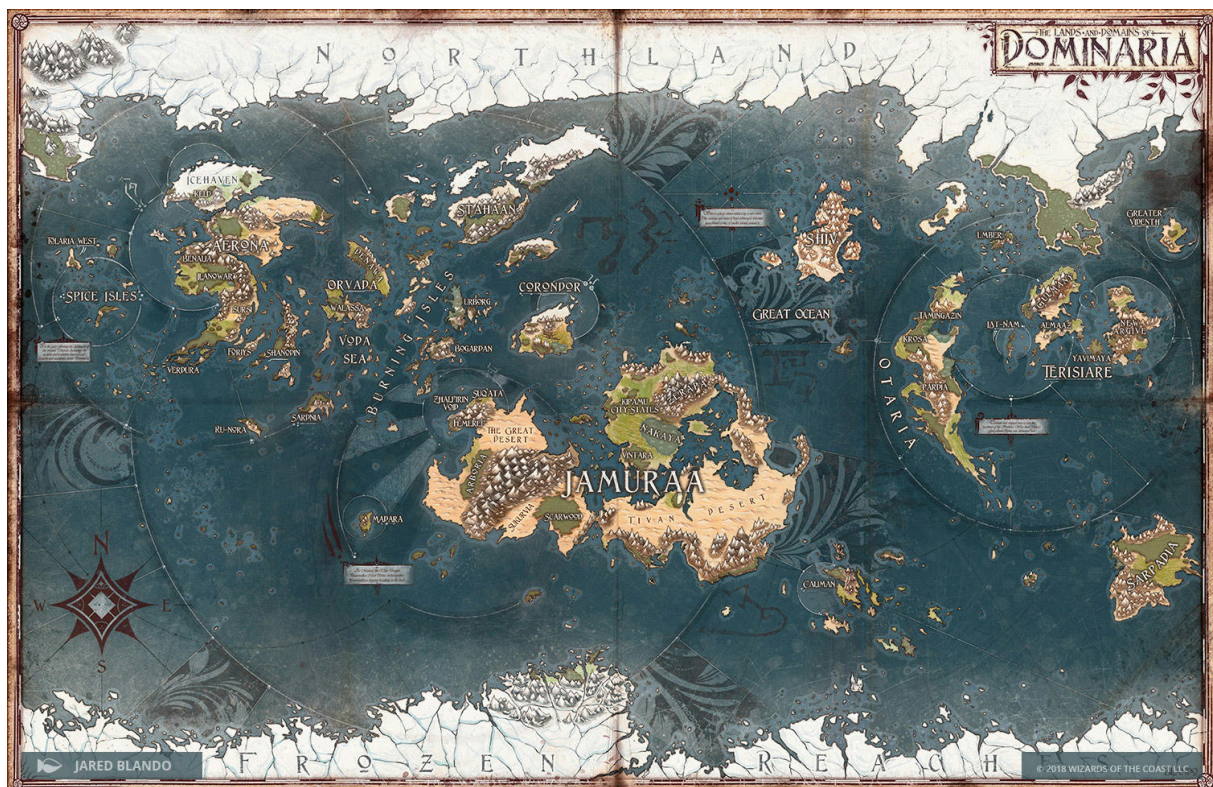


Return to Dominaria: Episode 1

Martha Wells

From set *Dominaria*

21. 03. 2018



i.

Sadage, cleric of the Cabal, made his way to the doors of the high-vaulted worship hall of the Stronghold. Smoke from torches and incense burners formed a cloud above the cultists sprawled on the stone floor. They begged for entrance to the hall, begged for the favor of the Scion of Darkness within.

A group of dark-robed disciples approached from the other direction, picking their way around the moaning supplicants to meet Sadage. He recognized the leader as Needle, an agent of the Cabal tasked with infiltrating New Argive. As the group reached him, they dropped to their knees. “You’ve returned,” said Sadage. “I hope for a worthwhile reason.”

In answer, Needle unwrapped a large black sword, holding it up for acceptance. “I bring you a gift for the Scion of Darkness.”

“A gift?” Sadage reached for it, but stopped, a breath of air between his gloved fingertips and the metal. A dark miasma clung to the blade. “What is this?”

Needle looked up at him, her eyes wide, the dark pupils dilated with reverence. “A fabled blade, a soul-drinker. The one who forged the sword killed an elder dragon and absorbed its strength—”

Sadage said, “Stop.” This close to the worship hall and its resplendent occupant, he couldn’t afford to let discipline slip. “*Who* used it to kill an elder dragon?”

