

The Lunarch Inquisition

James Wyatt

From set *Shadows Over Innistrad*

Thalia, the Guardian of Thraben, was instrumental in defending Thraben from the siege of zombies launched by the necromancer siblings Gisa and GERALF. In the city's darkest hour, she faced Liliana Vess at the Helvault, in the heart of Thraben Cathedral. And while the Planeswalker threatened the life of every soldier under her command, Thalia finally acquiesced to her terrible demand: she sundered the Helvault, releasing all the demons it had contained—as well as the archangel Avacyn.

Mikaeus, the Lunarch of the Church of Avacyn, died during the siege of Thraben, and his successor was killed in the early days of Avacyn's madness. Now a new Lunarch Council has been established, made up of senior bishops of the church with a few cathar leaders in advisory positions. Another great leader in the defense of Thraben, a cathar named Odric, showed tremendous initiative in organizing the Lunarch Council to deal with Avacyn's madness. He earned a seat on the council as a representative of the cathars, without an actual vote on council matters.

But as the madness of the angels continues and spreads into the Lunarch Council, the two cathar leaders are struggling to navigate the waters between loyalty to Avacyn's church and devotion to all the church represents.

The ride from the Elgaud Grounds in Nephalia to Thraben Cathedral had taken days, through the cold air of the hunter's moon. Her fingers were numb, but Thalia's cheeks still felt hot from the flames, and her blood still boiled with outrage. She handed her reins to the stable hand and shot a wary look at the angel that wheeled overhead like a carrion crow before she stormed into the echoing halls.

Out of habit, she traced Avacyn's collar on her own chest, shoulder to heart, shoulder to heart, as she passed the open doors to the sanctuary. Her eyes stung, though, as she thought of that blessed symbol presiding over the atrocities at Elgaud.

She was still the Guardian of Thraben in name, even if she spent precious little time in the High City anymore, so no cathar barred her way or asked her business as she swept up the stairs, down a corridor, and into the chamber that the council had given the Lunarch Marshal to use as an office. He wasn't there, naturally.

Thalia shrugged out of her riding cloak and threw it down on a chair, then stuck her head back into the hall. "You," she called to a nearby cathar standing stiffly on watch. "Find him."

She clapped her gloved hands together and rubbed them hard and fast, trying to ignite a spark of warmth in her frozen fingers as she paced back and forth in the small office.

When she turned away from the doorway, it was empty; three steps later, when she turned back, he was standing there. She stopped short.

"Thalia!" Odric said warmly, opening his arms to embrace her.

He looked older. His hair had been white for years, of course, except for the single shock of raven black at his forehead. But his face had always looked young. Now it was lined with worry.

"It's good to see you, old friend," she said, stepping toward him with a smile. But instead of embracing him, she slammed a fist against his silver-inlaid breastplate. Her smile vanished. "Do you know what's happening out there?"

He sighed as his arms flopped down to his sides. "I know these are not the best of times," he said.

"Children," she said. "We're burning children now. Sin-plagued my—"

"Elgaud?" He cut her off.

