that building. Come on, Ambrellin. You know Izzet will scrap it to make some bigger and better invention, and Orzhov will just sell it to the highest bidder.”

Ambrellin holds up the artifact, a gleam in her eyes. “Okay, we’ll go take a look. *Just* a look. If anything feels wrong, we’re leaving immediately.”

I grin. “First sign of trouble and we’re out of there, I promise.”

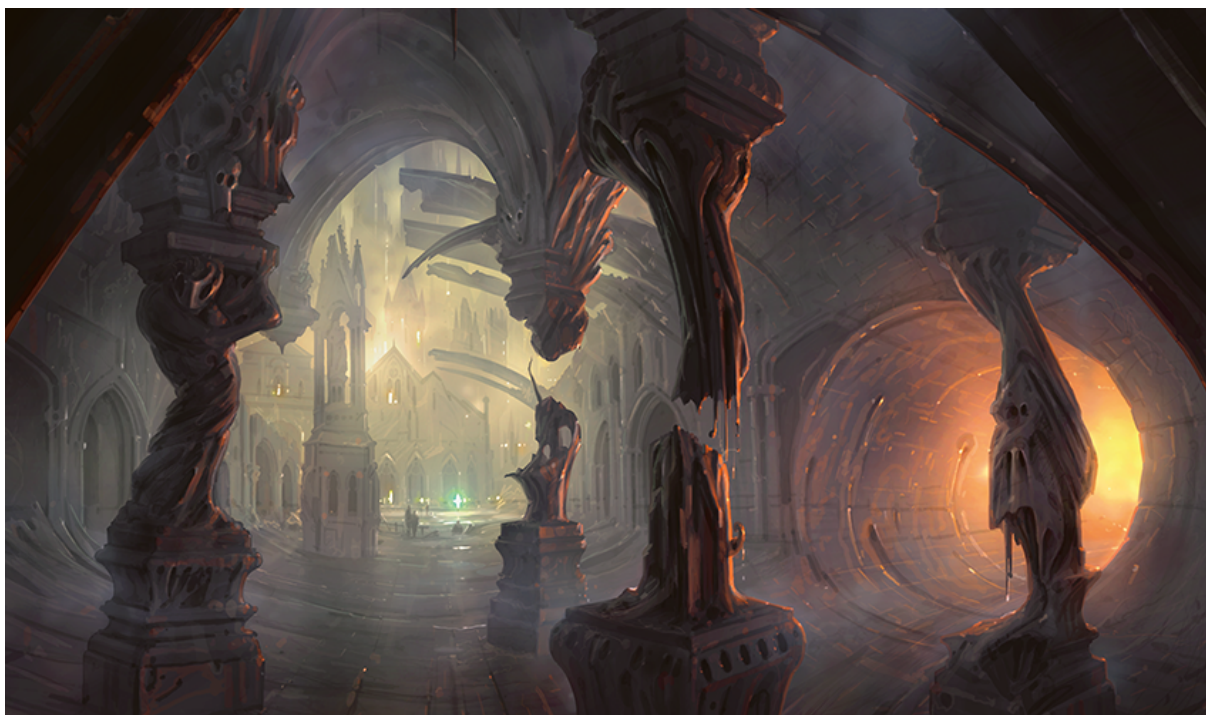
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The worm cuts a path through solid rock, subsonic frequencies temporarily rendering stone into a state of liquid, allowing us to avoid the evening traffic and any shakedowns by Orzhov gangs. I’m armored to the teeth in my old wurmcaller’s uniform, my plating shielding me from the burn of the melted rock that surrounds us. The others are crammed into the fortified chariot cab that had previously served as my wardrobe.

We’re nearing the site of the collapsed basilica, but the worm is drifting back up toward the surface. I pull her reigns, bidding her to dive deeper, but she’s resisting. I scratch her on the side, right behind her ear divot. She purrs and calms some, though from the tense way she’s holding herself, I can tell she’s still hesitant. It doesn’t matter in the end, because she delivers us to a long, rectangular catacomb chamber beneath the collapsed basilica.

