

Veil of Deceit

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The planeswalking necromancer Liliana Vess knows all too well that everybody dies, but that doesn't mean she's going to let it happen to her. She made a pact with four demons from four different planes—a contract, etched on her skin, that granted her power and agelessness, in exchange for services rendered.

But she wasn't really in over her head until one of her demonic creditors sent her after the evil artifact known as the Chain Veil...

Liliana of the Veil

As the world took shape around her, Liliana Vess stumbled. The unending chaos of the Blind Eternities formed itself into lush trees all around, soft loam beneath her feet, sweltering heat, the pungent smell of rotting humus. Perhaps there was sound—the call of birds startled by her arrival, the tromp of a baloth in the distance—but all she could hear was the veil.

“...nurtured the root...strong enough...the vessel..”

Different voices rose and fell over each other in a constant susurrus that gnawed at the edges of her mind. It was always worst right after she used magic—the rest of the time she could ignore them or drown them out with her own thoughts.

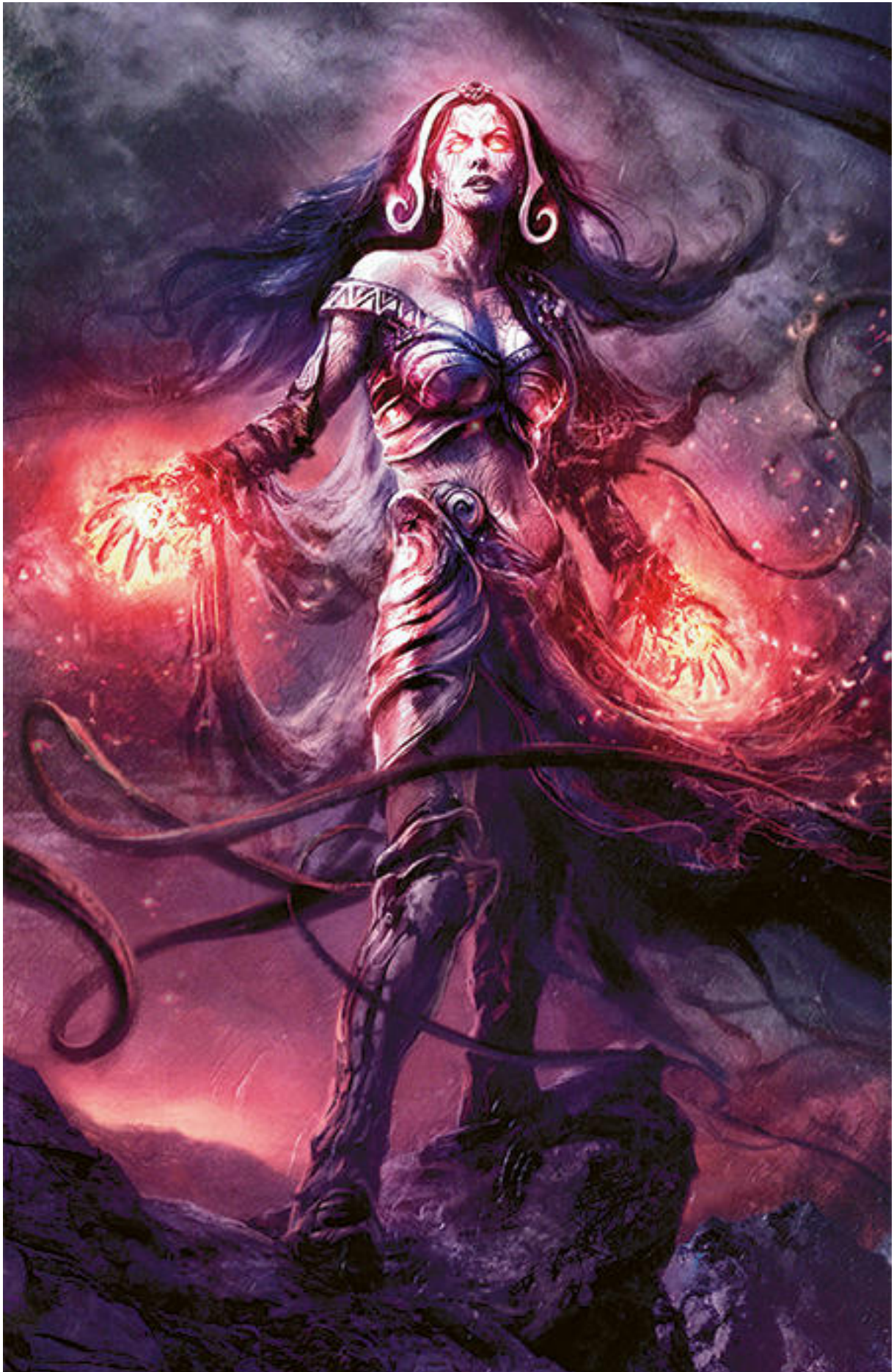
“Pipe down, boys,” she said aloud, leaning against a tree to steady herself.