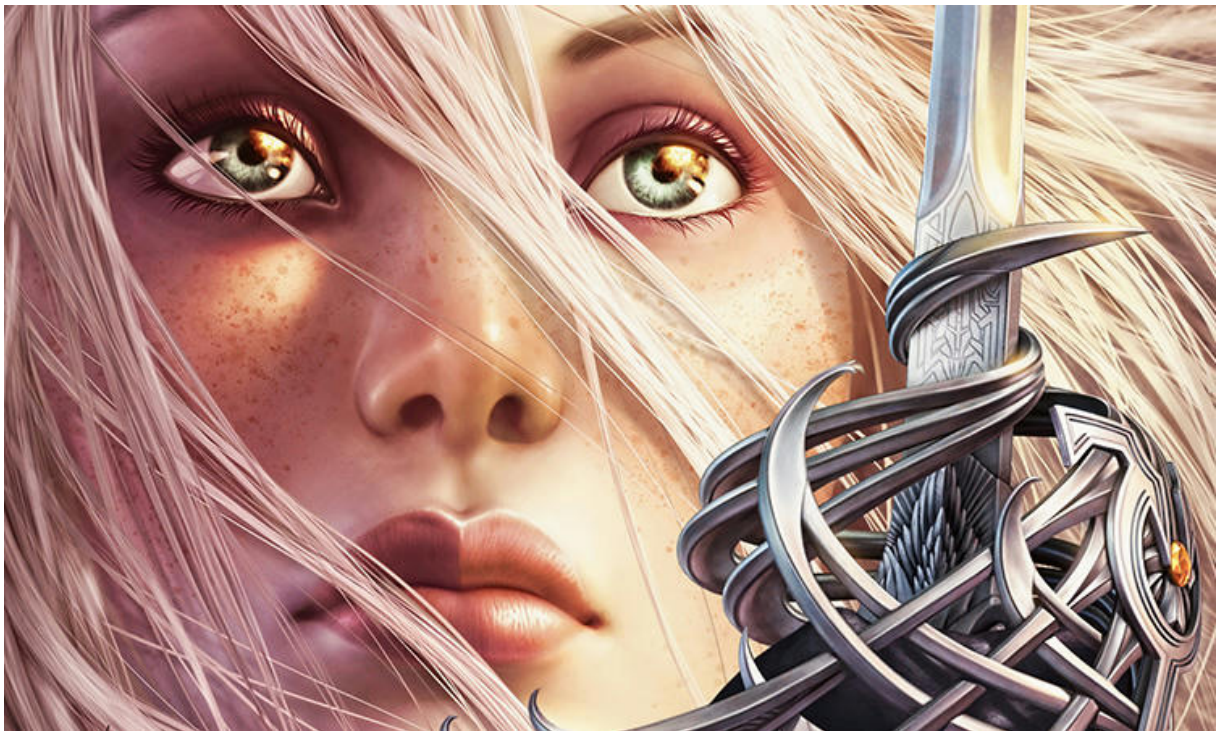
"Yes. This has to stop, Odric. Ulmach is completely out of control."

"He's Chief Inquisitor, Thalia. He *is* control, as far as the church in Nephalia is concerned."

"No." She thumped his breastplate again. "The Lunarch Council still commands the church, doesn't it? Your council?"

Odric finally managed to squeeze past her and enter his office. "They're not my council," he said, "but the inquisition operates under their aegis, yes."

"It has to stop," she said again.



Thalia, Guardian of Thraben | Art by Steve Argyle

"And then what? How do you intend to stem the tide of the angels' wrath?"

"Do you hear yourself? You think the angels are angry because we tolerate sin in our midst? Odric, the angels are supposed to *protect* us, not burn our villages to the ground. And we're supposed to protect children, not burn them at the stake! You really think this is what Avacyn wants from us?"

"Avacyn is leading this purge. You know that. If human sin arouses her fury, we must root out the sin from among us or be caught in her wrath. Avacyn has set the example for us. If she has hardened her heart against the pleas of the wicked, we must do the same."

"The wicked? What sin do you suppose those children harbored?"

"You're questioning the judgment of the inquisition?"

“Of course I am! How can they look into the eyes, into the heart of a child and find evil there—evil that deserves such a horrible death?”

“*If* the inquisitors are putting children to death—”

“They are. I saw them.”

“If they are, then they must have good reason. Blessed Avacyn gives her church power to root out evil, punish it, and protect the innocent from its reach.”

“They’re abusing that power!”

“What would you have me do?”

Thalia grabbed one of his hands. Even through their gloves, it felt warm against the chill in her bones. “Speak to the council,” she said. “Help them see reason.”

“You know I have no vote on the council.”

“But you have a voice. You represent the cathars. They can’t just ignore you.”

He turned his back on her. “But I am subject to their will. To Avacyn’s will.”

“Those aren’t necessarily the same thing, you know.”

He bowed his head, but gave no answer.

Suddenly overcome by exhaustion, Thalia slumped down in the chair where she’d thrown her cloak.

“Did I do the right thing, Odric?” she asked.

He turned and gave her a gentle smile. They had had the same conversation before, but he knew she needed to hear it again from time to time. “You freed Avacyn,” he said. “And you saved your soldiers from the necromancer’s grip.”

“Yes, but I also freed demons beyond counting. And some of them have escaped the angels’ reach.”

“They are in hiding.”

“But they will be back—they will all be back. They can’t be destroyed—that’s why the Helvault existed in the first place. And I let her destroy it.”



Art by Todd Lockwood

“You freed Avacyn,” he said again.

“What if that was a mistake too?” she said. The lines between his eyebrows grew deeper, but she pressed on. “What if her time in the Helvault corrupted her? What if she is no better than a demon herself now?”

His face grew stern. “You should not be saying this to me,” he said. He was right, of course—and she had never before dared to voice these thoughts to anyone. “I am a member of the Lunarch Council...”