“What’s wrong, girl? Did something spook you?” I pet my worm’s snout and give her a treat as the others disembark. Savaryn is shaking off the motion sickness, and if you’ve never seen a loxodon dry heaving, well, be thankful. Kellim is mesmerized by the stone sculptures of giants, their backs hunched up against the curved ceiling as if they’re keeping the whole place from caving in on us. Stress fractures meander through the stone, probably from the collapse above, but Kellim doesn’t seem too concerned with their structural integrity. Ambrellin is taken with the thousands of ceramic urns that are shelved on either side of the sculptures, each decorated with gold coins.

“The Basilica of the Opportune dates back thousands of years, and the catacombs are even older,” she says, looking around, lost in awe. “Some of these urns could be nearly—” Her eyes catch on something at the far end of the chamber. She starts walking toward it, then hastens her step. We follow.



Swamp | Art by: John Avon

It's another stone statue, a thrull this time, sitting back on its haunches, head bowed in servitude, arms outstretched and holding a chalice. The chalice is covered in layers of dust, but I can feel the mana streaming off it. It's an artifact. Ambrellin blows the dust away, revealing finely etched pictographs with emeralds lining the cup's rim. Carefully, she tries to dislodge the artifact from the statue's grip, twisting it to each side. Without notice, the entire statue tilts backward, receding into the wall, taking Ambrellin with it.

Kellim is the closest, and he reaches after Ambrellin, grabbing onto her leg, but he's being pulled into the pitch-black opening, too. Savaryn gets a good grip with his meaty hands, and Bazda and I help to steady him. Working together, we heave, heave, heave, and Ambrellin is nearly out, but the vigor of our rescue has caused the stone around the statue to fracture. The floor has started to crumble, as well. I look back at my worm and conjure a quick spell to call her forward. She's strong enough to pull us all out.

I hope.

But she's not responding. I whistle again, and she bristles, shaking her head like she's trying to rid herself of her harness. "Come on, girl! I've got some jerky for you."

She inches forward, eyes wide and crazed, but right before she makes it within arm's reach, she reels back and makes a jump for the ceiling. Stone goes liquid, and then she's gone, tail whipping through and stone solidifying again a half second later. I call for her twice more, but something has frightened her, and she's not coming back.

Then the entire floor gives out, and there's nowhere for us to go but down.

We're coughing rubble for a full five minutes, but the only casualties are some bruised ribs, a chipped tusk, and our pride. We've fallen fifteen feet, maybe twenty, into some kind of corridor. I feel awful and cast an area healing spell to help with the scrapes and cuts. I'd promised we'd be gone at the first sign of danger, and now look at us. Stuck.

"It'll take a while, but if we stack the broken stone, we can make a set of stairs leading back up," Savaryn says, lifting a boulder like it's filled with air.

I lift a smaller, less impressive rock and stack it next to his. "Sounds like a solid plan."

Ambrellin cuts her eyes at me, an unmistakable "I told you so" forming on her lips. But even completely out of her element, she clings to the harmonious tenets of the Conclave. "Yes," she says, straining to keep her smile from turning to bared teeth. "It sounds like a good plan."

"You're mad at me," I say to her. "I get it. You've been nothing but kind, and I've been nothing but a disappointment."

The bark near her temples is crinkling so hard, it's coming up at the edges. "I'm not mad."

"Not even a little bit? I know we value serenity and the sacredness of friendship, but if you're bothered, you have to say something. I've spent the past three months in your home, eating your food, secretly kept a worm that harassed your neighbors, maybe kind of almost kidnapped a child, and got you stuck under a collapsed building in the middle of the Orzhov Syndicate—"

"Okay I'm angry with you, are you happy?" Ambrellin walks up to me, pounding her finger right into my chest plate. "We've been patiently waiting for you to hit rock bottom, so we could help build you back up, but instead, you've managed to drag us down with you! Our get togethers are all about tip-toeing around your feelings, and you've thrown off our chemistry, and now Savaryn and Kellim are leaving because you've been so insufferable to be around!" She stops, looks up at me, relief on her face for just an instant before the remorse sets in.

"They're leaving because of me?" I say.

Ambrellin shakes her head, leaves rustling. "I'm so sorry, Terrik, I didn't mean—"

"No, *I'm* sorry," I say. I thought I could lean on them for support, but I guess in times like these, you learn who your true friends are. "Take care of Bazda. Get her back to the orphanage. You don't have to worry about me dragging you down ever again."

