

Journey to the Nexus

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From set *Khans of Tarkir*

When last we saw him, Sarkhan Vol had just returned to his home world of Tarkir.

He fears his enemies, from the ancient dragon Nicol Bolas to the Mardu khan Zurgo, who despises him. He still follows the voice of Ugin, the spirit dragon—long-dead dragon Planeswalker; enemy of Nicol Bolas; and, perhaps, the key to Sarkhan's salvation.

He does not know where he is going, or what he will find when he gets there. He knows only one thing: This world is broken, as he is broken, and there may yet be hope to set things right.

The wind screams across the barren dunes. Flecks of bone tear from the ancient, gigantic skeletons and whirl in the storm along with the ever-present sand. The horizon is indistinct, lost in the scouring grit.



Scoured Barrens | Art by Eytan Zana

A distant speck is moving.

Perhaps it is a mirage. It wavers in and out of vision, its shape indistinct.

But it is slowly growing larger. The rippling form is resolving. A winged thing? A man, perhaps. Walking. His shape fluctuates, flowing outward in the wind.

He comes closer. A heavy cloak is billowing behind him like wings as he trudges over the ragged land. He clutches a staff.

Closer still. The walking figure gestures wildly with his free hand. He shouts to the air. He shakes his staff. An object hanging from its tip clatters against the pole like dry bones.

He is here now. Wild, unkempt hair, a ragged beard, eyes that shine with madness. He is talking. No one else is here.

“Stay out of my mind, ghost!” he cries. He grabs his head as though in pain. “What would you have me do?”



Sarkhan, the Dragonspeaker | Art by Daarken

He stops, turns, and surveys the wild landscape. He falls silent. Then he nods to himself, slowly. He looks to the sky. He squares his shoulders. He turns toward a distant peak and begins to walk again, his steps surer now.

Soon, only shallow footprints remain, fading as the howling sand spills into them.

Narset was meditating, as she always did at sunrise. She focused on her breathing, then went deeper, finding the still point beyond the rhythms of life. The silence was absolute, soul-deep.

She drifted in quiet contemplation, considering the ancient mysteries. The baffling runes of the Spirit Dragon floated before her eyes as she called up her studies. The characters shifted, always just outside comprehension.

A less disciplined student would lash out in frustration, but Narset had trained her patience over many years. Enlightenment required time and long silences to let the hidden meanings speak. She focused harder, listening. She had spent many months that way, coming so close to their essence but never quite reaching it.

That day was different. In her calm center she caught a flicker, the faintest scent of a word. *Heal*. She felt a psychic urge, like a push between her shoulder blades. Then she was out of the trance and gazing at the dawn's tinge on the mountaintop.



Alabaster Kirin | Art by Igor Kieryluk

From the clouds at the peak burst an awe-inspiring shape: a kirin, the messenger of fate. Its eyes and horns blazed with ethereal flame. It ran through the air on fire-pointed hooves. The magical creature paused and tipped its head toward her, catching her gaze with its own. Narset nodded in acknowledgment. Then the kirin turned, bucking and prancing, and headed away to the north and east.

Narset stood, understanding. Tarkir had spoken, through the hidden words of Ugin and the appearance of the harbinger. The destiny of the world lay there, somewhere in the kirin's fiery tracks.

She would need to appoint someone to oversee the clan's business in her absence. But such wandering in search of wisdom was part of every Jeskai's calling. She smiled and took up her staff.

Sarkhan was close to the mountain. He could see monumental structures at its peak, banners snapping in the chill wind. A cataract spilled over a waterwheel mounted near the peak, and rope bridges spider-webbed the deep chasms that surrounded it.

"Why have you driven me here?" he shouted to the sky. His voice came back to him: *here, hear, heal*.

"Another trick? Another lie? Will my bones join those of the dragons, unfulfilled and broken?" Sarkhan tore at his hair and gritted his teeth. He smashed the butt of his staff into the slope. He sank to his knees, mumbling.

A voice came from above. "Weary traveler, do you seek peace?"

Sarkhan flung his head back and forth, as though shaking off water. Then he looked up, slowly. There stood a slender woman, clothed in saffron robes, poised atop a head-high boulder. A glowing sigil like an eye shone from her brow.



Narset, Enlightened Master | Art by Magali Villeneuve

"Is this real?" Sarkhan growled. "Or do you mock my eyes as well as my ears?"

The woman stepped off the boulder and landed lightly on her toes. She slowly approached, reaching out a hand. "I am here." Sarkhan shrank back, but then went completely still as her fingers brushed his forehead. She brought her palm firmly into contact with his burning flesh. It was cool and dry.

She held her hand there and looked into Sarkhan's eyes. "I see...another...with you. Around you. Like an echo of a shadow." She stepped back, breaking the contact.

Sarkhan rose, leaning on his staff. “Do you hear it too? A voice within. A thought that is not your own.” Wonder smoothed his brow, and his eyes focused on the serene face before him. “They all say I am mad. No one else hears it. The endless whispering. Never a moment’s peace! How do you know this voice?”