“You’re a good man.”

“I serve Avacyn and her church. And so do you, in case you’ve forgotten, Guardian of Thraben.”

Thalia sprang to her feet again. “I serve the principles that Avacyn stands for—that she *used* to stand for. I serve the soft light of the moon that holds back the terrors of the night. I serve the bonds between us, driving out the fear that would break us apart. I serve the holiness we all aspire to. If she has turned against those things, then she is no better than a demon, and I can no longer serve Avacyn and her church.”

Odric’s face was right next to hers, red with anger. “I cannot stand here and let you compare Blessed Avacyn to the demons she has battled for uncounted centuries. Because you are my friend, I am going to urge you to leave Thraben, and do not let anyone else hear these blasphemies coming from your lips. Grete?”

A face framed in red hair appeared in the doorway. Thalia was taken aback—she’d had no idea that Odric’s champion had been right outside all that time. Had she heard the whole conversation?

“Sir?” Grete said.

Odric turned his back on Thalia again. “Will you please escort Thalia beyond the outer wall?”

“Of course.”

Thalia laid her hand on Odric’s back. “Odric...”

“Goodbye, Thalia.”

She swallowed hard. No other words would come.

Grete held the reins of the horse as Thalia mounted, avoiding her eyes as she had since they left Odric. But as she handed the reins up to her, Grete met her gaze at last.

“What will you do?” she asked quietly.

“I’m going to fight,” Thalia answered. “I’ve sworn to defend the people of this land from the monsters that would destroy them. I’m going to keep doing that. If the cathars and inquisitors have become monsters, then I will defend the people from them. If the angels themselves have become monsters..”

“You would fight the angels themselves?” Grete asked, eyes wide.

“If I must.”

“How can you be so certain you’re right?”



Strength of Arms | Art by John Stanko

Thalia heard so much in that question, including the doubt that had robbed her of a good night’s sleep for weeks now. But clearly Grete longed for the same certainty. Thalia wished she could provide it.

“If I’m wrong,” she said instead, “well, I would rather be a heretic than betray my conscience.”

Grete let go of the reins and looked away as she stepped back from the horse.

“You could come with me,” Thalia said.

“No.” Grete seemed to be talking to herself as much as to Thalia. “But I hope...I wish you the best, Thalia.”

“Thank you.”

Weeks later, Odric still heard Thalia's voice when some too-eager cathar stood before the Lunarch Council and reported the latest results of the inquisition's work at Elgaud. Every time the young man drawled the phrase "sin-plagued," he heard Thalia's voice on the brink of vulgarity, and every mention of the Chief Inquisitor made him think of her words: "Ulmach is completely out of control." It was too hard to listen to the details of the questioning, torture, and execution, so he surveyed the faces of the bishops of the council instead.

Some of them were clearly as uncomfortable as he was. But some of them leaned forward, eyes bulging wide, eager smiles tweaking the corners of their mouths as if hungry for the lurid details. *Was Thalia right?* he wondered. *Have we all become monsters?*



Hope Against Hope | Art by David Seguin

A bang jolted him out of his reverie as the chamber door was thrown open. Thalia's boots echoed on the stone floor as she strode into the hall. The young cathar stepped aside, obviously cowed by her presence—and the anger that burned in her eyes.

"Thalia, what are you doing here?" he asked, breaking the stunned silence.

Bishop Jerren stood and folded his arms. "The business of the Lunarch Council is not to be interrupted," he said.

"I am the Guardian of Thraben," Thalia replied, "and I claim my right to speak before the council."

"You no longer hold that title, Thalia," Odric said gently. He saw Jerren smile. "The council has removed it from you."

Thalia looked at him, clearly not surprised. The anger in her eyes had transformed into contempt, as if he were a snake writhing on the ground before her. He had betrayed her confidence, informing the council of her heresy. His stomach churned.

Jerren simpered. "But we are in a charitable mood," he said. "What business do you bring before the council?"

Thalia turned that withering gaze to Jerren. "I come to accuse you, bishop," she said.

Odric sat back in his chair, his throat tight.

Thalia continued. “I bring evidence that you have been in communion with the demon Ormendahl, called the Profane Prince, and you are now the leader of the Skirsdag.”

Jerren laughed. He *laughed*. Other members of the council began shouting their protest, but the nominal leader of the council could only laugh as he was accused of leading a demonic cult.

“Show us this so-called evidence,” someone said, and the shouts quieted.