Needle hesitated. The disciple at her side said, “It’s said it was the Planeswalker Dakkon Bl—”

Sadage made a sharp gesture. “It was Belzenlok! *Belzenlok* forged it. *Belzenlok* slayed the elder dragon. *Belzenlok*. “

In a murmuring chorus, the group of disciples repeated obediently, “It was Belzenlok, Lord of the Wastes, Belzenlok, Slayer of Elder Dragons.”

Needle added, “This is *his* sword. Belzenlok, King of Urborg, Demonlord. I return it to him.”



Art by Chris Rahn

“Very good.” Sadage took the sword from Needle’s hand. The contact made his skin burn, even through his gloves. “You have earned your reward.”

Needle smiled, trembling as she pushed to her feet. She pulled her hood down, baring her throat. Sadage lifted his hand and cast the spell. Slowly, Needle’s skin peeled from her chest as the violet spell light gently pierced her heart.

As Needle writhed in exultant death, the other disciples watched in jealous awe. Sadage opened the doors to the worship hall, ready to present the black blade to his chosen master, ready to collect his own final reward from the Demonlord.

ii.

Jhoira leaned forward over her diving ship’s control wheel and breathed, “That’s it.” She pulled a lever to stop their forward motion. It had been an artistic choice to shape the underwater ship like a large metal-plated fish, with fins for locomotion and steering and two bulbous ports in the bow like giant eyes, but it moved through the difficult sea currents like a dream.

Outside the ports, silvery fish flickered away through the sandy water, confused by the narrow beams of the lights and the strange metal fish pushing through the seaweed forest. Hadi, her assistant artificer, grabbed for the support rail as the ship jolted with the current. He leaned down to look through the second port. “Where?” He was an older man, and had come to Tolarian Academy from Jamuraa. That he had agreed to help her on this wild quest said a lot about his sense of adventure.

Jhoira adjusted the wheel more carefully and pointed, her finger almost touching the curved glass. “There, you see?” It seemed obvious to her; the long spine half-buried in the muck and waterweeds was too straight for any natural formation, at least in this bay. But then she knew that shape so well, it was like greeting an old friend.



Art by Brad Rigney

“You’ve got sharp eyes,” Hadi said, and pulled down the speaking tube for her. “I thought there would be more left of it.”

“Not after so long.” Jhoira took the speaking tube and called into it: “Ziva, I’m directing my lights toward it. Can you see it?”

The tube sent her voice through the water, transformed into vibrations the Vodalian merfolk could understand. Outside, Ziva swam down past the port, the silt in the water dimming the deep purples and blues of the natural armor on her arms and flanks. Ziva paused long enough to signal an assent toward the port, then with a flick of her powerful tail, she disappeared into the murk.

Jhoira waited for the verdict, trying not to bounce with tension like Hadi. Then Ziva reappeared and swam closer to the metal fish until she bumped against the hull. Her tail curled past the port, and Jhoira heard her fumble for the outside end of the speaking tube. Then Ziva’s voice was transported

into the compartment. “It’s lying on a shelf, trapped by saltweed and sand, but no rocks,” she reported. “We should have no trouble raising it to the surface—if the price remains the same.”

Yes, just as I hoped! Jhoira thought. It was hard to contain her glee, but they had a lot of hard work ahead. “The price is doubled if you can bring it up within two days,” she told Ziva. The merfolk needed the money, and Jhoira had no problem paying for something that would be the culmination of years of careful work and planning.

Ziva’s laugh was like bubbling water. “You’ll have it in one!”

Jhoira sat back against the worn leather of the pilot’s seat. The heady combination of relief and renewed purpose made her want to dance. *Later*, she promised herself. When she stood on the shore beside it, then she’d dance. “I knew we could do it.”

“You knew it,” Hadi told her, sounding elated. “I’m not sure anyone else believed it was possible!”

“Well, they’ll believe it now,” Jhoira said. The rest of the merfolk swooped in to join Ziva, gliding in patterns around her as they waited for orders. “Everyone ready?” Jhoira said into the speaking tube. “Now we raise the *Weatherlight*.”

iii.

Dominaria coalesced around Gideon and the first thing that struck him was the stench of rotting plants and dank earth. He stood on a high stone foundation between a ruined town and an overgrown stinking marsh, the landscape desolate under a cloud-covered sky. Gray stone structures once tall and graceful had lost sections of walls and roofs, and some were just heaps of tumbled stone. Mist cloaked the tall grass, bubbling mud pools, and rotting trees of the marsh, empty of any life except clouds of insects. It was like an artist’s attempt to visually capture a representation of death and failure. He couldn’t suppress the bitter thought, *How fitting for this moment*.