I head away down the hallway, alone, except for the dozens of gargoyles perched in notches on either side, eyes cast up, mouths open wide. They've been sleeping for centuries, maybe millennia, but I don't dare risk waking them. Guilt pecks at my brain. I'd gotten my friends into this mess, and I should be helping to find a way out, but at this point, I can't trust myself not to make it a hundred times worse. So I keep putting distance between us, until I come to a stairwell that leads deeper into the depths of the catacombs.

I take one timid step down, another, and suddenly I'm overwhelmed with the familiar scent of worm castings, the most highly prized fertilizer among Selesnyan gardeners. For a moment, I am swept away by thoughts of my old life, traipsing through the forests in late autumn, digging through rich, black earth in search of worm cocoons. The translucent cocoons were about the size of a loxodon's fist, and inside you could see five or six little wurmlings squiggling around. I'd trained hundreds of worms over the course of my career, growing them into tremendous lethal weapons to protect our way of life, but that moment in the woods was always the best part of my job, holding in the palms of my hands all that potential power, their futures unwritten.

The good feelings slam to the recesses of my mind when I get to the bottom of the stairs, peek around the corner, and see three adult worms blasting the walls of the chamber with their subsonic emanations. Spirits, impervious to the vibrations, wipe away the liquified rock before it can solidify.

At the center of the chamber sits a circular stone machine with a large lever protruding out at chest height, something like an antiquated mill, with similar markings as Bazda's artifact. Definitely the

Izzet technology Ambrellin was talking about. Copper coins lay in piles around the machine. A stout man with the undeniable look of desperation in his eyes orchestrates the workers. He's dressed in white robes with black cording, though the dust has rendered his outfit into shades of gray. An Orzhov pontiff, if I remember their rankings right. There's an old leather-bound tome hanging from a worn strap slung over his shoulder, and an impish thrull follows him around, practically his shadow.



High Priest of Penance | Art by: Mark Zug

"Faster! It's got to be buried around here somewhere," the pontiff says, jabbing one of the worms with his staff, the business end a sunburst of jeweled amber. The worm wails out in pain, a deep cry I feel in my chest. Cries like that can travel over half a mile. No wonder my worm had been spooked.

Savaryn's big hand comes down on my shoulder, tugging me back. "He doesn't look like the kind of guy who takes kindly to uninvited guests," he whispers. "Come on. Ambrellin wants to apologize, then we can work on getting out of here."

Another thump hits my other shoulder. It's not Savaryn's reassuring hand this time though. I don't dare twist my head. From the look in Savaryn's eyes, I can't even imagine the half-dead Orzhov creature that's got a hold of me.

"It's it's it's " Savaryn is saying, definitely not whispering anymore. My eyes dart to the gargoyle perched behind him. I think it shifted ever so slightly. "It's "

*Squeak* , comes a tiny voice in my ear. I turn and exhale sharply. "It's just a rat."

I pull it off my shoulder and show Savaryn. His hands are clasped over his mouth, stifling a scream, but a little trumpet of fright escapes his trunk. Now the gargoyle behind him is opening an eye. It sees us, intruders, and starts shrieking. Then all the gargoyles are emitting ear-piercing sirens that echo throughout the catacombs. Before we know it, spirits have surrounded us. The pontiff elbows his way through them.

"Blessed spirits, what do we have here?" says the pontiff.

"Looks like trespassers, Master," says his thrull, lurching forward to crouch at the pontiff's side. Its voice is a hollow wet rasp, exactly what I'd expect from a creature molded from dead flesh.



“And who knows the fine for trespassing in these sacred catacombs?”

“Twenty-thousand zibs, Master,” says one of the spirits, eyes cast downward. “Or ten thousand labor hours.”

“I’m guessing you don’t have twenty-thousand zibs on you,” the pontiff says, and as he points his staff at me, the amber stone lights up, and all my valuables rip out of my pockets. My enchanted bramble seeds, my shears, and a few coins.

“Those are mine,” I say to him.

“Ah, but the Orzhov Syndicate considers possession ninety-nine hundredths of the law. And now *I* possess them.” He hands the staff and my belongings to his thrull, then opens his leather-bound book and flips through dozens of signed contracts until he comes to a blank page. He taps his finger on the pristine parchment, and words bleed through, dictating the terms of my indentured servitude and a spot for my signature and the date. “Sign it or become worm food.”