Now it was Thalia’s turn to smile. She had been given the chance to present her case, which was all she could have asked. She turned as she spoke, including the entire council in her address—though she did not meet Odric’s gaze. “Three days ago,” she said, “I led a small party of cathars through the forest of Wittal parish, near the ruins of Estwald. We sought the lair of a notorious witch who had brought curses upon several of the villages in the parish. At last, we came upon hoof prints in the soft earth.”



Thalia’s Lieutenant | Art by Johannes Voss

“We are still waiting for your evidence,” one of the bishops said.

Odric looked at Jerren. The bishop sat back in his chair, his fingers steeped in front of his mouth, not quite hiding the hint of a smile that quirked his lips.

“The trail led us to the dismal cave where the witch laired. A horse grazed on the blackened grass outside, bearing the livery of this council. Rushing inside, we found the witch lifting the quivering heart from the corpse of a messenger, as if preparing to take a bite from the raw flesh.”

A few of the council members made faces of disgust and turned their gaze from Thalia. But Odric noticed that the ones who still stared at her wore the same eager expressions they had while listening to the inquisitor’s report.

“We attempted to subdue the witch, but she fought like a fury, with demonic power at her command. We had no choice but to kill her.”

“Conveniently negating the possibility that she might give testimony,” someone said.

Thalia ignored the interruption. “The dead rider was a messenger of this cathedral, carrying this letter.” She produced a sheet of parchment from inside her cloak. Dark splatters and smudges of what must have been blood disfigured the page. “Read it for yourself, and judge the truth of my accusation. The letter bears the seal and signature of none other than Bishop Jerren, giving instructions to this witch in the name of the Profane Prince!”

Odric’s feet and hands felt numb, and his pulse was pounding. Thalia had woven a damning tale. Could it be true?

Thalia strode to the far end of the council table and held the parchment out, offering it to one of the lesser bishops, Quilion. Quilion cast a timid glance toward Jerren and refused to take the parchment from her hand. Thalia scoffed and offered it to the bishop beside him. Three bishops refused her as the council sat in stony silence, before Bishop Carlin took it with a quivering hand. Her face paled as she read the page.

“What say you to this, Jerren?” Carlin said after a moment.

“It is clearly a forgery,” Quilion said, though he had not examined the parchment.

“The whole tale is an impossibility,” another bishop said.

Odric could not believe it, any of it. He knew Thalia would not fabricate evidence, however much she disagreed with the council. And once he allowed himself to consider the possibility, he had to confess that he wouldn’t call Jerren the holiest of men. But the leader of the Skirsdag? Chairing the Lunarch Council?

“Of course it’s impossible,” Jerren said.

“It seems to me there is only one heretic in this room,” Quilion said. He cast his gaze toward Jerren as if seeking the senior bishop’s approval.

Odric stared in shock as members of the council began shouting again, this time demanding Thalia’s execution. Thalia’s face was grim—he had seen her grow steadily more pale as more of the bishops sided with Jerren. Surely she had expected some resistance, but perhaps not as much as this. Jerren’s influence on the council must have been stronger than she had anticipated. Her hand reached toward her sword.

Cathars came and seized Thalia’s arms before she could draw it, looking to Jerren for direction. With the merest wave of his fingers, he condemned her, and they started to drag her away.

“Odric!” she called, her voice piercing the clamor of the still-shouting bishops. “I serve the light!”

The soft light of the moon that holds back the terrors of the night, she had said. I serve the bonds between us, driving out the fear that would break us apart.

And here was the Lunarch Council, seized by fear, turning on one of their most devoted servants.

The doors slammed closed behind Thalia, and with a simper, Jerren gestured for the young cathar to continue his testimony about the latest horrors performed at Elgaud on the Lunarch Council’s behalf.

Odric hurried to the basement of the cathedral, where he hoped Thalia would still be awaiting execution. They would not have brought her to hang on the tree in the cathedral courtyard just yet, not without time for the ceremonial observance appropriate to the execution of such a prominent heretic.

“I must speak with the prisoner,” Odric said to the soldier guarding the cells. The young woman saluted and stepped aside so he could pass.

“Don’t speak,” he whispered at the window to her cell. “We are leaving here, together.”

“What?”

“I said don’t speak.” He turned back to the soldier. “Guard, open this cell.”

Her eyes widened, but the cathar fumbled with the keys at her belt. Odric nodded his approval. *At least some of us still know our duty*, he thought.

