

Puppets

James Wyatt

From set *Aether Revolt*

With the rest of the Gatewatch embroiled in the Inventors' revolution, Liliana has taken on the grim task of addressing what she sees as the real problem on Kaladesh: the Planeswalker Tezzeret.

Long ago and worlds away, a young Liliana Vess had slipped through the trees of a dark forest while a battle raged around her. The croaking of ravens and the screams of the dying had accompanied her into the woods, and the course of her life had altered. The streets of Ghirapur were about as different from the Caligo Forest of Dominaria as the Liliana of today was from that naive, hopeful, desperate girl.



Liliana, Heretical Healer | Art by Karla Ortiz

But war was war. Buzzing thopters took the place of ravens here (for which she was deeply grateful), while screams mingled with the explosive sounds of aether cannons and quicksmithed incendiaries.

Her mission then had been life: finding a cure for the mysterious affliction that had laid her brother on death's doorstep. Today her mission was death—her mission and her constant companion. The death of Tezzeret. Nothing else mattered—not the struggles of Kaladesh's renegades, not the interference of her Planeswalker allies, not the Consulate's attempts to restore order.

Tezzeret had to die.

Of *course* he had to die, and it was absurd that Gideon was queasy about it. Hells, right up until this whole business on Kaladesh had started, she had thought he was dead already. Killing him now was just tidying up a loose end left over from an unfortunate affair on Ravnica four years ago.

Liliana had been working for the dragon then, turning Jace against Tezzeret in an attempt to wrest away control of an interplanar consortium. Jace had wrecked Tezzeret's mind and left him for dead on some remote plane. A loose end—Tezzeret would come after her, would come after Jace, would no doubt make everything more complicated.

She sighed, looking around at the chaos wrought by Ghirapur's angry renegades. Everything was already complicated enough, and she had plenty of unresolved issues. Tezzeret and Jace. Garruk and the Chain Veil. Bolas and her demonic pacts. The damned Raven Man. Even the events of the Caligo Forest had left certain questions unanswered. One tangled mess after another, each with its own loose ends. She paused and looked at the body of a hapless renegade, lying limp and broken in the wreckage of a small copter. She waved a hand in its direction, and a new zombie struggled to its feet.



Cemetery Recruitment | Art by Kieran Yanner

She felt a little better.

If Tezzeret had been a loose end when she first found him here, now he was a clear danger not just to this plane, but as far as his ambitions extended. If Rashmi had any idea what she was talking about—and she was smart, so she probably did—then Tezzeret was building something like an old-fashioned planar portal, the sort of thing that had caused so much chaos in Dominaria's ancient history. As far as she had known, such things were impossible now, now that the Multiverse had...changed.

But judging from the vortex of energy that was now swirling around the Aether Spire, Liliana guessed that Tezzeret had activated that portal. That could not be good.

Gideon talked a good show about fighting interplanar threats, but Tezzeret was right in their reach and somehow Gideon didn't want to kill him. Instead, he and Jace and the others were hip-deep in this war, this rebellion. "None of our damned business," she muttered. Not that she really cared about the stated mission of the Gatewatch, but the revolt had become a huge distraction from what was really important.

"Me," Liliana said to herself with a sardonic smile.