Worm food seems like the easier choice, but I sign a fake name and hope for the best, knowing the others had heard the siren, alerting them to the danger. I know Ambrellin’s mad at me, but our friendship has deep roots, and she’ll stop at nothing to find a way to free us.

Once Savaryn has signed, too, the pontiff hands us each a bucket and commands us to get to work.

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The spirits seem to forget that living people need breaks, and they pile up buckets of gravel faster than we can haul them off. I carry one in each arm as I walk down a short hallway that opens into another catacomb chamber, this one shelved with neatly stacked bones and skulls with coins inset into their eyes, burial practices from an even earlier era. Statues line the circular room as well, some human, some thrull, even a vampire with her fangs bared. At the center of the chamber is where we dump the crushed stone, an ominous hole that leads further down into the forgotten histories of Ravnica. I dare to peek into the darkness, wondering how deep it goes, and if the fall would kill me or just leave me with broken bones and regrets.

“You shouldn’t linger,” says the spirit who’s come up behind me. She dumps the contents of her bucket into the hole—worm saliva, sickly dark with yellow foam. A sure sign of a distressed worm.

“Sorry,” I say, hustling back ahead of her. “So, what does that machine do, anyway?”

She looks around, then speaks with a voice so soft and scratchy, it turns my skin to gooseflesh. “It mints gold coins out of copper, some Izzet invention that was stolen by Master’s great-grandfather twelve generations back. He used it to amass a great wealth that launched him into a position with the elite, the family’s dirty little secret.”



Izzet Locket | Art by: Dmitry Burmak

“But it’s missing a piece,” I say, and immediately regret it. But instead of the spirit looking suspicious about how I know that, she seems racked with guilt. Somehow, despite being an apparition, she manages to go pale. “You know where it is, don’t you?” I ask her.

She shakes her head quickly, but then I notice the resemblance is there. Same mousy face and slight build, dark gray hair that had probably been black in life. “You’re Bazda’s mother?”

“Please, we’ve already lingered too long!” She runs off ahead of me, and I sprint after her.

“She misses you. She’s here, in the chamber just above. Let’s sneak out of here when the pontiff isn’t looking.”

“We can’t. We are bound by contract. The law magic would pull us right back here if we dared to run away.”

“Kadin! Zavora! You’re late!” the pontiff says when we arrive back. He passes his staff to his thrall attendant, then cracks open his tome. “One day added to your debts.” Zavora makes a tiny scratch onto a long row of marks. The pontiff then flips to my page. I feel the strain of the law magic, forcing my hand to make the mark.

“There will be plenty more of those to come!” the pontiff laughs.

I tense, and suddenly the weight of the contract sinks in. I’m going to be indebted to him forever, and not even death, especially not even death, will free me, unless I make a move right now. I grab the book, then run over to Savaryn, who’s carrying three full buckets in each hand. He drops them as I toss the book at him. “Rip it up!” I say. “Rip it all up, and we’ll all be free.”

Savaryn obeys, and his big hands crack the binding of the book while I hold the pontiff back. Pages rip next, and the book is nothing but shreds. I think I can feel the contract’s bonds weakening already.

“Who are you, anyway ‘Kadin’?” the pontiff says to me, looking searchingly into my eyes, like maybe he’s recognized me. “And what were you doing down here?”

“Nobody and nothing,” I say.

"Hmm. We'll see about that." He snatches the staff back from his attendant, then scrapes the amber tip along the stone floor as he draws a circle around my feet. Suddenly, I'm standing as straight as a board and my tongue feels like it's been transformed into a weapon. "I'll ask again. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"My name is Terrik, and my friends have come down here looking for treasure to bond our relationship after I ruined everything by steering a worm under this very basilica and causing it to collapse!" I hadn't meant to say any of that, but he's put me under the influence of a verity spell, a strong one, and my own words betray me. But there's one thing I cling to with all my might, our only piece of leverage, that Bazda has the missing piece of the machine. I meditate, surrounding that thought with mental armor.

"I thought you looked familiar," the pontiff says. "You can ease your conscience, Terrik. You and your worm were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Seems I got a little too ambitious with the digging down here and knocked out some support structures I shouldn't have. But it's good to know you have more friends around. I'll use every set of hands I can get."