The second thing Gideon noticed was the hole in his shoulder and its piercing pain. He took a deep breath and did not stagger or collapse onto the muddy stone. Liliana, Chandra, and Nissa stood nearby, disheveled and shaken by the battle. This was not the time for him to show weakness. He made his voice even and moderate and admitted, “That did not go according to plan.”

“Oh, it didn’t?” Liliana turned to him, putting on an expression of mock surprise. “What makes you say that? Was it the river of undead I almost drowned in? Or Nicol Bolas slapping you around like a child’s toy?”

Gideon was in too much pain for a clever answer. Besides, she was right. He stood here wounded, barely keeping himself upright, his sural lost. They had failed utterly, been hopelessly outmatched, and were lucky to survive. The thought of how many others hadn’t been so lucky was a sickening weight on his heart.

Chandra rubbed her eyes. “Where’s Jace?”

Startled, Gideon looked around again. She was right, there was no sign of Jace. “He’s not still on Amonkhet. I saw him leave.”

Liliana’s gaze crossed his. They had all known their meeting place. Jace’s absence couldn’t mean anything good. She pressed her lips together and said, “Perhaps he was delayed.”

“He’s not coming.” Nissa ground out the words, her voice harsh. “He’s given up.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Gideon was certain. Jace wouldn’t abandon them.

Nissa ignored him, too angry to listen. “A plane all but destroyed. So much death.” She shook her head in disgust. “And we played right into Bolas’s hands!”

Chandra hunched her shoulders and looked away. "Ajani was right. We never should have gone there."
"We had to try—" Gideon began.

Liliana turned to Nissa, all calm reason. "It wasn't a disaster; we killed Razaketh. The rest . . . We couldn't have anticipated—"

"Yes, your demon's dead," Nissa snapped. "You got what you wanted and ran. You don't care about defeating Bolas, you're just using us to free yourself from your pact."

"Of course I want to defeat Bolas!" Liliana protested. "I ran to save my life—just like Jace did before me."

Nissa persisted, "And why here?" She flung an arm out, gesturing to the dead marsh. "How do you want us to risk our lives for you here?"

"Your precious Ajani suggested we meet here," Liliana said, sounding aggrieved.

Gideon noted she hadn't answered the question, and he had a bad feeling he knew why. But he said, "Nissa, this isn't the time. We're all exhausted—"

Chandra said flatly, "Your last demon is here, isn't it, Liliana?"

Liliana hesitated, and her calculating gaze moved from Chandra to Nissa, but even she didn't have the gall to protest. Her jaw hardened and she said, "Belzenlok is here."

Gideon let out a resigned breath. *Of course he is*. "Nissa—"

Liliana stepped toward Nissa. "If I wasn't restrained by my pact, we would have destroyed Bolas on Amonkhet." Her voice turning persuasive, she added, "I can kill Belzenlok—but you're the only one powerful enough to help me."

Gideon winced. He could see Nissa was in no mood for flattery, and it was a measure of Liliana's disarray that she thought it would work. "Liliana—"

Chandra made a derisive noise. "You want to use her. Like you wanted to use me. I thought we were friends, Liliana."

"Chandra, that's not helpful," Gideon said.

Liliana ignored them both. Speaking only to Nissa, she said, "Belzenlok is worshipped here by the Cabal, a death cult. You can rouse the treefolk of Urborg's Yavimaya remnant to break into their Stronghold where he hides. And I can use the Chain Veil to kill him."

Gideon grimaced. The Chain Veil, a powerful artifact of the Onakke, had allowed Liliana to kill two demons. But it sapped her strength, and he thought it was far more dangerous, to the wielder and possibly everyone else around it, than even she had admitted.

Nissa's lip curled. "No. I won't help you. I didn't take an oath to save your skin." She turned to Gideon. "Tell her. Tell her we aren't going to let her use us again. Tell her she can help us against Bolas or leave."

Gideon took a sharp breath, managed not to wince at the pain pulsing through his shoulder. Working with Liliana could be a trial at the best of times, but they had made an agreement. "We need Liliana's help to destroy Bolas, and she can't do that until this last demon is dead."

Nissa was incredulous. "That will make her as much of an interplanar threat as Bolas!"

"I don't believe that." Gideon tried to sound calm and reasonable, but pain sharpened his voice. "She's not using us, it's the best chance we have against Bolas. And we can't leave Belzenlok to wreak havoc on this plane. Nissa—"

Seething, Liliana said, "I saved your life, Nissa! This is how you repay me?"