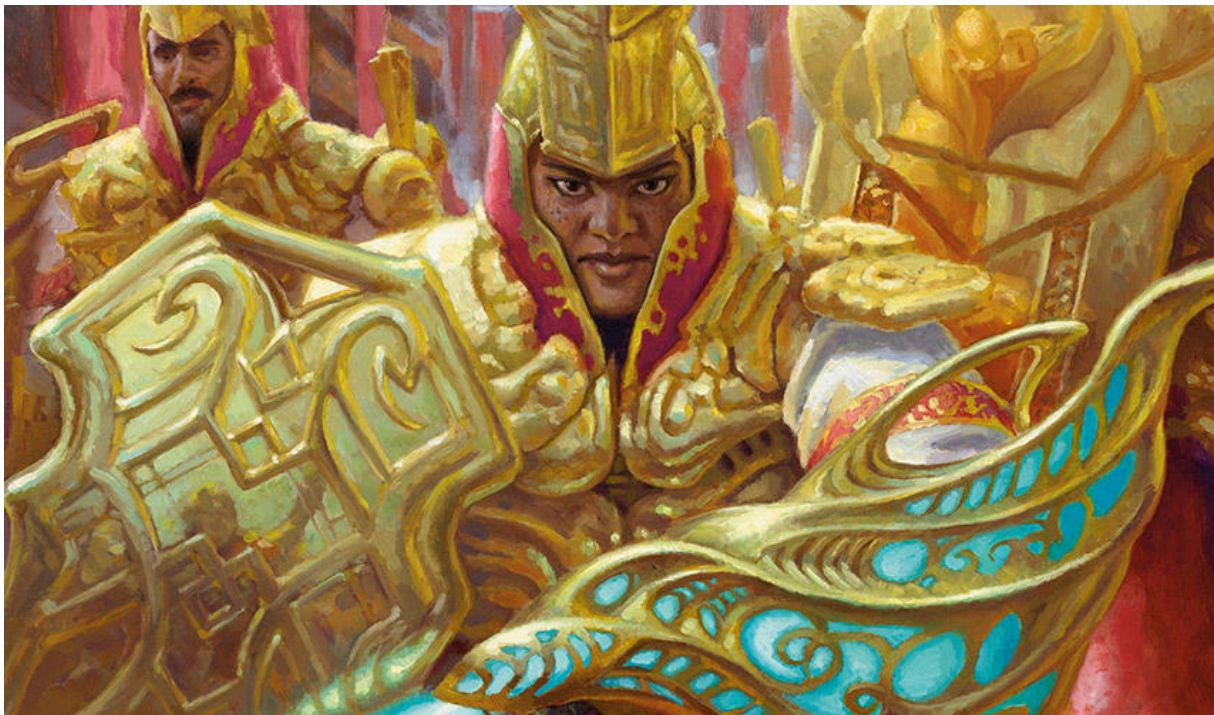
She told the zombie to follow her, smiling at the thought of Gideon's disapproval. But she would need a bodyguard if she was going to get to Tezzeret.

And I am going to get to Tezzeret, she thought.

Fortunately Liliana didn't have much farther to go because her new friend drew a lot of attention. It was the best kind of attention, though: people gasping and recoiling in horror, pointing at her in shock and dismay, and staying the hell out of her way.

You'd think they'd never seen a necromancer before.

But she knew it couldn't last; sooner or later, some Consulate soldiers would decide that she and her zombie were a threat to their precious order and put themselves between her and the Aether Spire. So she covered the remaining distance as quickly as she could manage, until at last she reached a barricade across the street and a dozen or so Consulate soldiers blocking her way. An unnatural wind, no doubt stirred up by the swirling energy vortex above, drowned out the sound of the dwarf captain's challenge, but her meaning was clear: Stop. Turn back.



Bastion Enforcer | Art by Matt Stewart

With the slightest nod of her head, Liliana directed the zombie to a position in front her, to keep the soldiers busy until she could deal with them.

“Deal with them?” She could almost hear Jace's voice questioning her—in fact, for a moment she thought it was his voice in her mind. A single spell could drain the life from the soldiers and add their walking corpses to her retinue, and she had no doubt she could do it. Mana surged in her like bile, fueled by her hatred of Tezzeret, ready for the battle to come. Killing these soldiers would be easy—but, strangely, that had not been her plan. *Perhaps Jace and —she shuddered a little—and General Meat-Shield are rubbing off on me.*

Spears stood up a little straighter and aether weapons lit with their blue glow as she continued her approach. Then a keen-eyed soldier saw the nature of her escort and shouted a delightful expletive, audible even over the rushing wind.

“That’s your cue,” she muttered, willing the zombie ahead as she strode toward the soldiers. Purplish-black energy crackled around her hands and sparked like static in her skirt.