The pontiff sends a group of spirits to retrieve my friends, then waves his staff in the air, leaving wisps of gray smoke trailing behind it. The smoke sinks down to the ground, covering the scraps of parchment and ripped binding in an eerily glowing fog. Then the pontiff reaches down into the mist and pulls back a perfectly bound book, pages all intact.

He looks at me and smiles. "Oh, you're going to be in debt to my family for generations."

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My stomach pitches when the spirits come back, pushing Ambrellin, Kellim, and Bazda ahead. Their eyes go wide when they see the wurms and the machine. Bazda breaks from the spirit's grip, barreling right into me with a tight embrace.

"It's okay," I tell her. "We're going to find a way out of this."

"Get over here," the pontiff says, ripping her away from me. "Let's see what we've got." He waves his staff over Ambrellin first, but she keeps nothing the pontiff would find of value on her, her only adornments the branches winding down her arms and a necklace made of autumnal leaves. He gets a dagger from Kellim, and then he turns to Bazda. I close my eyes. He's going to find her artifact, and his machine will be complete, and our usefulness here will have run its course, and there's no way he'd let us go, knowing what we know.

"Sign, or become worm food," the pontiff says to my friends.

I open my eyes, and he's passed his staff to the thrull, who's only holding the dagger and Bazda's hair pins. Where did they hide the artifact? Bazda nods at me, then I look down, noticing a bump under my armor that wasn't there a moment ago. I discreetly feel along its edges, the shape of a crescent with a hole in the middle. Her quick thieving hands had planted it on me without me even noticing.

"Master!" one of the spirits shouts. "This worm has stopped moving."

The pontiff grabs his staff and stomps over to the worm, body gone slack against the cold stone floor. He jabs the pointed end into the worm's flesh, and the amber sunburst lights up, delivering a jolt of pain magic to the animal. It shudders for a moment, a black web radiating out across the skin. He shocks the worm again, but this time there's no response.

"What are you all standing around looking at?" the pontiff screams. "We've still got two wurms. Find that missing piece by the end of the day, or I'm adding another year to everyone's debt!"

As soon as the pontiff has gone, I run over to the worm. I put my hands on the pulse behind his jaw, feeling the faintest of beats. The eye turns to me, and I'm struck by the look of recognition he gives me, a dark, thick tear running down his face. He's one of mine, I know it. The others could be, too. But it wouldn't matter either way, because the pontiff is going to pay dearly for this.

"Don't linger," comes Bazda's mother's voice again. She's got her bucket filled with worm saliva. I pick up two filled with gravel and walk quickly ahead of her until we reach the catacomb chamber, far enough from prying ears.

"Ma'am. I could really use your help," I plead. "I've got a plan to free me and you and everyone else the pontiff's got bound by contract. All I ask of you is to do these two simple things "

Bazda's mother stands at the hole in the center of the chamber, looking down into its depths. The pontiff stands next to her, looking down as well.

"He just jumped," she says. "I guess the work was too rough for him. You know how elves are."

"Pity," the pontiff says. "At least I've still got the loxodon. Definitely the better worker of the two." He hands his staff to the thrull as he always does before opening his contract book, then he flips to the page I'd signed. The pontiff raises his hands, and as he casts the spell, I'm close enough to see where the expiry date bleeds into the paper, and yet the pontiff doesn't notice me.

The first thing I'd asked of Bazda's mother was that she fetch the pontiff and tell him that I'd jumped. There was no other entry or exit to the room, so it was obvious that's the way I had to go.

The second thing I'd asked was to borrow her bucket of worm saliva. I'd rubbed it upon my entire body. The experience, I can't say that it was a positive one, but it gave me a nice tacky coating for gravel to stick to. After two applications, I looked as much like a stone statue as any of the others lining the walls. I struck a pose, then waited.



Overgrown Tomb | Art by: Yeong-Hao Han



And now is my chance to strike. I barrel toward the pontiff at full speed, then swipe the contract book with one hand. I catch him by surprise, and it goes flying. I grab onto him, wrestling him toward the hole. He's scrappy, but I've spent my whole life atop the backs of beasts a thousand times his size, and with two hard flips, I pitch him into the hole. Four seconds pass before I hear flesh impact and bones snap. I wince, then race for the book, tearing up contract after contract. I look back at the thrull who's still standing there, holding the staff.