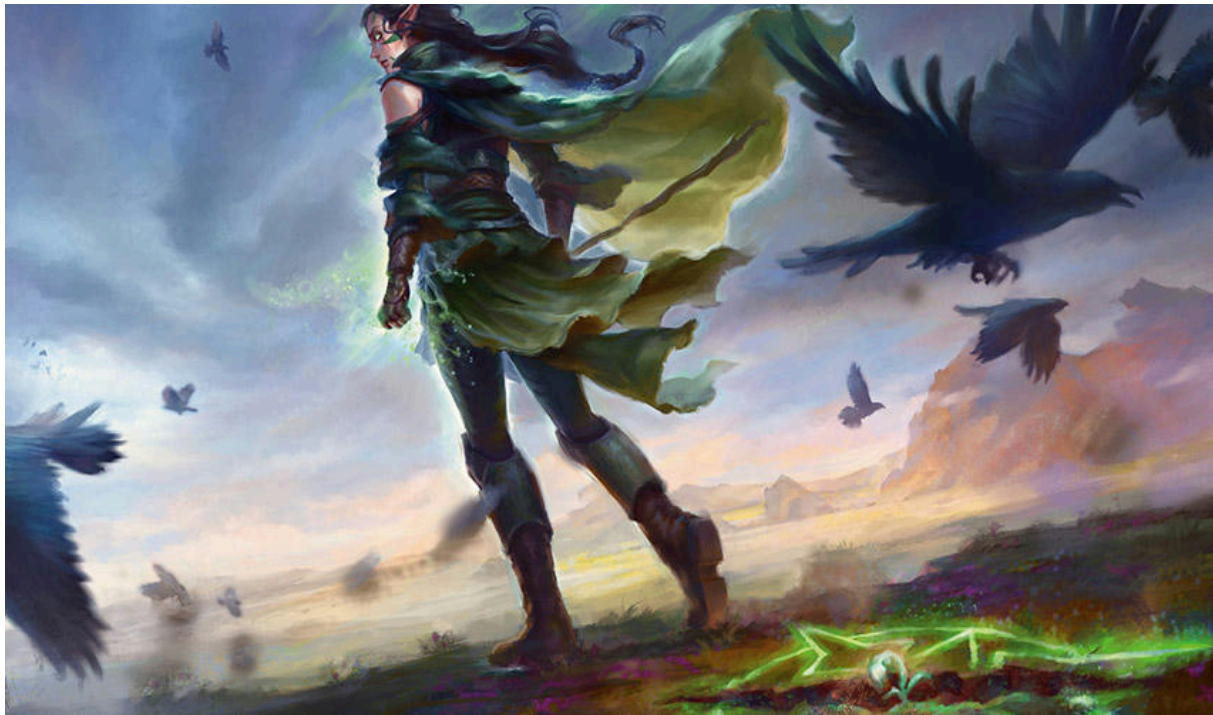
"I owe you nothing." Nissa stepped back, contempt in every line of her body. "None of us do. If the rest of you are too blind to realize that, I can't help you." She stepped away.

"Nissa!" Chandra stared at her. "If you don't want to help Liliana, I understand that, but Bolas—"

Gideon scrambled for a persuasive argument, but pain scattered his thoughts. "Nissa, you made an oath—"

"No." Nissa backed farther away from them, her expression hard as marble. "I can't bear to see another plane broken before I make my own home whole. I'm sorry, but my watch is over."

Chandra shouted, "Nissa!"



Art by Ryan Yee

But Nissa was already stepping out of the plane. For a heartbeat her form glowed with green light, the air around her filled with the shadows of vines and leaves. Then she vanished, leaving behind the fading scent of green foliage and flowers.

They stood frozen, the damp breeze stirring their hair. Liliana looked away, her jaw tight, clearly furious. Chandra buried her face in her hands and Gideon suppressed a groan. He had to find Nissa, talk her into coming back, but pain stabbed through his chest with every breath.

Then Chandra lifted her head and said, "I'm going too."

"What?" Gideon turned to her, appalled. The movement pulled at his wound and blood dripped down his side. "Chandra—"

"What?" Liliana said incredulously. "Are you joking?"

"I'm not quitting," Chandra said rapidly, nothing but determination in her expression. "I'd never quit! But you're right, Gideon, I need to learn from this. We failed Amonkhet because I was too weak!"

Liliana sputtered, "That wasn't why we failed—"

Chandra's chin lifted. "I have to become stronger."

Gideon tried, "Chandra, when I said 'learn from failure,' that's not what I—"

"I know what I'm doing!" she said, and before Gideon could take another breath she was gone. Her form disappeared in a rush of fire as she walked from the plane.

Gideon stared at the empty space where his two comrades had been. At some point he had lost control of the situation, and he wasn't sure how. And the throbbing in his head was worse.