Then her magic surged out in front of her like a wave of death, sweeping over the soldiers. She was careful: just enough mana to suck the breath from their lungs until their vision went black and their knees buckled, just enough to keep them out of the way while she and her escort entered the spire, and not enough to turn them into withered husks. She almost wished Jace were there to witness her care and restraint.

The zombie cleared the barricade, and Liliana entered the Aether Spire.

Restraint was not entirely practical. It robbed her of the chance to build a whole retinue of zombie bodyguards. More important, it left people behind her, who could block her retreat once Tezzeret was dead. How easy it would be, she thought as a ghostly black hand coiled itself around the neck of another sentry, to tighten just a little, to twist, to send one more soul into the yawning Void. Jace and Sir Side-of-Beef would never know. So easy.

But she sighed, let her own hand fall to her side, and watched the sentry slump to the ground, clutching his throat and gasping for breath, unable to lift a finger to stop her. She patted his helmet as she walked past him.

And then she was inside. It was a vault of a room, dominated by the huge ring of Tezzeret’s planar portal. More accurately, the portal was a ring within a ring, set within a vaguely ring-like structure made of whorls and glowing pipes and what looked like purely decorative filigree. Tezzeret stood just beneath the inner rings, his back to her, manipulating some piece of machinery. Beyond, a shattered glass wall left the room open to the gusting winds, with an orange sunset staining the sky.



Planar Bridge | Art by Chase Stone

She thrust both hands forward, the tattoos of her demonic contract glowing almost as brightly as the aether in the portal. The time for restraint was past. A roiling storm of smoky blackness surged across

the room toward Tezzeret, coalescing into a spectral claw that would tear his soul from his flesh and end him.

But at the last second, a hulk of sharp-edged metal detached itself from the heaps of junk around the edges of the room and interposed itself between Tezzeret and the death that hurtled toward him. Liliana's spell tore into it, but not through it, and it seemed none the worse for wear as it coalesced into a vaguely humanoid figure.

Only then did Tezzeret turn around, his flesh-and-bone hand finishing up some kind of adjustment to his etherium arm. He seemed unfazed by her arrival and even her attack.

"Vess," he said. His voice echoed in the enormous room. "Did *he* send you? What, to check up on me?"



Art by Daarken

Liliana blinked. This was hardly the vicious counterattack she had expected—and prepared for. "Who?"

Tezzeret shrugged. He tugged the sleeve of his robe down to cover most of his etherium arm again, hiding a strange glow that seemed to echo the eddying light of his portal. Only then did he grace her with his full attention. He arched an eyebrow.

"No," she said. "You saw in the arena. I'm here with them."

"Of course you are. Baan's little mistake. What did he call them? The Gatewatch?" He chuckled. "Did they come to see my magnificent gate?" A broad gesture with his metal hand encompassed the ring behind and around him.

Liliana sauntered to her left, putting some distance between herself and the junk-heap of a construct that had saved him and was now lumbering in her direction. "I thought it was Rashmi's gate."

Tezzeret's face twisted in rage. "That idiot? She had no idea what she discovered."

Liliana smiled. His temper was his weakness, and pricking his ego seemed to be the surest way to make him lose control. "I wouldn't be so sure," she said.

"What, you think she glimpsed the Blind Eternities? You think she understood how her invention could be used to bridge worlds? She would have been sending vases across Ghirapur forever if I hadn't

guided her tiny little mind.” He was closing the gap between them now, as if to keep Liliana away from his precious creation.

Purple light coursed through the channels etched in Liliana’s skin. “You should know better than to underestimate a woman like her.” Emphasizing that point, while his guard was down, she hurled a focused blast at him, like dark lightning. He threw up his metal hand, blocking the attack and scattering its energy. She needed to get closer.

“Fair enough,” he growled. The metallic hulk shambled closer, raising two fist-like masses over what passed for its head. Tezzeret continued talking as if nothing had happened. “And what about your new friends? Do they have any idea who they’ve gotten themselves tangled up with?”