“...hallowed earth...the void's first breath...”

“Shut up!”

Silence. The voices stopped. If birds had been calling, they quieted at the sound of her outburst.

“Don't talk to me about the void,” she said. “Now where in this cursed world am I?”



Liliana Vess | Art by Aleksí Briclot

Liliana had visited Shandalar only twice before—once when her demon patron Kothophed had sent her to fetch the Chain Veil she wore. Instead of bringing it back to him like a good little retriever, she'd used its power to kill him. Then she took it to Innistrad and killed Griselbrand, the second of her four demonic masters. There was no denying its power.

The cost, though—that, she could do without.

Her second visit had been an ill-fated attempt to learn more about the Onakke, the ancient civilization of ogres who were connected to the Chain Veil in some way she still didn't understand as well as she wanted to. That visit had ended with a crowd of pitchfork-bearing peasants demanding her death and left her with not much more information than she'd started with.

Lacking any better sense of where she was in relation to the ancient catacomb she sought, Liliana started walking. "You'll take me there, won't you?" she said. The whispers rose just to the edge of her hearing before she quashed them again.

"...where the seed took root..."

She walked, and soon enough—as she had expected—a sort of pressure behind one eye steered her to the right.

"...the vessel draws near..."

"Shut up," she said again. "I'm not a piece of pottery."

The trees and ferns opened up just enough to let an old trail pass through, and she felt drawn along it as if the Chain Veil were a rope pulling her forward.

"I've been here before," she said to herself. The packed earth showed no sign of the hoof prints her horse must have left before—of course it wouldn't, after so much time. But the scene was printed more firmly in her memory. She'd reached the very spot where some jungle predator had leaped out of the brush and killed her horse on her first visit.

She had barely given a thought to killing it. A single spell had wrapped it in shadow that wrung the life out of it. Like refreshing water on her tongue. If she had known the trouble it would bring her, would she have done it differently? The dirt mage Garruk had followed her to the catacomb and confronted her, providing her first opportunity to draw on the power of the veil she'd found. She'd used it to infect him with shadow, polluting his nature magic with the touch of death.

"...the root of evil..."

"Evil is such a strong word," she said, silencing the whispers again.

And then Garruk had hunted her across the worlds, as far as Innistrad, to force her to lift the curse—or to claim his revenge. She had bested him there, just as she had bested him in their first encounter here on Shandalar.



Garruk, Apex Predator | Art by Tyler Jacobson

“Death always wins,” she muttered.

“...the vessel of destruction...”

Guardian Seraph

The Chain Veil drew Liliana along the path until the ancient catacomb came into view. Or temple, or tomb—whatever it was that housed the catacombs below. Compared to when she’d last visited, it was in poor shape. Her battle with Garruk had left it partly crumbled to rubble. Roots and vines crawled over the fallen stones.

A light shone inside that was not there before, golden and pure, and Liliana knew what that meant. She could practically smell the angel. With a sigh, she adjusted the veil on her face and strode up the steps.

She stopped in the doorway. The angel hovered in the alcove directly opposite, where once an Onakke skeleton had stood with a different metal veil draped over its tusks. Except, instead of an alcove, it was a tunnel’s gaping mouth, choked with rubble. Liliana wondered how long the angel had been there, and who or what she was waiting for—Liliana, or some other intruder into this ancient place?



Guardian Seraph | Art by Paul Bonner

“Stop, defiler,” the angel said. “You can go no farther.”

Purely out of spite, Liliana took three more steps in, making sure the angel could see the veil draped across her face.

“I’ve done it before and I’ll do it again,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“You!” the angel gasped.