Liliana rounded on him. "Well? Where are you going? What's your excuse?"

Gideon let out his breath wearily. "I'm staying." He looked down at her. "Nothing has changed. We need you to destroy Bolas, and you need to destroy this demon."

"I—" She stopped, staring at him. Then her expression hardened again. "Good. Then we should get on with it."

"We have to make a plan—" Pain stabbed him again, worse this time, as if Bolas's claw were still in his shoulder. He set his jaw, breathed through it, and tried again. "A plan. We have to—"

Liliana threw her arms in the air. "I know you're wounded, stop being a giant child and just admit it!" She swore under her breath. "Come on, we'll find a place so I can heal you."

Gideon was startled. "I didn't know you could heal people."

"The list of things you don't know could fill all the archives on Dominaria," Liliana snapped. "Now come on."

Well, this is yet another disaster, Liliana thought as they followed an overgrown path farther into the ruined town. With Nissa quitting in a rage and Chandra flouncing off to find herself or whatever she had been babbling about, Liliana's strategy was as ruined as this town. And Jace, gone without a word. Perhaps he no longer wanted anything to do with her . . . That thought disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. She would find him again, talk him around, but she had to kill Belzenlok first.

She cast a sideways glance at Gideon. Whatever happened, she couldn't let him realize she had run from the battle, just as Nissa had accused her. He was all she had left, and she needed his help to kill Belzenlok. But there was a sallow cast to his brown skin, lines of pain and tension etched around his mouth. *If he lives*. The big idiot's wound must be much worse than he was willing to admit.

Their boots squelched in the mud and scraped against broken paving stone and shattered glass. Death cloaked this town and the marsh around it, woven with the mist that drifted over the wet ground. Shades moved in that mist, faces that appeared then faded away. Death was everywhere.

The sight of this place had been another shock. Liliana couldn't believe this was Vess. If the others hadn't been standing beside her, she would have thought she had somehow planeswalked to the wrong part of Dominaria.

At least the town wasn't as deserted as it had first seemed. Some of the stone buildings showed attempts at repair, with patched walls and roofs, cleared steps, and wooden shutters for tall windows that had once held stained glass. The creeping marsh grass had been hacked away from a few courtyards, and one held tethered goats. A sense of something watching made Liliana examine a roofline more carefully. The shape near a chimney was no gargoyle but—*Not an angel*, she thought. A visit from the sanctimonious Church of Serra would have been the perfect cap on this foul disaster of a day. It was an aven soldier on watch, the cloudy gray light glinting on its armor, the white of its feathers and folded wings.

Ahead over the rooftops, the stone curve of an ancient Thran ruin loomed out of the mist, the smooth sides dark with moss. It was shaped like an ax blade, as if a giant had driven it into the earth and left

it there. That at least was a familiar sight, something that hadn't changed in all the decades she had been gone.



Art by Titus Lunter

Around the next turn was a broad plaza surrounded by tall houses, all in disrepair but some with stained glass still glinting in the narrow windows of the upper floors. To one side was a fountain and a few wooden market stalls. Near the market stood a tall rambling building that must be an inn. Smoke issued from the chimneys and the doors stood open. The people gathered in front stared curiously at Liliana and Gideon. All were well-armed, but made no hostile moves. Gideon nodded a greeting to them, then ruined the effect by gasping and grimacing in pain.

This was the center of town, and it looked as if it was barely clinging to life, a pale shade of the bustling market plaza that had once been as familiar as the back of her own hand. Liliana swallowed back a curse. *What happened here?*

"What is it?" Gideon asked quietly.

Liliana grimaced. She hated showing weakness. "Nothing."

Gideon sighed. "If we're going to do this, we have to be honest with each other."

Liliana snapped, "It's nothing!" As he eyed her skeptically, she reminded herself he was her only ally. And really, there was no point in concealing this fact. "There's no grand conspiracy, it's just that this place has changed. The last time I was here, this town was surrounded by forest, not a stinking marsh."

Gideon's brows drew down as he took in the plaza. "Why couldn't you just say that?"

"Because it's nothing," Liliana said through gritted teeth.

"That's exactly my point—" He winced and cut the words off. "Why were you here?"

"It's where I was born." She ignored his startled expression. "Come on, before you fall down—you're too heavy for me to drag."

Liliana didn't even need to threaten anyone to get service, though the inn was clearly functioning as a hostelry in name only. The innkeeper seemed frankly astonished at the idea they wanted to stay, but immediately led them to a room on the first floor, no doubt chosen because Gideon was leaving a blood trail and didn't look capable of climbing the stairs.