A cascade of metal crashed to the floor, battering her zombie bodyguard but leaving Liliana unscathed. The zombie lurched at the walking scrap heap as Tezzeret advanced.

“Of course not,” Liliana said. For all their hesitation, their displays of mistrust, the other members of the Gatewatch had welcomed her into the fold. In fact, the one person who might have known better—Jace—had encouraged them to trust her.

“You have them all wrapped around your finger, don’t you?” Tezzeret said.

Liliana just smiled, pointed a single glowing finger, and shot another enervating bolt of energy at him.

He waved his metal hand, and a stream of sharp metal shards coursed through the air and intercepted her attack. “Even Beleren?” he said. “I find it hard to believe that he’s forgotten what you did to him.”

Liliana scowled. “Jace and I..” She trailed off, and decided to finish her sentence by snatching at the edges of Tezzeret’s soul and sucking his vitality away.

Blue light shimmered in the air between them, and her magic vanished into tiny azure sparks. “Or has he forgotten?” Tezzeret said. “His memory seems so fragile.”

“He certainly hasn’t forgotten what *you* did to him.” Two crackling blasts, in rapid succession, punctuated her words. One was intercepted by Tezzeret’s living scrap heap, tearing itself free of the zombie, and he caught the other one on his metal hand—with some apparent effort.

“It’s too bad he didn’t come with you.” Tezzeret spread his arms wide, and two streams of metallic shards like the one that had torn into her zombie rose up behind him, snakelike. “We could have had quite a reunion.”



Battle at the Bridge | Art by Chris Rallis

He had left himself open. A spectral black hand appeared from nowhere and clutched at his chest, sending him staggering back and gasping for breath as the metal shards cascaded down to the ground. But she had sacrificed power for speed, and he didn't fall.

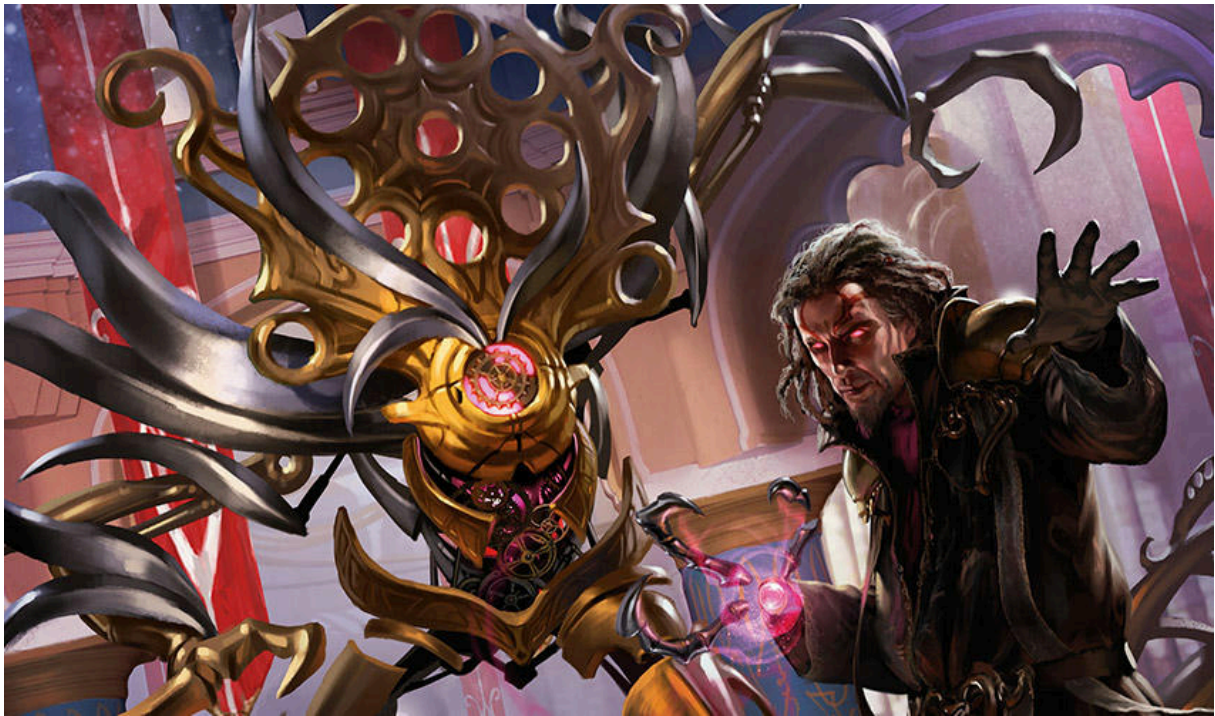
His breathing was heavy and his voice rasped. "Are you certain Beleren isn't the one manipulating you?" he said. "Sending you to fight his battles and exact his revenge?"