“You know me? Or you know what I wear, more likely.”

“Please, for the sake of your soul—”

“The only thing that matters to me about my soul is that it stay with my body for a good long while.”

“You don’t know what’s at stake,” the angel said, a pleading note entering the cloying melody of her voice.

“I’ve heard that before. They were just about Kothophed’s last words. And yours as well.”

She punctuated her words with a killing wave of raw necromantic power that flayed flesh from the angel’s bones and raised squawks and bellows from animals dying in the forest behind her.



Killing Wave | Art by Steve Argyle

“The Onakke...,” the angel croaked.

Liliana clucked her tongue as she walked to the dying angel’s side. “Angels. You just don’t know when to quit. It’s almost like you enjoy pain.” She crouched beside the angel, her hands beginning to glow with violet light. “Here, this will only hurt...a lot.”

“...vessel,” the angel said with obvious effort.

Liliana stood and stepped back. “What did you say?”

“You...the vessel...holding them...freeing them...”

The whispers in her head became a roaring chorus of voices drowning out whatever the angel said with her dying breath. In all their clamor, only three words rose above the din to clarity in her mind: “Root...Vessel...Veil.”

Ancestral Vision

Liliana slumped to the floor beside the dead angel, clutching her head in her hands and trying to silence the Onakke spirits clamoring in her mind.

“Stop it! Shut up!” But her protests did nothing to quell their riot.

Then something dripped onto her leg and the voices fell silent, all at once. She opened her eyes and saw blood everywhere, seeping from every line Kothophed had etched in her skin, joining in tiny rivulets down her arms. She pulled hands sticky with blood away from her hair and sighed.

“This again.”

The same thing had happened after she killed Kothophed, and again after Griselbrand. Drawing too much power from the Chain Veil was not just painful, but...so *messy*.

She got slowly to her feet, every joint burning in protest. Then something moved at the edge of her vision, drawing her gaze to the mausoleum doorway.

The verdant forest was—not gone, but pushed back, cleared away to make room for proud buildings that had been crumbling heaps of rubble mere moments before. For a crazed moment, she wondered if this was somehow her doing, some weird side effect of her devastating spell. But that made no sense, she realized. People were walking around among the buildings, going about the normal business of life. No, not people. Ogres. Ogres with enormous, curling horns or tusks jutting from their heads, like the skeletons behind her. The Onakke.

The whispers of the Chain Veil in her mind were displaced by the hubbub of a marketplace outside. As darkness settled over the jungle, merchants and artificers were packing up their goods and starting to disperse. Liliana saw spectacular artistry in every booth and cart, the work of artisans whose awkward size belied their incredible talent. The buildings, no longer choked with jungle growth and worn by the passing ages, were elegant and stately, decorated with masterful carvings showing all aspects of life—hunting and war, sowing and reaping, feasts and what she assumed were religious rites, childbirth and sex.

“I really didn’t need to see that,” she muttered.

But something was happening. Ogres were standing still, looking around, cocking their heads to listen. Then Liliana heard it, too, a low roar in the distance, but growing louder with each second. Across the square, she saw one ogre running wild-eyed out of the jungle, shouting words she couldn’t make out as those nearest to him dropped their goods and launched into a mad scramble.

The running ogre fell on his face, but his body sloshed forward as if melted, turning into a black smear on the ground around a scattering of bones. And around him roiled a purplish cloud that washed over the remains and surged onward, extending new tendrils ahead of it as though it were dragging itself along the ground.

And every ogre it touched suffered the same deliquescent fate.



Damnation | Art by Kev Walker

The sun had made way for a field of gleaming stars, but even they seemed restless amid the chaos of the market. A cascade of meteors streaked across the sky as the Onakke were utterly obliterated before her eyes.

A bird croaked nearby, a raven, perched on a ledge of a nearby building overlooking the killing field. It cocked its head toward her, the first creature here to notice or acknowledge her presence.

“Raven Man,” she said.

A bolt of shadow streaked from her outstretched hand toward the raven—and struck only the crumbling rubble where the building had been a moment before.

The marketplace was gone, the roiling fog and its Onakke victims, the stately buildings, the hubbub of life and the horror of death. Only the jungle, coming to life again as the sun’s last light faded from the sky and the creatures of the night came out to hunt.