The innkeeper was a large dark-skinned man with an abundant family who kept popping out of doors to stare at the visitors as they made their way down the corridor. The room was expansive and contained a bed and a random assortment of musty furniture. Liliana steered Gideon to a low couch and helped him collapse onto it.

"It's been a long time since we had any travelers," the innkeeper admitted as he built up the fire in the hearth. A young woman, dressed in practical work clothing with a short sword belted to her waist, carried in a bucket of water to pour into the hearth's cauldron. A young boy brought a stack of folded blankets. A young girl appeared with a basket of bandages and healing supplies, and another boy came with a tray of food and drink. Despite Liliana's foul mood, there was no fault to find with the service. The innkeeper hadn't even asked to see their coins.

"I'll need whatever healing herbs you have," Liliana ordered. As the children left, she added, "What happened here? This place has . . . changed since I saw it last."

"It's the Cabal," the innkeeper said, adjusting the cauldron's support so it hung over the growing flames. He added grimly, "They mean to take over the whole world."

Surely the man had to be exaggerating. Liliana brushed aside Gideon's fumbling attempt to remove his armor and undid the buckles herself. While he stoically pretended there wasn't a massive hole in his shoulder, Liliana set about cleaning and bandaging the wound. She had known Belzenlok had supplanted the god Kuberr to gain control over the Cabal, that their Stronghold was now in Urborg, but had they really spread so far? "The Cabal has come here, then. To Benalia."

The innkeeper nodded, adding more wood to the fire. "We fought to keep them off Aeronia, but we failed. You see what their influence has done to Caligo Forest over the years." He made a helpless gesture.

"The whole forest?" Liliana said in disbelief, turning to stare at him. "All the way to the river?"

"And past. The river's silted up, impassable. It's Caligo Morass, now. And they have a new leader in this area, a powerful lich acting as the grimmants' general. The Church of Serra came to help and there was a great battle only a few days ago, but the Cabal routed us." He pushed to his feet. "I'll get some more wood for the fire."

The young girl returned with the box that held the inn's store of healing herbs. "This is all we have left. Most of our supply got used on the soldiers who stayed here."

Flicking through the packets, on impulse Liliana asked her, "Does anyone here remember the House of Vess?"

The girl paused to consider. "There's ghost stories about the old ruined manor in the morass, about the undead son and the evil daughter who fled—"



Dark Dabbling | Art by Bastien L. Deharme

“No, no.” Liliana held up a restraining hand. It was unsurprising the events of that day had become a local legend, but she had no interest in hearing it. “That part I know. I mean the true history of the family, what happened to them afterward.”

“No, not that I ever heard.” The girl hefted the bucket of soiled water. “I can ask around for you, if you like.”

“No, it’s not important.” Liliana gestured her away. As the girl left, she stared toward the shuttered windows, her brow furrowed.

Gideon stirred a little, blinking up at her. “What is it?”

She shook her head and glanced down at the herb packets. “They don’t have what I need, but it should grow nearby. I’ll go find it.” He sank back on the couch, wincing at the pain of movement. She put on a malicious smile for form’s sake, and added, “Don’t fear I’ll abandon you.”

“I don’t fear that,” he said, mildly, gazing up at her. “You need me to kill Belzenlok.”

Liliana found herself with no reply and, doubly irritated, left the inn.

The land had changed so much Liliana knew the herbs she wanted might no longer exist, but they were the fastest way to heal Gideon. They needed to come up with a plan and deal with Belzenlok, as quickly as possible.

Once past the ruins, she made her way into the marsh. She found the herbs on a surviving island of higher ground, and picked what she needed. She straightened up, looking off through a copse of moss-shrouded trees, and for a moment the strange landscape was familiar again. This was where she had first met the Raven Man.

You tried to help Josu like this, with these same herbs, she thought, the memory of that day unexpectedly clear. She had meant only to heal him, and instead turned him into a mindless undead monster that killed Lady Ana, killed her servants . . . And then she had fled the plane as her spark ignited, leaving

her mother and father, all her family and friends, everyone she had ever known, to their fates. The spell animating Josu must have broken when she left the plane, but she had never thought of what her family had made of the carnage in his room. They must have thought her dead, surely. Had they searched for her? Had they thought Josu had killed her?

Wrapped up in her sudden new power as a planeswalker, trying to survive, she had refused to think about them since that day. It was so long ago, and the pain-filled memories were like a glimpse into the mind of a different person.

Don't be stupid, she told herself. The House of Vess was now just a legend, a ghost story to amuse the town's children. *They lived their lives, aged, and died*. Nothing would be left of the manor but a pile of rubble, with no clues to discover. But she found herself walking, her feet finding the familiar path buried under all the mud and marsh grass.

