

Episode 4: The Wedding Crashers

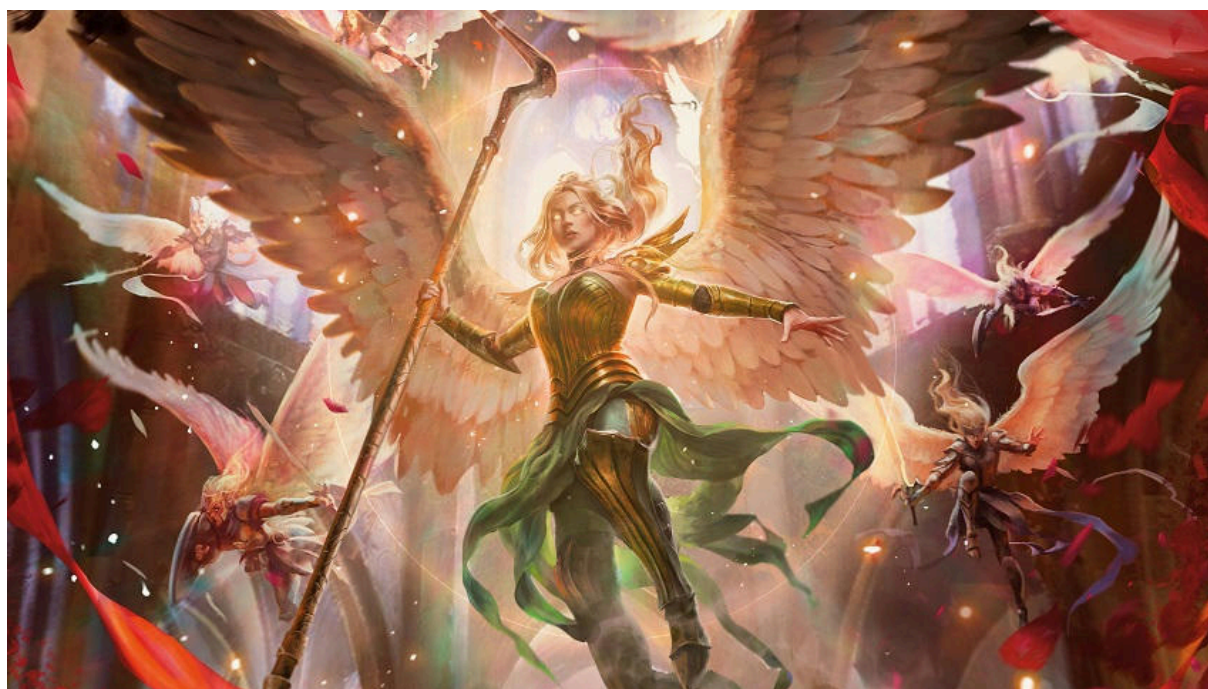
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From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

17. 11. 2021

A spear of light shatters the windows of Voldaren Manor. Invitation wards crumble, scattering ash-like on the winds. The air in Stensia is bright and clear for the first time in what feels like months, as clear as the goals of the gathered hopefuls.

Tonight, they break down the doors of this awful castle. Tonight, they fight tooth, nail, claw, and sword to take back the day.



Sigarda's Summons | Art by: Nestor Ossandon Leal

Arlinn can't give the order fast enough. The moment she sees the angelic plume of light, she shouts to the others, "Now!"

But they are already moving, holiness gilding them like saints, swords raised, and stallions rearing. Adeline is ahead of the pack, Chandra sitting behind her; Teferi hastens the footsteps of the surrounding foot soldiers as much as he can. The guards at the gates stand no chance against the gathered masses. Arlinn doesn't see who takes them down, only the lances piercing their chests, but she does taste their blood on the wind.

Her senses sharpen. She sees beyond the gates: from the narrow walkway, trailing thin as thread above the abyss, to the manor's sick tapestry. All of it will be torn down. The thought's a satisfying one. It was like her mother always used to say—didn't matter how nice the pie looked, if you filled it with hot fish, it'd still taste rotten. And vampires left a rotten taste in everything they touched.

Kaya's hand on her shoulder brings her back to the present moment—to the reality of it, instead of Arlinn's far-flung musings. "We've got to get going," she says. "Otherwise, there isn't gonna be much left for us."