“I have only sensed it in your aura, an echo on the breeze. An idea. An image. Your coming has been foretold, traveler.

“I am Narset. I dwell here, among other seekers of enlightenment. I guide my clan toward a higher destiny.”

Sarkhan nodded. “The Jeskai. I have heard of those mountaintop sages, though I never met one in battle. Our khan thought them weak, seeking endlessly for some imagined truth.”

“The truly strong do not reveal their power until it is needed.” Narset wheeled and struck the boulder with three fingers, a short, stabbing motion. The stone split neatly, falling into halves like a hatched egg. “Our mountain strongholds yet stand, though many have tried to take them.”

She turned back. “Tell me your name, traveler. Let me hear your tale.”

Sarkhan had spoken little to another since the Eye of Ugin. And that had been painfully brief. He strung together words in short clusters, halting, breaking into half-forgotten songs and children’s doggerel. Sometimes he simply stopped and stared into space for minutes at a time.

But slowly, agonizingly, he put together an account of his travels since leaving behind the meditation realm of Nicol Bolas. Of the voice that constantly spoke to him, driving him ever onward until he fled back to Tarkir. The path to heal his world. Once his home. Now his quest.

Narset listened. Sometimes she asked a question, never interrupting, but waiting for one of Sarkhan’s anguished pauses. When he spoke of wandering the planes, her eyes grew wide for a few moments, but then she nodded to herself as though she had discovered something precious. She asked to inspect the jagged piece of stone that hung from his staff. She studied the strange markings that covered all its unbroken surfaces.

“I have seen something like these symbols before,” she murmured. “They are ancient. Only the most hidden lore mentions them. Secrets that only dragonfire can reveal. How came this relic into your hands?”



Eye of Ugin | Art by James Paick

“It is from the Eye. The sheer fire shattered it. Overcame me. But I saved this. All that I could.”

“What is the Eye?”

“The Eye of Ugin. He speaks to me. Still.”

Her eyes flashed wide again. “You know of Ugin? You were in his sanctum?”

“It was a trap. Then a trick. Now no more. But the Spirit Dragon is dead. Bolas said so. Or does he lie?”

“It is no lie. Ugin is dead. And with him, all his brood, the dragons. Did you not know this?”

“But he speaks! He taunts me, constantly. He tells me to seek him out. He sent me here. He says just one thing: ‘Heal.’”

“The voice of the Spirit dragon led you to me. I might be able to find surcease for what troubles you. But perhaps it meant more than that. This world is in pain, Vol. You feel it, don’t you?”

Narset spoke quietly, her eyes distant. “For centuries the clans have fought. When the dragons lived, we struggled for survival against them. But when the last dragon fell, we turned on each other. What balance was struck in our mutual fight was lost long ago.

“Now even our quiet strongholds know the shout of war. The Abzan leave their sturdy fortresses to seek enemies on the steppe. The Sultai send forth armies of the dishonored dead. Even the hardy Temur descend from their mountains. And over every land, the Mardu ride, and raid, and ruin.

“We have lost our way. I fear that soon the clans too will be only bones in the wilderness, gnawed by wild beasts. All that we have built will crumble away until even the past is gone.”

Sarkhan’s shoulders fell. “Then I have failed again. This world is already dead. The past is lost. Ugin is only a dream.”

Narset shook her head. "Ugin is far more than that. He is this world's soul. When he was lost, Tarkir was lessened. But perhaps something yet lingers. Something that you can awaken. That stone you bear might be the key."

"The key..." Sarkhan stared into the distance. "Yes, that is what I called it. I thought it would unlock the secrets of the Spirit Dragon." Then his eyes focused again and he stared hard at the jagged piece of stone. He looked up at Narset. "Secrets only dragonfire can reveal. How could I have forgotten?"

He clenched a fist around the fragment and uttered a bestial sound, deep in his throat. His eyes flared and smoked. And his hand became a dragon's jaws. Fire rolled from within. The markings glowed, swirled, seemed to form words.

Narset leaned forward, despite the heat. Her face was eager, excited, shining like a blade from the forge. "It is a phrase, in the language of the mighty. The ancient scrolls use it. 'Look to the past and open the door to Ugin.'"

Sarkhan shook his head. "But Bolas said he put Ugin where he lies."

Narset looked back at him. "Do you not know where Ugin lies?"

"My clan never stayed in once place for long. We had no interest in scrolls or maps or ancient tales. The Mardu move on. That is all."

"And yet you have seen so little of this world."

"The voice spoke of a door. I was seeking it, though I have no guide to show me."

"You have one now," said Narset. She laid a gentle hand on Sarkhan's shoulder. "The place where Ugin fell is not known to many. But it is recorded in the *Annals of the Sage Eye*. As keeper of the Annals, I have read the lore within. I can take you to the tomb of the Spirit Dragon."

The night sky shimmered and hissed, a counterpoint to the voice murmuring in Sarkhan's mind. The weird light cast multicolored shadows across the snow, as he and Narset slowly climbed into the Qal Sisma range, following a path made of memory as much as land.