Chain Veil

Liliana turned away from the doorway, swallowing hard.

“Stop messing with my head,” she said. “It’s bad enough that I can hear you all the time. I don’t want to see you, too.”

She took a few steps toward the tunnel mouth at the far end of the hall.

“Not that the scene wasn’t lovely, mind you. A masterful stroke of death. That’s a trick I wouldn’t mind learning. Wipe an entire civilization off the plane with a single spell? Right up my alley.”

The voices of the Chain Veil surged in angry, harsh whispers promising her an equally terrible death. She ignored them. Gathering her strength and noting with satisfaction that the blood seeping from her skin had dried, she turned her attention to the rubble-choked tunnel that led to the catacombs where she first discovered the veil.

“...the vessel returns...harbinger...carrying destruction...”

The whispers grew louder, although no less jumbled, as she ducked her head and stepped over the rubble to enter the tunnel. A twisting descent led her back to the vaulted chamber with its stately columns and glowing block of stone—an altar, she supposed—where the Chain Veil had lain.

“I’ve brought it back,” she said, taking the veil from her face. The soft clanking of the chains echoed in the hall. “I don’t think I want it anymore.”

“...just a child...unimaginable...” The whispers echoed as well, no longer confined to her thoughts.

“Trust me, I’ve tasted its power. It’s really something. Great work.”

She moved to stand next to the altar and hesitated, staring down at the veil in her hands. She had thought it was the key to her freedom, and indeed, it had helped her free herself from two of her four demonic masters. She had thought to use its power to kill the other two as well, to end the bargain that bound her to them, body and soul.

“But I seem to have killed two masters and taken on a million more,” she said. “I’m not your damned vessel.”

“...a million in one...”

She laid the Chain Veil on the altar, but kept hold of one edge.



Carnage Altar | Art by James Paick

“I don’t know what you thought I was going to do for you,” she said, “but I don’t do errands for anyone. Not anymore.”

“...the vessel of destruction...”

She pulled her hand back—and realized with surprise that she still held the veil.

“No. I’m not playing this game.” She tried to open her hand, to let the thing drop, but her fingers wouldn’t obey her will. She moved it from her right hand to her left easily enough, but her left hand was just as recalcitrant.

“Stupid hands! Don’t you know who’s in charge here?”

The purplish light of the glowing altar filtering through the Chain Veil created the fleeting impression of an inhuman face behind the veil.

Turning on her heel, she retraced her steps to the outer chamber, where the angel’s flayed corpse still lay. Ignoring it, Liliana turned to one of the gigantic ogre skeletons standing silent watch over the place.

“You’ll do,” she said, jabbing her finger toward it. With a shudder, it came to attention and stepped toward her.

“Take this,” she said, holding the veil up toward it.

The skeleton lumbered forward and reached for the veil. An instant before its bony hand closed over it, Liliana yanked it away.

“No!”

With a mighty effort of will, she held the veil up again, letting it rest on her open palms, and turned her gaze away from it and her skeletal creation. “Take it,” she said again.

A thrill went through her as the skeleton snatched it from her hands. She looked at her empty hands in disbelief.

“I am,” she said aloud. “I am in charge here. Take it down there.” She pointed at the open tunnel, but the skeleton didn’t move. It held the veil almost gingerly in its enormous hands, its empty eye sockets fixed on her.

“Get it away from me,” she said. Still it didn’t move.

“Fine. You don’t want to move? Then just stay here. I’ll leave.”

She turned and walked to the entrance, but the skeleton’s clattering footsteps behind her stopped her dead. Without turning around, she said, “I told you to stay here. If you can’t follow my orders, you’re useless to me.”

She lifted a hand and snapped her fingers, and the skeleton crumpled to the floor, robbed of the magic that had given it the semblance of life. As it fell, though, it lunged forward and hung the veil over her upraised arm. She stared at the veil in horror as bones clattered to the floor all around her.

Silence descended on the mausoleum as the bones settled back to rest and Liliana found herself without words. But then the silence broke—as it always did—as the voices of the veil resumed their whispering.

“...shall rain...root of evil...annihilation...”

She fell to her knees and clutched her hands to her ears, trying in vain to silence the voices.