She's right. Arlinn's learned that Kaya's right about a lot of things. After all of this is over, she hopes the two of them can get to know each other better; Kaya, out of all the other planeswalkers, understood the delicate balance of life and death that so characterized Innistrad. And understanding Innistrad meant understanding Arlinn.

"Try to keep up," she says, smiling.

Kaya rolls her eyes—but she doesn't back down.

The two of them join the crowd: cathars mounted and unmounted, priests bearing herons and priests bearing Avacynian collars, and farmers who have lost their families.

Onward across the bridge, toward that den of depravity, the rush of the living and the mortal.

Onward the lances, onward the hammers and shields, torches and pitchforks, the holy tomes and blessed blades.

And downward come the bats. Distant, at first, easily mistaken for pieces of falling ash, but the sound soon drowns out that hope. Screeching pierces her sensitive ears; Arlinn covers one and tucks the other against her shoulder to try and block out the cacophony. It's no use.

But what is useful are the bolts of magic hurled over her shoulder. Arrows, too, soon find their marks. As the bats descend, hungry for blood, the witches and archers are eager to meet them. Fur sizzles; the screeching worsens—and then goes silent. Her ears are still ringing as the bats go down. She can't hear the crunch of their bones beneath the boots of their makeshift army, but she can feel it.

She can feel the shift beneath her, too, as they move from simple stone to carefully curated marble. Up ahead, at the secondary gates, the guards have already been overwhelmed, floating face down in pools of blood. Maybe Kaya's right. If they aren't quick, there's hardly going to be anything left.

But even a crowd of this size has trouble with gates.

Kaya and Arlinn make their way through the crowd. It's easy enough—many part for their erstwhile leader and her comrade in arms. Adeline, Teferi, and Chandra make up the vanguard standing before the great doors.

Teferi tilts his head up, then shakes his head with a sigh. "Awful taste."

"That's why we should light the whole thing on fire," Chandra says.

"You mean the door, don't you?" Adeline asks.

Chandra looks back toward her, smile straining. "Right just the door."

Flames spiral around her arms. Full of swagger, she advances, holding out her hands before her.

Arlinn has half a mind to stop her. Fire's hard to deal with, after all, and while it's harmful to vampires, it's harmful to their group, too.

But Avacyn preserve her, she just can't be mad about it. There's something satisfying about imagining Olivia's smug face burn.

Teferi taps his staff against the ground. As amused as he is by the sight, they don't have much time to waste. The fire burns hotter, brighter, and faster—and soon the door before them is only ash.

This is where the real assault begins.

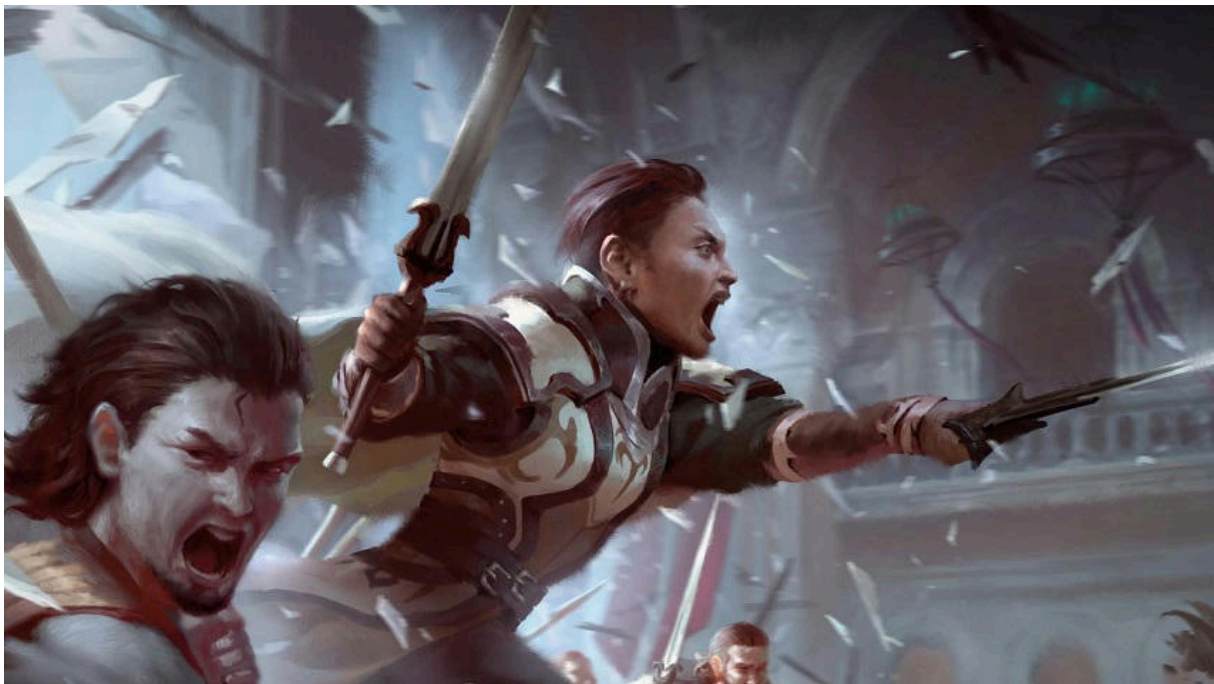
All of Voldaren Manor is open before them. Arlinn's never been, personally, but she's heard the stories. One wrong turn, and you'll never be heard from again. But that only applied if you wandered in alone.