Inconvenient emotions, getting in the way of her goal.

Liliana made her way through a stand of grass as high as a sapling and stopped abruptly.

It had to be her fevered imagination. The house was still here.

The twisted trees and heavy vegetation had grown right up to the gray stone walls, but she could see the shape of the center wing, the curve of the nearest tower. *This is madness*, she thought. *Madness or...*

Or some strange power at work.

The doors to the main hall stood open. It was surprisingly hard to make herself cross the open field and walk up the steps, but dread and the need to know drove her on.

She stepped inside. The light from the doorway fell on the carved railings of the upper gallery, the tapestried hangings on the wall behind, and for an instant it was as if the house was wholly intact, just as it was. As if it had existed in a timeless bubble, preserved like an insect in amber. But then she breathed in the scent of blood and rot, and the moment broke. She blinked, and saw the hangings were in tatters, the carving broken and scarred by weather. *But still, this whole house should be a ruin*, she thought. *Something has done this, deliberately*. So she could be brought here to see it? If so, it could be the Raven Man, stalking her across the planes. *But why?*

She followed the scent of blood farther into the hall.

There, before the great hearth, symbols had been charred into the stone floor, their shape and pattern obscured by dried remnants of what must have been huge gouts of blood. Dozens of unlit candles surrounded the spot, their pools of melted wax further obscuring the traces left behind by some powerful necromantic spell. Cold air wafted up from the floor like an open grave.

Liliana's jaw hurt and she realized it was because her lips had drawn back in an unconscious snarl.

Whatever had happened here, it was no coincidence.

Night had started to fall when Liliana reached the outskirts of town. She had barely started on the path through the ruins when she sensed the surge of undead malice. She muttered, "I do not have time for this," and started to run.

She heard the fighting before she reached the plaza and rounded the last corner to see a battle ahead.

The market stalls had been set afire and dark figures fought across the plaza, firelight glinting off flashing blades. The townspeople were easy to spot, wearing patched armor and wielding makeshift clubs

and tools as well as swords and battle axes. Some had fallen already, and the aven she had seen on the rooftop lay sprawled dead on the paving stones, its wings a broken tangle.

The attackers wore black armor with spikes and sharp points, as unlike the Benalish white and silver and stained glass as possible. *Undead knights from the Cabal*, Liliana thought in disgust. There would be a Cabal cleric here somewhere, a living human cultist, to control the mindless revenants.

Gideon suddenly tumbled out of the shadows near the inn. He rolled to his feet then staggered, still clearly weakened by his wounds. He wore no armor and blood stained his bandages and clothing, but he swung a borrowed sword as a knight on horseback bore down on him. The knight wore heavy black armor studded with sharp spikes and was mounted atop a large armored horse. No, as the creature tossed its head Liliana spotted the rotting flesh and white bone through the gaps in its armor, the pits of darkness where its eyes should be. The knight wore no helmet and his head was covered with pale shrunken flesh, his hair a rotting white mane.



Art by Even Amundsen

Screams erupted from the inn as the doors burst open. Another undead knight dragged two struggling figures outside. Liliana recognized the young woman and the boy who had helped attend their room. Gideon flung himself toward them and the knight on horseback drove his mount forward to ride him down.

Hah, you'll have to do better than this, Belzenlok, Liliana thought as she raised her hands. She drew strength from the dead slumped on the cold pavement, from the bones buried in the ruins, from the rotting corpses in the marsh, from the ghosts in the mist. As the etchings on her skin flared violet, bolts shot out from her hands to strike a dozen black-armored knights. She strode forward into the chaos of the battle.

A revenant on foot charged her and she spared one gesture to send a black cloud shooting up from the ground. It wrapped his writhing form and rotted him to nothing as what was left of his armor hit the pavement.