"No one sent me." *I took it upon myself to do the work none of them would do*, she thought. *My choice. Right?*

"Are you sure?" Tezzeret said, as if he saw the hesitation in her mind. "Maybe he's playing you, worming his way into your thoughts."

Liliana's zombie was doing a pretty good job of dismantling the junk hulk, but she needed it to be harrying Tezzeret instead. "Oh, please," she said. "Jace likes to think he's a mastermind, but when he looks at me he turns into a schoolboy." But her words didn't come out sounding quite as convincing as she had intended.

"I think he's *softened* you, Vess. The necromancer I knew four years ago would have marched in here at the head of a zombie army. And she might have lived to tell about it." Tezzeret pointed his real hand at a pile of construction materials, and something stirred to life.



Tezzeret's Touch | Art by Chris Rallis

The effort of will his spell required showed on his face, and she jumped at the opening. She felt blood well up in the lines carved into her flesh as she drew on just the smallest bit of the Chain Veil's power. "You don't know what you're talking about," she snarled, as a pulse of dark energy radiated out from her like a ripple. The ripple bounced off Tezzeret and turned back toward her, tearing his life from his body as it came. She reached for it, calling that scrap of vitality, of soul, toward her waiting arms. Tezzeret clutched at his throat and fell to his knees—where her zombie fell on him, biting and clawing. She twisted her fingers in the air, claiming a better hold on the magic that had caught hold of his life, reeling it in like a wriggling fish on a line. Oh, she was *enjoying* this!

She heard a loud buzz just before a hawk-sized thopter clipped her face, sending her sprawling on her back and opening a gash in her forehead. She heard Tezzeret gulping the air and looked up in time to see him throw the zombie off him and stagger to his feet, his eyes burning with rage. Two thopters took up positions hovering over his shoulders.

"Why are we fighting, Vess?" He took several labored breaths while she got to her feet. "Has your love for Beleren made you think you're some kind of hero?"

She gritted her teeth, biting back her own fury. "I assure you, my relationship with Jace has nothing to do with romance or sentiment." Her breath was coming faster as well, but the energy she had siphoned from Tezzeret surged through her. "And what kind of *hero* uses magic like mine?" Her zombie lunged at him again.

Tezzeret's huge metal claw sliced across the zombie's rotting flesh in a wide arc, trailing foulness and offal. "So he really didn't send you?"

"Jace? Of course—"

"Not Beleren."

They stood facing each other in a moment of stillness.

"Oh," Liliana breathed. "Oh. You're here for Bolas."

A contemptuous sneer twisted his face. “Tell me you didn’t *just* figure that out.”

It all makes sense now. Some part of her had suspected, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. But it explained why he was alive, why his mind seemed whole. *And it’s all so much worse now,* she thought as she ducked Tezzeret’s swooping thopters.

“So *he’s* got *you* wrapped around his finger,” she said. *Like he does everyone.*

Tezzeret snarled. “I’m working to pay off a debt. Thanks to your boyfriend.” Jace had been just a pawn in their game, but the injury he’d done to Tezzeret was not the kind that’s easily forgiven.

“And then what?”

Tezzeret shrugged, but Liliana saw a familiar cockiness in his eyes.