Arlinn always traveled with a pack. A pang of sadness follows the thought. Streak, Boulder, Patience, and Redtooth. If she tried, she could imagine where they might be right now—somewhere with springy earth beneath their paws. Somewhere that smelled of pine.

She feels alone.

She knows she isn't.

The light up ahead is proof of that.



Resistance Squad | Art by: Joshua Raphael

Mounted cathars break off from the crowd, taking to the courtyards and gardens, swords and lances ready to mete out justice. Chandra and Adeline go with them, Adeline mounting her charger before helping Chandra up behind her.

Ranks of guards armed with golden weapons come to meet their charge, their armor more ornamental than functional. Arrows and bolts crash into the first line of defense: farmers with makeshift shields, old soldiers standing next to them. A return volley soon follows. Arlinn picks up a bow and lets loose herself. Hard to see where her arrow lands in all the chaos, but someone's hitting the enemy.

"Didn't know you were such a good shot," Kaya says.

Arlinn glances toward her. Kaya's eyes are gleaming a faint silver. There's a strange taste on Arlinn's tongue, and a high-pitched sound she can't seem to place.

“Can’t always use my teeth to hunt,” says Arlinn. “Everything all right?”

A javelin comes their way, soaring right through Kaya and clattering uselessly against a beheaded statue. “There are spirits here, Arlinn. And they’re *very* angry.”

Arlinn finds herself grinning. “Good. Think you can get them to help us out?”

“I’ll see about cutting them loose,” Kaya says. She returns the smile—but something else catches her attention. She looks toward the light. “Wait. I don’t think I’m alone. There’s someone else calling out to me.”

Arlinn looks over her shoulder. The light must be coming from the ballroom; the hallways open not too far down. And those guards have got to be coming from somewhere.

Just what was going on in there?

“Who?”

“I think I think it’s Katilda.”

Warmth in Arlinn’s chest, as fortifying as her favorite ale. “Even better.”

Kaya nods. “You keep going on ahead. I’ll see about our backup. It’s time the Voldarens paid their debts.”

And, just like the ghosts, Arlinn doesn’t need to be told twice. She trusts Kaya. She trusts Teferi. She trusts Chandra and Adeline. And—Avacyn’s mercy—she trusts Sorin, too. When the time comes to save Innistrad, he’ll do the right thing, she’s sure of it.

It’s only that she wants to be there just in case.

The guards are in ragged shape to begin with. Fighting them is hard work—fighting vampires always is—but easier than it should be. Vibrant shards of glass jut from their pallid skin; their balance is so far off that Arlinn hardly takes a single blow making her way through them. Blood slicks the marbled floors of Voldaren Manor—and this time it belongs to the leeches themselves.

It isn’t just the vampires themselves that fall.

It’s the statues, toppled over; polished stone made jagged.