Thalia’s cell door creaked open, and he helped her up off the filth-encrusted floor. He noticed a fresh bruise, just beginning to blossom on her cheekbone. Had she struggled? Or had the guards who escorted her here been caught up in the cruelty that seemed to have become the norm, even in Avacyn’s cathedral?

They walked up the stairs together. Grete met them at the top, carrying Thalia’s slim sword.

“Horses?” Odric asked her as Thalia belted on her sword.

“Should be ready by the time we reach the stable,” Grete said.



Crusader of Odric | Art by Michael Komarck

“Well done.”

“Where are we going?” Thalia asked.

“You tell me,” Odric said. “You said you had other cathars with you in Wittal parish. Are they still there?”

“Yes.”

“Then shall we join them there?”

“Yes. I have a lot to tell you.”

They were nearly to the stables now, nearly free of the Lunarch Council and Jerren and whatever corruption festered here. But now five cathars blocked their exit.

“Stop where you stand, Lunarch Marshal,” the one in the center said. Dougan was his name, Odric remembered. He had trained the young man, years ago. “Bishop Jerren’s orders,” he added, sounding almost apologetic.

Odric kept walking. “Step aside and let us pass,” he said. Grete and Thalia walked a little closer to him. “I can’t do that, sir.” The apology was gone from his voice, replaced with steel. “The bishop expected this treachery from you, and wants you—all three of you—returned to the council chamber.”

More cathars were behind them now—three more, from the sound of them. Eight to three, if it came to that.

Odric was face to face with young Dougan now, and Thalia and Grete faced down the cathars on either side of him.

“Dougan, let us pass,” Odric said again.

“No.”

Odric tried to push his way through, but the sound of drawn steel behind him changed everything.

Eight to three might have been a problem, if the three had not been among the most experienced soldiers in Avacyn’s church. Odric’s first swing sent Dougan’s blade clattering to the floor. While his former student scrambled for his weapon, Odric turned to parry an attack from behind him—Marta, another young cathar he had trained. His riposte drew blood at her shoulder—she had always left that shoulder open in training—and she stumbled backward.

Dougan was back, rushing at him with his sword overhead. Odric shook his head—he had taught the boy better form than that. He ducked below the clumsy swing and jabbed at Dougan’s belly, checking his blow before he gutted the lad. He had almost forgotten they were not training with wooden swords.

Perhaps Dougan had forgotten it as well, for his eyes went wide and he fumbled with his sword again as a hand went to the blossoming red stain beneath his ribs.



Odric, Lunarch Marshal | Art by Chase Stone

A third cathar lunged at him, one whose name escaped him, and the hapless wretch impaled himself on Odric's blade. Marta, fighting on despite the wound in her shoulder, fell under Grete's heavy sword.

Haral came at him then, an older soldier who had fought with him against the zombies. He had years of experience beyond what Dougan could boast, and if his will had been stronger, he would have been commanding this team. He had always lacked that will, that drive. Tears flowed down his face as he faced Odric, blocking the exit.

Odric's sword rang against his helmet, sending the cathar staggering backward, but he kept his feet and clutched his sword more tightly.

"You're going to have to kill me, apostate," he growled.

Odric strode forward and unleashed a storm of steel, driving Haral back from his relentless assault. Haral couldn't muster an effective counterattack—he lacked the will. The inevitable opening came, and Odric took it without thinking, slashing the man's throat open.

The cathedral doors were now in sight. Odric looked back, at the eight loyal cathars bleeding or dying on the polished cathedral floor. Holy cathars of Blessed Avacyn's church. "May the angels of Flight Alabaster guide you—" He choked on the words. Did the angels give a damn about human spirits anymore?

"...guide you to the Blessed Rest," Thalia said, close beside him. Her hand traced the symbol of Avacyn's collar across her chest, shoulder to heart, shoulder to heart. She glanced up at him, eyes bright with tears, then turned and ran toward the doors.

Some part of Odric lay dead on the floor beside the fallen, but he left it there and ran with her, with Grete, to the stables. As his champion had promised, three horses were ready for them. They barely broke their stride to mount and spur the horses into a gallop. And they left the cathedral, then left Thraben, left their old lives far behind.

"Fully two-thirds of them were in the palm of Jerren's hand," Thalia said, addressing the small band of cathars she had gathered in a tiny Nearheath chapel. "Clearly I underestimated the extent to which Ormendahl's influence has taken hold of the council."

The other cathars shook their heads, distraught.

"And you knew nothing of this?" she asked Odric.

But Odric said nothing. He had uttered barely a word since they passed beyond the outer wall of Thraben. She couldn't be sure he had even blinked—he just sat and stared.