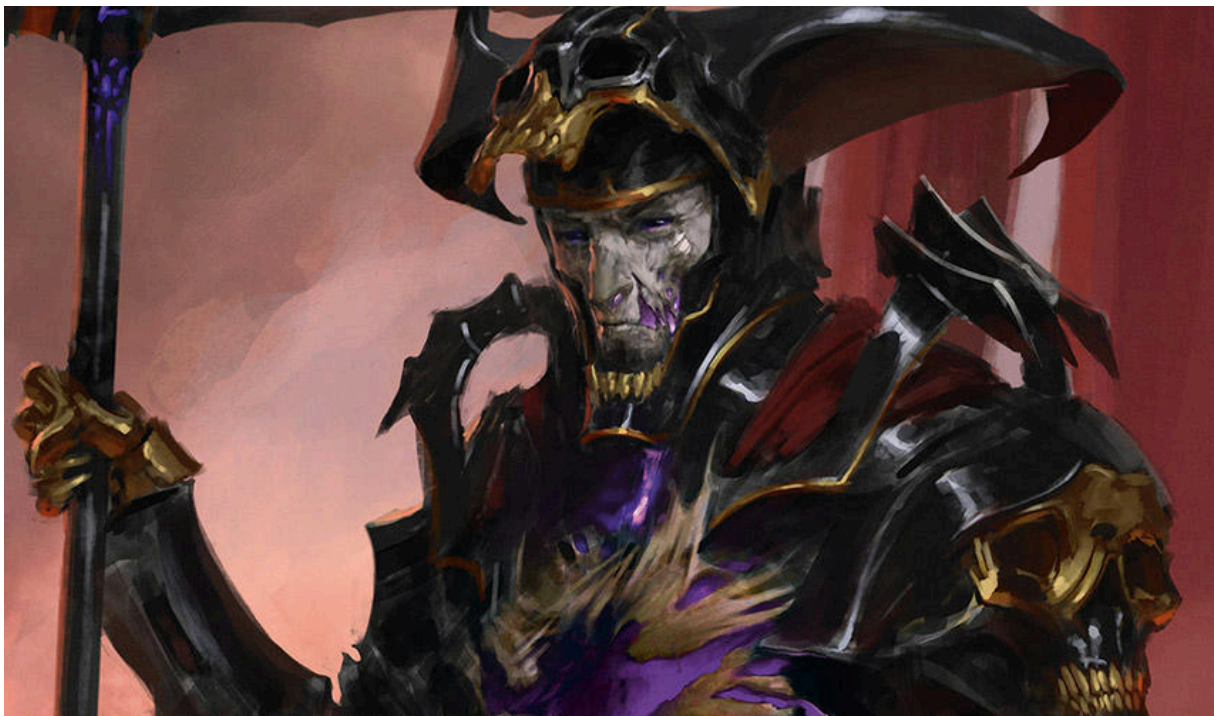
The undead knight barreled down on Gideon and lifted his lance for a killing blow. Liliana focused her will and sent it into the black-armored form.

In the next instant, he was hers. She made him drop the lance and turn his mount away from Gideon. She snapped the mount's connection to the power that animated it. As it collapsed into a pile of bones, the knight tumbled to the ground. She considered using him against the others, but the dozen or so she had already destroyed had turned the battle. Gideon gained his feet again and hacked away at the few combatants left near the inn. Shouting in triumph, the surviving townspeople regrouped to charge the others.

Liliana lifted her hand to destroy the last knight, but something whispered in her mind: *the Void awaits*.

Liliana froze, her heart pounding. Then her lips curled in contempt. It was a trick. The undead knight's master had to be the lich who had devastated Caligo for the Cabal, and the lich had to be the one behind the arcane preservation of Vess Manor. Liliana explored along the connection, curious. How could this lich know so much about her? Was it possibly . . .

An image of the lich's face burned before her. The face was Josu's.



Art by Tyler Jacobson

No. Liliana's heart seized in her chest. *It can't be*. "No!" she shouted.

Her rage and dismay snapped the connection. The knight's corpse exploded and armor and rotting bones flew across the plaza.

The townspeople had caught the human cleric and pinned him to the ground with a spear to his chest. Liliana shouldered them aside and grabbed him by the leg to drag into the firelight. Her voice rough with rage, she demanded, "Where is Josu? What has Belzenlok done to him?"

She was barely aware of Gideon moving to her side, watching her with concern.

The cleric gasped a laugh, then choked out, "He knew, our Demonlord, the Scion of Darkness, he knew you were coming! He has made your precious brother into his servant, the commander of his unholy forces!"

"Josu serves Belzenlok," Liliana repeated, shock making the words sound calm. The necromantic rite in Vess Manor had been used to turn Josu from mindless undead into a powerful lich, capable of using

Josu's memories and military training, but enslaved to Belzenlok. *Belzenlok is using my own brother against me*, Liliana thought. The brother whose soul she had made vulnerable with her first uncontrolled use of power.

"He serves our lord, he . . ." The cleric gurgled as blood filled his throat. He gasped, "The Void awaits," and slumped lifeless on the pavement.

Liliana stared down at him, growing fury overriding the horror at what had happened to Josu. She would not allow this. Her brother would not be Belzenlok's slave. She would free him no matter what it took. "You'll pay for this, Belzenlok," she said, grating out the words in cold fury. "No matter what I have to do, you will pay."