It’s the fountains of blood, smashed apart; priests working in tandem to purify the tainted.

It’s the tapestries, the chandeliers, the fine carpets, and the extravagant furniture. A fiery anger burns in the heart of Innistrad. The shouts echoing down the hallway aren’t simple war cries—they’re more than that. Howls of agony, affirmations of life, the cathartic wails of a people who have lived in fear for far too long.

Vampires built this place on the backs of mortals.

Mortals will tear it asunder.

By the time they break through to the ballroom, Arlinn feels that righteous anger within her, too. Her inner beast struggles against its leash. Tovolar would tell her to set it loose upon these bloodsuckers.

She doesn’t *want* to agree with him.

Not yet.

But she nearly loses control when she breaks through to the ballroom.

To see Sigarda's bloodied wings, to see the fervor consuming her as her sickle reaps vampiric heads—Arlinn isn't sure what to think. It's a sight as grisly as it is invigorating. A coppery taste sticks to the roof of Arlinn's mouth. The Church could be as bloody as any werewolf pack.

And there are the others, too: more guards, some bold enough to attack Sigarda directly; the partygoers going bestial at the sight of the intruders. As she scans the room for the key—and for Sorin—there's almost too much to take in. Torn gowns, bats swirling in the air along with petals of blood, the shattered stained-glass window, fountains torn, and buffet tables broken in two.

It's not getting easier anytime soon.

But she has to get through them somehow.

Ahead, ducking beneath the swing of a blade, tearing through silk and lace to claw at her attacker: a hopped-up Markov duelist. She's fought his type before. Fancy swordplay gets you lots of places, but Arlinn doesn't need a sword to fight.

The blood gushing down his side doesn't slow him, not yet. Must have gluttoned himself before all this started—he smells of many lives mingled together, his lips smeared thick with red. "No one invited the *fashion disasters*."

His next cut is fast. If he was attacking anyone else, it might even have been too fast to follow. But Arlinn's not alone, and the waves of magic slowing the blow down speak to that. She has enough time to drive her knee into his stomach. The vampire gurgles as the air's knocked out of him; his sword clatters to the ground.

She could kill him. Tear his throat out. He'd deserve it, all the things he must have done. A vampire's existence necessitates the suffering of others.

But that's what Tovolar would do.

Arlinn hefts him overhead and hurls him into a column.

If he has any sense, he won't come after her again.

She doesn't have time to see if he will. Through the melee again, trying her best to cast aside the memories of Harvesttide. This won't be the same. It can't be.

The best way to stop all this is to find the key. But where is it? She sniffs at the air, hoping to get the scent, but there's too much magic to make any sense of it. Sigarda's, likely—it's coming off her in waves as she fights off the lion's share of guards.

Arlinn's eyes will have to serve instead.

The second she spots Olivia, the cavalry arrives. Cathars break in through the windows, their warhorses stained red. Bolts of magic shoot straight for the progenitor vampire as some of the priests follow.

And when the priests see who's in the ballroom with them, a chorus of cheers rises.

Olivia's not cheering. "You all of you! You're ruining my *wedding day*!" she roars from atop the stairs.

"Hand over the key!" Arlinn answers. A hundred voices echo her—*the key, the key!*

So many that the walls start to shake.

The key, the key, the ki. . .ki. . .kill.

Wait. Those aren't just the army's voices. And the humming in the air—something's happening. All around them the air itself coalesces into something *else*. Something old.

Geists. Arlinn can see their shapes now: servants and knights, nobles and farmers. There must be hundreds of them, all materializing at once, ghostly flames alight with anger.

You killed us.

The voices of the dead carry well.

Their weapons, she's relieved to see, do too. Like a wave of spectral force, the geists crash against their former oppressors. And among the crowd, a familiar headdress stands out: Katilda. Arlinn doesn't need to be told to follow her—the path ahead glows a faint green, like moss on full moon nights.

Arlinn charges up the steps.

Olivia takes to the air—or tries to. She doesn't get very far before a familiar silhouette forms in the air behind her. Kaya plunges a spectral dagger into Olivia's fell train. Ordinary fabric would tear asunder. This magical fabric does, too—and, like blood from a wound, the geists trapped within the train burst free.