She sighed and rested a hand on his shoulder. "I think I know what you're going through, old friend," she whispered in his ear. "I think all of us do."

"He'll be all right," Grete said. "Give him time, time to rest,"

"I know," Thalia said. "He can have all the time he needs."

"What can I do?" Grete asked.

Thalia smiled. "Remember when I invited you to come with me?"

"I should have."

"I'm glad you didn't. I might be hanging in the cathedral courtyard by now if you hadn't been there to help with my escape. You're here now."

“So what is ‘here’? What are we doing here?”

“Welcome to the Order of Saint Traft,” Thalia said, gesturing to the chapel around her as if it were a grand palace.

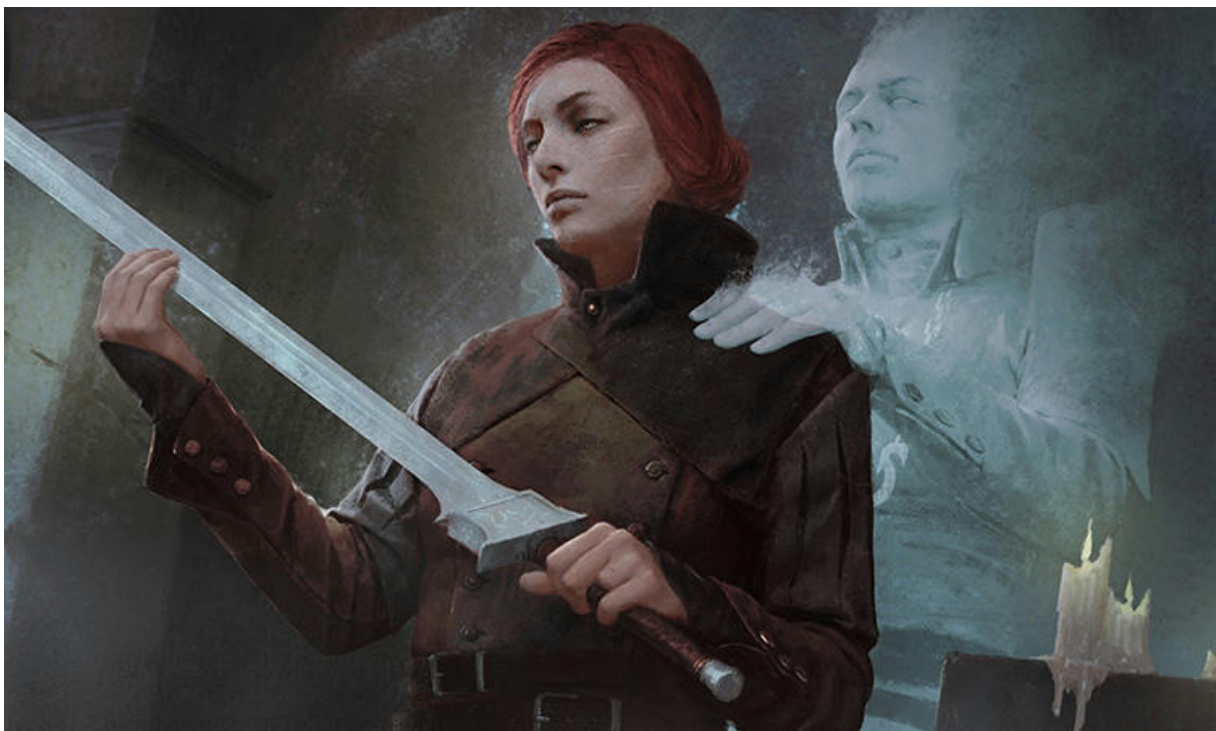
“Saint Traft?” Grete said. “You lay claim to a noble pedigree by invoking his name. Demon Slayer, Beloved of Angels, Martyr of the Needle’s Eye—you could hardly have chosen a more worthy patron.”

“I did not choose him,” Thalia said with a smile. “He chose me.”

A luminous mist coalesced in the air behind Thalia, turning her hair to liquid gold, and her face seemed to shine with a light of its own. A moment later there were two faces; they pulled farther apart, and a man stood beside her, radiant but insubstantial, a holy geist. Saint Traft himself.

Thalia laid her hand on Grete’s shoulder. “Are you ready to fight?”

Grete fell to her knees, but her eyes remained fixed on Thalia’s face. “Wherever you lead.”



Invocation of Saint Traft | Art by Igor Kieryluk