"Come on," I say. "Help me with this, and we can all go free. Including you! He won't be able to put the book back together without his staff."

The thrull slowly turns to face me. From the hole, we hear the pontiff moaning. There's a flash on the thrull's face, and before I can plead with him to stop, he's jumped in after the pontiff. Moments later, I hear the ripping of muscles and ligament. Amber light flickers down deep as the pontiff wields his flesh magic.

"Change of plans," I say to Bazda's mother, then I'm running back toward the others. I pull the artifact from beneath my armor and give it to Ambrellin. "Do you think you can get that machine working?" I ask her.

"I think so," she says. "The magic is strong, but the mechanics are simple. I'll just need someone to push."

"I can do it," Savaryn says, flexing his muscles. Ten minutes later, the piece is in place, Kellim and Bazda are dropping copper coins into the feeder, Savaryn is pushing the lever around and around, and as the top stone grinds against the bottom one, purple sparks fly and the hairs on my arms stand on end. I keep checking over my shoulder, looking for the pontiff, but the hallway stays silent. The first gold coin tumbles out the chute, and I catch it in my hands. I bite it. Looks like the real thing. A dozen more tumble out, then fifty. The spirits count them out into buckets of five hundred zinos each.

I ask each of them how much they have left of their debts, and divide the money between them, ready to buy their freedom. Everything stops when we hear a *click, click, click* coming toward us. Moments later, the pontiff emerges into the room, one arm hanging lower than the other and his jaw sitting too far forward. Blue-gray flesh peeks out from beneath his robes with each step, and it takes me a moment to realize that he's fused the thrull to his leg, its head now where the pontiff's foot had been, the thrull's golden faceplate hitting the stone tile with each step.

"It's over," I tell him, setting a bucket of zinos before his feet. "I'm paying off all of our debts. We are no longer bound to your contracts." And with my words, I feel the law magic loosening its grip.

"No!" he says, his scream like a gargle in his throat. "The machine is mine. Those coins belong to me! You have no claim!"

"But we do. You said it yourself. Possession is ninety-nine hundredths of the law." I grin.

Bazda waves at him, sitting atop the coin mill.

"I will make more money," the pontiff says. "Money to feed into the Syndicate. Money to fund wars. All other guilds will fall, starting with Selesnya."

"We'll be leaving, now," I say, tipping my head. "It was nice doing business with you."

And with that, the spirits stretch up, their ethereal bodies suddenly lighter, and they disappear through the rock. My friends and I make our way back up the stairs, toward the chamber and half-finished set of stairs.

I whistle, calling the wurms below, hoping they remember their training. They show up moments later. I strip out of my armor and hand it to Bazda. "Here, put these on. It's about to get a little hot."

Ambrellin looks at me. “You expect us to ride a worm out of here? Without protection? We’ll melt!”

“It’s not far to the surface. Five, ten seconds, max.”

“Five seconds of molten lava in our faces.”

“Or, ten,” I remind her. “Alone, we couldn’t make it, but if we work together. Sticking close, casting healing spells, and weaving them together into something greater than the sum of its parts, I think we’ll make it.”

“I believe in Terrik,” Savaryn says. “I think it’s a good plan.”