Olivia's scream is a hideous thing. She thrashes, sending Kaya tumbling. If she hits the tile, there's going to be blood.

Arlinn can't take any chances. She leaps into the air, catching Kaya mid-fall, landing only an instant later. But that's long enough for Olivia to flee: Arlinn looks up just in time to spot her tattered train ducking into a hallway.

"Leave the fight to us," Kaya says. "Go."



Kaya, Geist Hunter | Art by: Ryan Pancoast

Arlinn spares a glance over her shoulder—at the angels, the mortals, the immortals, and the ghosts. Somewhere in that din is Sorin. She can't catch sight of him here. She doesn't have time to search.

She nods. "Keep them safe."

It's a big ask, and she knows it is. People are going to die here today. She wishes they didn't have to. But all Arlinn can do is make sure their sacrifices are worth it.

"It didn't have to be this way."

The slow, careful voice echoes in the chamber. Over the bubbling and boiling of blood, it reigns supreme. Maybe that's because Sorin's spent so much time listening to it already. Once, it told him stories.

"You're right," he calls back. "Grandfather, you know this is foolish. She's only using you."

His own voice sounds strange here. The plaque outside read "Sanguitorium"—a ridiculous name, but an accurate one. This must be where the Voldarens kept their stores for lean times.

Not that there were ever lean times for the Voldarens.

When Sigarda took to the sky, Edgar fled. He knew better than anyone an angel's wrath. Sorin followed. By then, Arlinn and her group had already breached the door. They'd handle getting the key.

But no one else could confront Edgar Markov.

Now here they were, among the intricate vats of the sanguitorium. Somewhere between these red columns, his grandfather was waiting for him. Watching.

"Is that the way you're seeing things?"

Sorin flourishes the blade in his hand. "Sophistry? Grandfather, you're better than this."

He hears the blow coming a moment before it does: the shifting of Edgar's armor gives him away. Sorin sways to the right; Edgar swings a rack of bottles like a warhammer. They shatter the moment they hit the ground. There's nothing but contempt in Edgar's eyes when they meet Sorin's.

Is this what the Markov line has come to? A deluded old man swinging furniture at his grandson?

"At least use a proper weapon!" Sorin snaps. The slash he unleashes at Edgar is a messy, wild thing.

And easily countered. Edgar catches Sorin's wrist, his fingers a vise. Pain shoots up Sorin's arms as the delicate bones of his forearm crack. "What do you know about propriety, Sorin? It isn't as if you've ever bothered to be part of the family."

Rather than wait for an answer, Edgar flings Sorin away. Sorin crashes into a vat; the wood cracks behind him. Blood spills out and onto his already sticky skin.

"Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed for you?" Edgar says. He's advancing, crooking a finger toward Sorin as if he's lecturing a child. "How much we've *all* sacrificed for you?"

Sorin brings a cupped hand to his mouth. If he was going to be soaked in blood, he might as well make use of it. Better than listening to his grandfather's delusions. Olivia's control must have run deeper than he thought, if Edgar's saying things like this. They might not have always gotten along—but Edgar's never been a fool.

And yet.

These can't all be Olivia's words.

"As if I've never made a sacrifice for your sake," Sorin answers. The sword's out of the question now. As he gets to his feet, he grabs the first thing his hands close around—a length of pipe. Pulling it from

its housing takes barely any effort with such potent blood coursing through his veins. Even better, more blood sprays over him.

Best to take advantage of this power. In a streak of speed, Sorin attacks. Edgar's armor groans and caves beneath the force of the blow; his ribs crack.

And yet he doesn't move away. The pained wheeze that leaves him sounds almost amused.

"By all means, boy, tell me of your sacrifices," he says. "What have you given for House Markov? For Innistrad?"

"I created Avacyn—"

Edgar's choking hand stymies any response. There are alchemical fires behind those eyes, disgust in his sneering lip.

"Your little toy soldier? Yes, I'm aware. For the past thousand years, you've spoken of little else. Even that was an idea you derived from *my* research. I wonder if you've ever had an original idea. For that matter, I wonder if any of your ideas have ever worked out for you."

As if he knows. As if he could ever possibly know the depths of Sorin's struggles.