Sarkhan looked across the campfire embers at Narset. She bent her head over a small pot of tea. As the fragrance rose about them he sensed a closeness, something he had not known with another human being for as long as he could remember. She looked up and smiled openly. "It is a luxury, but I always carry a small handful of leaves. Will you join me?"

Accepting the steaming pot, Sarkhan inhaled deeply. He sipped and looked up to the sky as he savored the brew. "I have been in these mountains before," he said. "I listened with those who spoke to the long ago."

Narset nodded. "The shamans of the Temur have a special connection to the world's soul. They hear the spirits of the dead and echoes from times both past and yet to come, what they call the unwritten now. Perhaps their closeness to the Nexus grants such gifts."

"The Nexus?"

"It is a point, deep within the ravine where Ugin's bones rest. There, reality is always shifting and twisting, as though seeking a final form but never finding it. Seekers have approached the place, but none were able to enter. The few who pressed on were simply torn apart. Those wanderers who survived told me what they saw, but I know nothing more than this."

"Is that where we are going?"

Narset nodded. “You carry a talisman,” she said, “bearing the words of the Spirit Dragon. Perhaps only one such as you, who can pass between worlds, can withstand the violence of the Nexus.”

She finished the last swallow of her tea.

They walked in silence after that. There was nothing more that needed to be said.

It was Ugin’s voice that disturbed the quiet.

“He’s speaking to me,” muttered Sarkhan. “His voice seems stronger now.”

Narset pointed. Between the ragged peaks rose a contorted stone spire, bathed in a weird glow that outshone the cold light overhead. “That twisted rock marks the entrance to the canyon, the gateway to Ugin’s grave.”



Tomb of the Spirit Dragon | Art by Sam Burley

The eerie luminescence caught Narset’s face and seemed to transform her into cool, blue-green jade. Sarkhan’s burning eyes shone with a chill light. Below them stretched a miles-long fissure, plunging deep through the ice into the ancient stone.

Dragon bones lay there, as they did all across Tarkir, but they were different. They glowed an uncanny blue, from the tip of the immensely long tail all the way to the arched passage of ribs a hundred feet away. A curve in the canyon wall hid the rest from view.

All at once, Sarkhan’s mind fell silent. He stopped in his tracks.

Narset moved to his side. “Be at peace, traveler. You have found your path. See, the Spirit Dragon shows you the way.”

A new light cast Sarkhan's shadow before him, down the long slope that led to the dragon's tail. He looked up at the shard that hung from his staff. It pulsed, a warm orange glow from the markings that scrawled its surface.

Then, with a bestial cry, a thuggish orc leapt from the crag behind them. "I have you, traitor!" roared Zurgo, as he chopped with his butcher's blade.

Narset spun, faster than Sarkhan's eye could follow. She raised her staff, and the murderous blow slammed to a stop as though it had struck stone. Zurgo howled and threw a mighty punch that could have felled a loxodon. Narset held up a palm as though to hush a willful child. The orc's fist smashed against it, and he howled again as knuckles shattered.



Deflecting Palm | Art by Eric Deschamps

"Go now." Narset's voice was urgent, breathless. "I feel the power of the Nexus even from here. It seems stronger than ever before. I will guard your passage."

"I can't let you fight my battles."

Narset's eyes flashed. "You must. The moment is right. Whatever fate Ugin has in store for you, this is the time to meet it."

Anguish and shame raced across Sarkhan's brow. But he turned and began to run along the pathway. The snow-covered stones were slick, and he had to watch every step to avoid a fall. He was abreast of the glowing tail tip. He could see around the curving stone, into the vaulted ribs that formed a glowing gateway. Waves of pressure pulsed across him, and the landscape shuddered with the same rhythm. He felt the forces of destiny pulling him in, dragging him inexorably forward.

He looked back at the crest where Narset and Zurgo struggled. She seemed to catch his eye, even smile, as her graceful staff swung in a killing arc. Zurgo was outmatched. Sarkhan could see it.

But then the powerful orc moved with unexpected agility, dodging the staff's swing. He lashed out with his sword. A gush of blood.

Narset stood still. She seemed almost to be meditating again. But then she began to sink, a cut flower. She turned her head toward Sarkhan. He heard her shout. "Go!"

Sarkhan's world went crimson. Fury and grief and vengeance fought for a voice, leaving him silent. He stumbled, began to stagger back upslope, where Zurgo waited, glorying in the blood of his companion.

"Zurgo! Monster! I will have my vengeance!" Sarkhan screamed.

But the Eye fragment flared bright. All around him the world wailed. The land twisted. He had to turn away, howling his despair as his hands erupted with flame. The dragonfire roared into the vortex ahead of him, and a gate appeared.

It was the door he had been waiting for all this time.

Yes.

Sarkhan turned and looked from Zurgo to the crumpled body of Narset, and then back to the gate.

Yes.

With a bellow, equal parts rage and release, Sarkhan charged into the flaring arch.