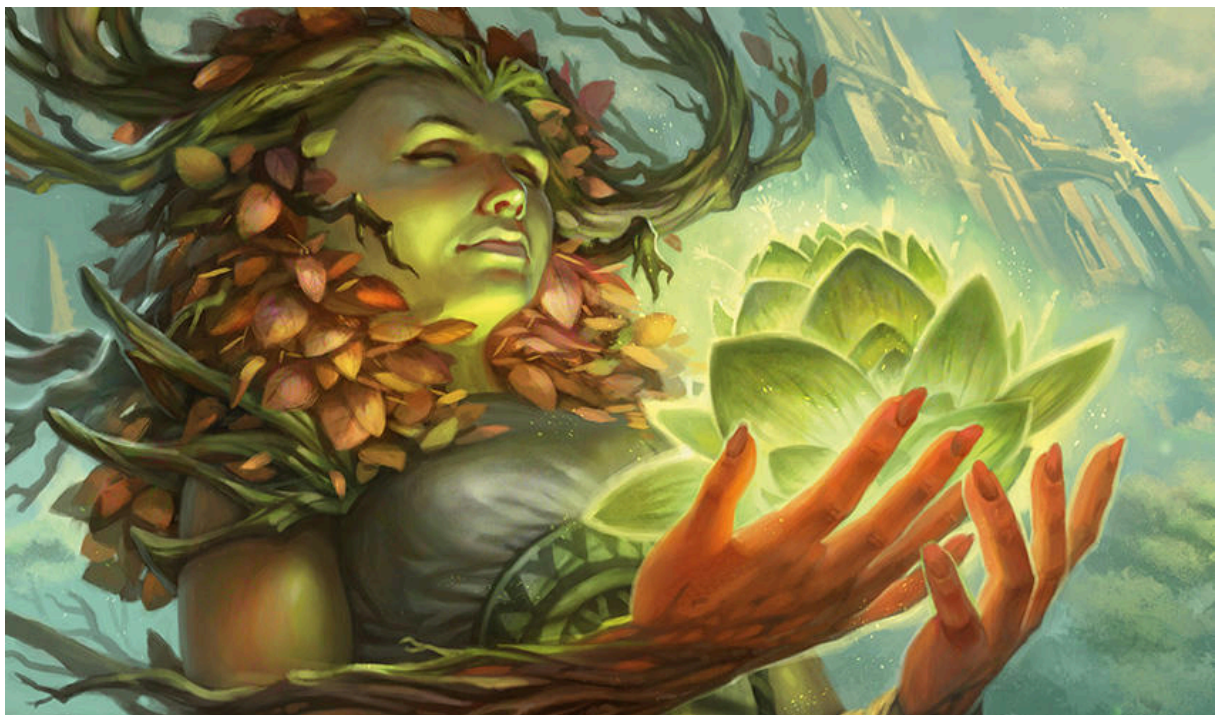
“I agree,” says Kellim.

“I do, too!” Bazda says, the bulk of my armor nearly swallowing her.

“It’s a good plan,” Ambrellin agrees.

We all climb upon the worm and hold on tightly. I pat the worm and speak softly to her, hoping the abuse she’s endured hasn’t nullified all her training. I’ve still got a few jerky crumbs in my pocket. I toss one into her mouth. “Come on, girl, let’s do this.”

I lean forward, taking my time like I’m training a hatchling, even though time is the one thing I’m short on. She moves forward, gains some confidence, and trust starts to build. She worms her way up the gap to the catacomb where we’d entered, and by the time we’ve reached the other end of the chamber, she’s moving at a steady clip. “It’s time. Start your spells,” I say and pull back, directing the worm to jump toward the ceiling. Healing spells encompass the five of us, the others meditating with all their might as I steer. The heat hits my face, burns, but I hold steady, and finally, the curtain of molten lava parts, and the cool of the night soothes away our wounds. Never in my life would I have thought to be so glad to be breathing the sooty air of the Orzhov Syndicate.



Flower // Flourish | Art by: Dmitry Burmak

Two of the spirits are sitting there, waiting for us. It takes Bazda a long moment, but she finally puts it together. “Mama? Papa?” she asks them. The strong little girl I thought incapable of softness breaks down into tears. There was a little money left over after all the debts had been paid. I hand it to Bazda.

“Here’s something for you to restart your lives together,” I say.

“Thank you,” Bazda says. “But that man. Won’t he keep using the machine? Won’t he make war?”

“Not any time soon,” Ambrellin says. She hands Bazda’s artifact back to her.

“I told you you’d get it back,” I say. “I always keep a promise.”

We part ways with Bazda’s family, the four of us dragging ourselves back to Ambrellin’s cooperative, but when we hear screaming coming from her downstairs neighbors’ apartment, we hasten our steps. We enter their home to find my little wurm girl curled up on their bed, slobbering through to the mattress. Looks like she found her way back home, give or take a floor. We all start laughing. Well, minus the neighbors.

“This feels good,” I say, “all of us together like this.” I don’t know what the future holds, if I’ll be able to clear my name and get my job back, or if Savaryn and Kellim will still decide to leave. I do know that the future is full of possibilities, and our bond is something that will never be broken.