Edgar lifts him up, one hand sufficient for the job. It's a mistake. Sorin swings the iron bar at Edgar's head. Red weeps from his grandfather's now cracked skull; the old man drops his quarry and recoils in pain.

Something wells up inside Sorin.

There are other Planes. There are other plans.

Again and again and again these words, a chorus echoing in his skull, a chant to summon a dark god. And yes, what it brings is dark indeed. Like the cry of an untethered beast, his scream as he swings again and again, his grandfather backing up further and further. Iron shatters glass. Waterfalls of blood spill onto the floor—blood that once ran in living veins, blood that once longed for more, blood that now longs to die.

"I thought you understood," Sorin rumbles. "I thought you saw, grandfather, that there is more to this existence than gluttonous parties and wanton excess. I thought you saw that!"

Again and again he swings, and swings, the iron bending now from his abuse. He sinks low to the ground—there is another pipe, far larger, that will serve. But the moment he reaches for it, Edgar lunges forward. His grandfather grabs him by the hair and by the waist, a farmer lifting an errant sheep.

"You are a child. You have always been a child," he intones. "It's truly a shame. Millennia ago, I gave you a gift. Now I have to live out the rest of my days knowing you squandered it."

"I never asked for that—" Sorin begins.

"My dear boy, that is what makes it a *gift*."

Edgar swings him face first into a vat. Blood rushes up his nostrils—blood, and splintered wood.

Memory subsumes reality. He is a young man, called into his family's gathering hall. His grandfather sits at the head of the table. Lashed to the ceiling is an angel, her blood dripping into a wine glass.

Everyone is there. His aunts, his uncles. His parents. All of them lay their hands upon him and tell them this is for his own good. For the family's own good. If they're to survive in the dark, they must become a part of it. Famine has taken all the things that humans eat—so they should no longer be human. It's perfectly reasonable.

He's dizzy.

His head against the wood again, a shock of red across the memory.

"Innistrad is ours, Sorin," his grandfather says. He sounds older, somehow, wearier, and the words do not match the movements of his lips. "It's only right we rule it."

The world lurches around him. Something cuts at his throat; he can feel the blood rolling down to his collarbone. His heart hammers against his ribs.

"For too long you've let your bitterness, your paranoia, guide your actions. They've eaten away at your potential. Now all that remains is this sad, broken shell. A little boy, weeping for his grandfather."

Memory still blurs with the present. A hand on the back of his head. The wine glass before him. He does not want to drink, but they force him, the rim of the cup sharp against his gums.

The awful, exultant taste of blood. Warmth coursing through every vein of his body. A filthy feeling from which he'll never be free, but one which will, in time, become part of him. In time, he will act as if he wanted this. In time, he will act as if this was always part of the plan. In time, it will be insulting to him to be confused for a human.

For a mortal.

"Drink and be eternal."

He fell on that day. They all did. Some might say the spark igniting within him was a saving grace. He felt otherwise. Sorin's never been a believer in grace, in religion—having manufactured one himself, it disabused him of any romantic notions. But he knows that it is true all the same: that day they fell.

So, it is strange, then, that he feels as if he is falling now.

But when he opens his eyes it all makes perfect sense.

His grandfather stands on the lip of a great pit, looking down on him with disgust.

And Sorin Markov continues to fall.

History watches Arlinn race through the corridors of Voldaren Manor—but it isn't Arlinn's history. There are no traces of Avabruck here; no rough wrought iron, no Avacynian symbols, no neighbors with stories older than the trees. Here, there are golden chandeliers; here, there is only the Voldaren's crest; here, everything is older than the trees. Even the people.

And those people are watching her as she chases after Olivia. There are the partygoers, and those too drunk on blood to know where they've gone. She shoves them aside as easily as parting wheat. There are the guards, who put up more of a fight. Arlinn doesn't indulge them. Their swings and arrows come one after the other, and one after the other, she weaves between them, shouldering them when she's close enough. Even vampires fall when they lose their balance. She doesn't need them down forever—just long enough to get past. The geists behind her will finish the job.

But there are other eyes, too.

Olivia's, down the hall, challenging her to follow.

And the portraits.