She laughed. “You have grand plans to turn the tables on him? On Nicol Bolas? I’m pretty sure even you are not that stupid.”

“Even if I had such plans, I certainly wouldn’t tell you. It’s only a matter of time before Bolas lays your mind bare and reads it like a book.”

That was not a pleasant thought. She answered it with a barrage of necrotizing energy—enough to rot the flesh from his bones, drink his soul dry, and leave him a crumpled husk on the ground, if she had been able to get through his defenses. But another stream of metallic shards, like a swarm of bees, caught some blasts. His counterspells negated others, and one blast went wild when a thopter drove itself into her gut, knocking the wind out of her. Even so, Tezzeret was forced to his knees, choking and gasping, and what was left of the zombie managed to pin him to the floor.



Metallic Rebuke | Art by Eric Deschamps

Blood flowed freely over her skin, not from any injury he had inflicted on her, but from the exertion of her spellcasting, the toll exacted by the Chain Veil. She wobbled—ever so slightly—as she walked to stand over him where he lay.

She rested one heel of her boot on his throat, just above his collarbone. “So, what?” she demanded. “All this is for him? What’s he going to do with it?”

Tezzeret, breath ragged, stared up at her with fury and fear raging across his pale face.

“A transplanar shipping company?” she asked. “A new take on the Infinite Consortium?” She knew better, of course: Bolas’s plans had never been that small. She’d known that even on Ravnica, when she helped him pursue them.

Tezzeret managed a chuckle. “Maybe you should ask him.”

Liliana’s mouth quirked into a smile. “But I have you right here.”

“You know he never confides more than he needs to. He’d never tell me the full extent of his plans.”

“Well, then you can tell me where to find him.”

“So *you* can turn the tables on him? Maybe you are as stupid as I thought.”

“Who said anything about fighting him?” Liliana said. “Tell me where he is.”

“I’m not sure he’d appreciate me divulging that.”

Liliana put a little more of her weight onto her heel, squeezing a hoarse cough from his throat. “I’m quite sure I *don’t* appreciate your reticence.”

Tezzeret gagged, clearly unable to speak. She lightened up the pressure just enough to let him breathe. “Spit it out, Tezz.”

“You should know. You’ve been there before.”

She frowned, thinking of all the planes she’d visited. “Which one?”

Tezzeret tried to cough, but couldn’t get any air out. He tried in vain to make sounds. “R— Ra—”

With an impatient sigh, she lifted her foot, looking for a different soft spot on his metallic body where she could grind in her heel.

“Razaketh,” he gasped.

Every inch of her body was suddenly alive with a thrill of fear. Two demons remained who held power over her, thanks to the contract engraved on her skin. Kothophed and Griselbrand had fallen relatively easily, thanks to the Chain Veil. But the Chain Veil’s power came with a cost, attested by the blood that still dripped from her skin and splattered on Tezzeret’s face and chest. Razaketh was stronger than either of them.

She had planned to bring Jace and the rest of his precious Gatewatch to confront Razaketh eventually. But she had hoped to understand them better—to learn what they were capable of, to make sure she knew exactly what strings to pull and what buttons to press to get them to do what she wanted them to do—before she brought them to...

“Amonkhet,” she said aloud. “He’s on Amonkhet.”

Tezzeret swallowed hard and with evident pain. *Good.*

“This is the end, Tezzeret.” She spread her hands above him, summoning the mana for the spell that would drain whatever life he had left in him.

“Is that what this is?”

He was looking past her. She ducked, expecting another swooping thopter. Indeed, something was flying toward her—something much larger than Tezzeret’s birdlike thopters, hurtling toward the spire from outside the shattered glass wall.

The renegades' so-called hope. So the Gatewatch had done their job after all, getting the airship past the Consulate's blockade, close enough to launch the aether disruptor. Surprising, but pleasing.

"I think it's about to be," she said. She moved behind what looked like a sturdy wall, leaving Tezzeret in her zombie's grasp.