“Vessel,” came one voice, clear and loud—just the single word and it paused as if awaiting a response. It took Liliana a moment to realize that her ears had heard it, not just her mind.

She looked up and saw another Onakke skeleton towering over her. Even as she looked, though, it changed—sinews wrapped the bones and tied them together, muscle and organs, blood vessels and finally skin clothed the skeleton until a whole ogre stood above her.



Kurkesh, Onakke Ancient | Art by Slawomir Maniak

“Vessel,” it said again.

Liliana sprang to her feet. “I am *not* your vessel!” With the last word, she sent tendrils of shadow to wrap around the creature and squeeze the life out of it.

Instead, the tendrils passed right through it and dissolved into oily black liquid that splashed onto the floor.

“We are beyond the reach of your magic,” the Onakke said. “Even though you wear our veil.”

At that, Liliana realized that she was, in fact, wearing the fine chain mesh, though she couldn’t remember draping it over her face. She pulled it off again and held it out toward the ogre.

“If it’s your veil,” she said, “why don’t you take it back?”

“The veil of deceit is of no use to us, vessel. Not yet.”

“Well, I don’t want it either. Take it.” Once again she tried to drop it, but her hand wouldn’t let it go.

“You want it. Your hands know it, although your mind can’t see it yet.”

“Yet,” she repeated. “What are you waiting for?”

“The root has not yet come to full flower in you, vessel.”

“What root?”

“The root that was planted in you so many years ago, when you killed your brother.”

Another blast of shadows erupted from Liliana with barely a thought from her, this one more effective—the dark tendrils pulled and tore at the incorporeal substance of the Onakke spirit. But if it felt pain, it showed no sign of it.

“What do you know of my brother?” she shouted. “Get out of my damned head!”

"We have no other place to go, vessel."

"Vessel. So I'm carrying you around with me. What does that have to do with my brother?"

The room filled with a low snuffling, wheezing sound, and Liliana realized after a moment that the spirit was laughing. More shadowy tendrils sprang from her hand to tear at its ghostly form.

"What's so damned funny?" she demanded.

"The veil of deceit is but one more lie in a life built on lies," the Onakke said. To Liliana's satisfaction, the spirit's voice was tight with pain. "Soon enough, the time will come. You will finally see clearly."

"Oh? And then what?"

"Then the root will come to flower, and the destruction you carry within you will bloom forth."

Liliana smirked. "Is that all? That sounds like fun."

"Yes, you like to destroy, to toy with the boundaries between life and death. So easily you consign others to the void, and so blithely you call them back to serve you."

Liliana shrugged. "Everyone dies."

"But not you," the spirit whispered, and a shiver washed down Liliana's spine. "Everything you've done has been to avoid following Josu into the void. Your magic, your schemes. Your pacts."

"That's enough," she said. "You live in my head, so you think you know me. You don't. And you don't know what I can do."

Three attacks against the spirit had been enough. She knew then what it would take to really hurt the thing, and she drew on all the power of the Chain Veil to do it. Reaching toward the Onakke, she pinched her fingers together as if extinguishing a candle. Blood welled up in the engraved lines that swirled across her skin, and pain roared in every nerve. And like a snuffed candle flame, the spirit vanished.

Silence fell once more over the still tomb. Liliana sank to her knees again, cradling her bloody arms across her chest. "What a mess," she whispered, her soft voice echoing in the chamber. Then she added, "It's getting worse."

Aside from her voice, the tomb was still. Silent. She looked around, half expecting the spirit to reappear, but nothing moved except swirling dust.

"Is it done?" she asked the air. "No more whispers?" She took off the Chain Veil and turned it over in her hands.

"Maybe now..." she said. She held the veil at arm's length and dropped it to the floor—or tried to drop it.

"Damn," she spat. Aching everywhere, she struggled to her feet and shuffled out the door into the jungle night, clutching the veil at her side.

"...swallowed up...annihilation..." The whispers, barely audible in her mind, began as soon as she set foot on the soft earth.

"Shut up," she said.

"...You carry the seed of destruction..."

"Yes, I know." The world began to melt away around her. She didn't know where she was going—just away from Shandalar, away from the mausoleum, away from her utter defeat.

As she walked into the Blind Eternities, she wondered if she had taken into herself the one thing she had spent her whole life trying to avoid.



The Chain Veil | Art by Volkan Baga