There are plenty of them here. Dozens in this long stretch alone, maybe hundreds throughout the mansion proper. Arlinn didn't care to count. Dressed in their impossible finery, with thralls across their

laps, their mouths slaked with blood—the people staring back at her belonged to a different world. To them, existing meant taking things from others. That’s power, to a vampire: taking the most things from the highest places.

It isn’t a world Arlinn wants to be in.

But it surrounds her all the same, this place that grew from death.

And it occurs to her, as she finally catches Olivia in a dead end, that there’s nothing alive in this corridor except her.

No other soldiers. No fellow walkers. Not even her wolves.

The beat of Arlinn’s heart is a war drum, a battle cry, a polemic against death. Olivia opens her mouth to say something, but that mouth has fed too much already; Arlinn can’t countenance another word. With a human howl, she lashes out, her sharp nails raking the fine fabric of Olivia’s gown—and, beneath it, her flesh. The scent of blood drives Arlinn wilder—her teeth ache to grow to fangs—but she cannot let herself be lost just yet.

There’s too much at stake.

“You,” Olivia sneers. “Why did *you* have to come?”

There’s an answer, of course—because Olivia stole the key—but Arlinn’s not inclined to reason with her just now. She presses on, wild slash after wild slash. Olivia’s hidden the key somewhere in her train, Arlinn can smell it. Their progenitor is going to pay the price for her theft.

One she isn’t inclined to pay, it seems. Only reasonable—vampires don’t pay for much out of pocket. In her single-sightedness, Arlinn hadn’t accounted for the unnatural architecture of the corridors. Somehow, they’ve turned into an entirely new one from a dead end. Worse—there are suits of armor here.

And weapons.

Like the gilt sword encrusted with gems that Olivia picks up.

Arlinn can’t pull back her swipe in time, and Olivia’s all too eager to meet her. Steel bites into Arlinn’s fingers. It hurts less than she expected, the thrill of the fight dulling all but the most important sensations. Still, the sight of her own bones peeking out at her is enough to slow her down.

“Give us the key,” Arlinn says.

“Us?” says Olivia. “Oh, what a *poor* little doggie.” A pirouette disguises her coming lunge, and Arlinn parries with her forearm a moment too late. Olivia drives the sword’s tip into Arlinn’s chest with wicked delight. Metal grinds against Arlinn’s collarbone as Olivia cups her cheek. “You’re all alone here.”

Arlinn’s not sure which is worse—the pain, now rising past the point of ignorance, or Olivia’s hateful voice. Red swims at the corners of her vision. The wolf within her cries out for freedom. Arlinn won’t heed it, not now. She has to keep a clear head.

But before Arlinn’s clear head can think of what to do, Olivia’s shoving her right off the end of her sword with malicious glee. Arlinn kneels, her wound weeping onto the carpet. The painted vampires watch with unchanging amusement as Olivia—their progenitor—cackles.

“I admit, none of this makes sense to me. Wolves aren’t known for thinking things through, but even still, you’re pack animals, aren’t you?” Olivia says. Then she tuts. “Well. *Most* of you are.”

Another flourish. Arlinn braces herself. Sure enough, mid-movement, Olivia's shooting toward her like a crossbow bolt. This time Arlinn ducks, lowering her shoulder and pushing back. It's enough to throw Olivia off balance, but only barely. Arlinn tries to grab her—but Olivia's claws find a home in Arlinn's gut.

Breathing starts to get harder.

"It's for the best, you know," Olivia says. "Even for *your* kind. Humans are fun little toys, but when has one ever understood you?"

Arlinn wraps a hand around Olivia's wrist. Blood wells up at the back of her throat; she spits it all over Olivia's gown. "Maybe *you* should try understanding them."

Olivia's full-face scowl is almost worth all the pain. Disgusted, she pushes Arlinn away again. "I don't make friends with my food," she says. "Now. Come on. If you're going to make this brave little stand of yours, do it properly. You know what you are, don't you?"

Arlinn Kord, daughter of a blacksmith and a baker.

Hard to think, hard to think.

"You know why you're here."

To get the key. To bring daylight back to Innistrad.