But something was wrong: she caught a glimpse as she ducked behind the wall, of flaming red hair at the tip of the oversized thopter. *Chandra? What the hell —*

"We'll see," Tezzeret said, and then—

Then there was fire.

Chandra's fist was a birthing star, searing hot against Gideon's chest despite the glowing golden light that shielded his body from the heat. Holding her tightly against him, he could feel every muscle in her body trembling with the effort to create and control the flame.

"Almost there," he said. The brilliant golden glow spread across the rest of his body—the magical force that had protected him from countless injuries. Would it be enough?

She gave the slightest nod and the heat grew even more intense.



Art by Chris Rallis

"Chandra," he said.

She didn't respond—maybe she hadn't heard, maybe she was too focused on the burning sun clutched in her palm.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "I'm glad you left Regatha. The Gatewatch—the whole thing. I'm—"

"Gids," she said through clenched teeth. "I'm...I'm gonna let go."

He pulled her closer. Impact was a heartbeat away. The golden light enfolded them both now—it was working!—but the heat...

"I've got you," he said. "You're safe."

"I know," she said. Her other hand touched his arm, and that was enough.

Brilliant white light, an eruption of searing hot air, crumbling stone, and clouds of dust. Falling. Screams. Pain—too damned much pain.

When her vision cleared, Liliana found herself half-buried in the rubble of the workshop, shattered stone and fractured metal all around, the wall she had sheltered behind now mostly crumbled away. A huge column of smoke boiled up from where Tezzeret's gate had stood. No zombie moved in response to her mental call, so she set about extricating herself. She was smeared with blood and a bit woozy, thanks to the Chain Veil if not her small injuries.

With every stone she lifted and set aside, she breathed a creative new curse. She hadn't killed Tezzeret when she had the chance, and if she had survived this explosion then he probably had as well. He would escape, back to Bolas—or he'd find her now and kill her, while she was...not at full strength.

And stupid Chandra has gone and killed herself, she thought. *That was not the plan.* "What a waste," she said to herself. "Can't they do anything right without me?"

Freed from the rubble, she clambered toward the wreckage of Tezzeret's portal. If he was alive, or Chandra, or any shred of hope, she would find it there. As she went, she occasionally stopped to shove a piece of rubble or hunk of metal aside, clearing her path and distantly hoping she might find someone.

"I'd be perfectly content to find a corpse to help me move this junk."

Someone who obeys me without question, she thought. *Someone completely under my control. It's so much easier that way.*

Tezzeret's words rang in her mind: "You have them all wrapped around your finger, don't you?" *That's the plan*, she thought. *But nothing is going according to plan.*

The whole point of coming to Kaladesh had been to assess Chandra's usefulness. *She's not very useful if she's dead—well, she's of very limited use.*

If she was going to kill the rest of her demons without killing herself, if she was ever to be free, she needed more than zombies. She needed powerful people, and she'd found them. But it was all so complicated.

She heard coughing. And in the midst of the dust and smoke swirling above the wreckage of the portal, she caught a glimpse of flame-red hair and brass goggles. Alive.

Liliana picked up her pace, turned her ankle once and ignored the jolt of pain, and finally reached Chandra.

"Chandra!" she scolded. "What in all the Nine Hells was—"

Chandra helped Gideon to his feet beside her. Towering over her, he picked a twisted hunk of filigree from her hair. They both looked like—well, like a building had fallen on them, and Liliana suspected she didn't look much better.

"Beef...side...guy," Liliana stammered.

Chandra was avoiding Gideon's eyes, and she smiled when she saw Liliana. Gideon followed her gaze.

"Liliana!" he said. He stepped forward and lifted his hand, then clearly thought better of it before bringing that meaty weight down on her shoulder. He awkwardly scratched his sideburn. "Did you... uh, did you find him?"

Liliana scowled. “He’s either buried in this rubble or run home to his master.”

In silence, the three Planeswalkers gazed around the wreckage for a long moment.

“Where’s Jace?” Liliana said at last. “We *really* need to talk.”



Dark Intimations | Art by Chase Stone