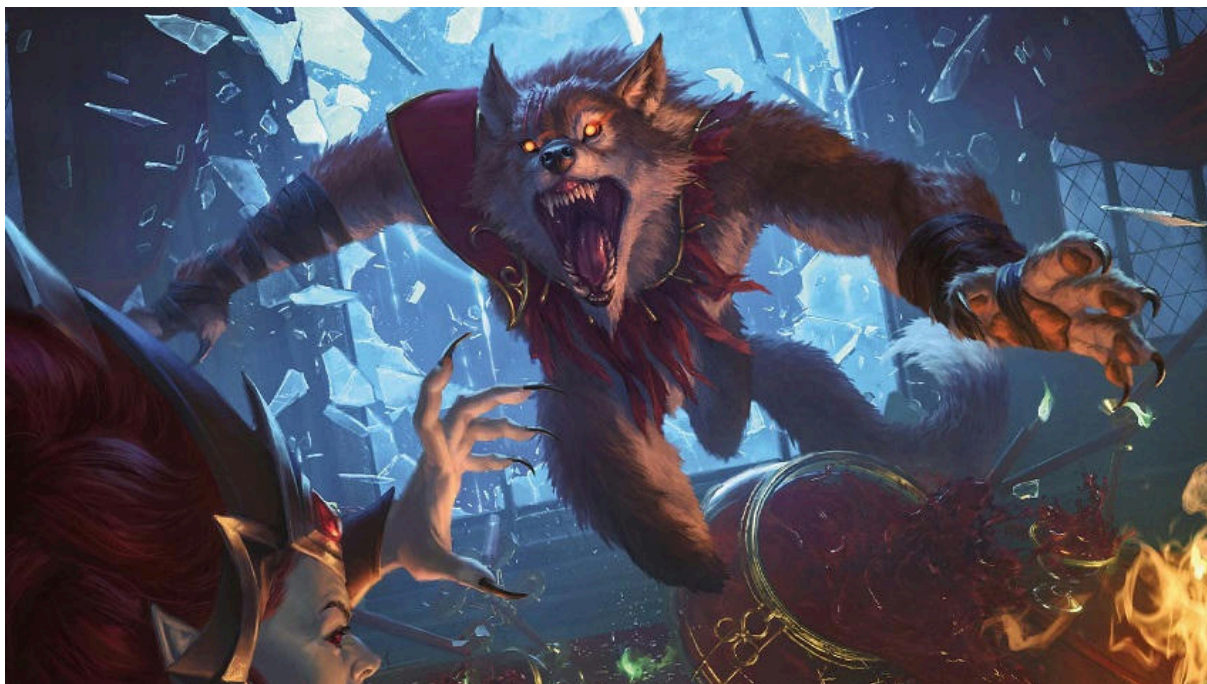
To get revenge for the Harvesttide Massacre.

Olivia dabs a finger on the edge of her blade. She licks it clean, then frowns. "Certainly, you *taste* awful. So. If you're going to do this, little pup, why not let yourself off the leash? You're never going to win in *that* shape."

She's right. Arlinn hates it, but she is.

And maybe that's the last touch of anger she needs to send her over the edge.

Senses sharpen. Strength returns to her as she grows, strength enough to keep fighting, at least for now. Her human mind is falling away, falling into the forest; she smells pine, tastes blood. Like the cry of a lost hunter, her last conscious thought: *this isn't the way we solve our problems*. But there is no one in the woods to hear it. Only the Moonsilver Key, only Olivia, only the faces staring back at her remain.



Sure Strike | Art by: Lie Setiawan

Pure instinct drives her. She pounces, Olivia twirls away. A flash of gold—the sword’s coming again. Arlinn catches it barehanded and flings it aside. With the other, she hurls Olivia through a statue of herself.

Ahead, ahead, ahead. The key’s somewhere on her. Get it back. End this.

But there are the faces, too—these terrible faces.

Arlinn isn’t sure what drives her to do it. Animal rage, perhaps—or an all-too-human rage that only the beast can unleash.

For just a moment, her attention shifts to the paintings—to digging trenches across their smug faces, to tearing the canvas, to howling with fury at the sight of them.

There are so many of them, after all—and she is here alone.

She doesn’t notice Olivia’s gotten behind her until it’s too late.

How ironic—a vampire’s stiffened hand makes for an excellent stake.

A plaintive whimper leaves Arlinn’s throat.

She falls.