

Unbowed, Part 2

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From set *Core 2019*

Vivien awoke to the taste of tin in her mouth. Paste-like, it coated the insides of her cheeks and the underside of her tongue. She felt a path along her teeth, found a gap where two should have resided and the ruined stub of a third. Vivien winced. It was too bright, and the air was not hot but warm, like the gullet of a freshly butchered cow, unctuous and humid and cleanly animal.

Fingers twined in her hair tugged her head back.

“I thought you’d die in your sleep.” The baron’s voice, cloying, his silhouette coming into view, velvet and candle-white skin. “That would have been terribly inconvenient.”

“What have—” Vivien spat blood. The words came together with effort, syllables clotting like fat, chunkier and chalkier than she’d recalled such things to be, a coppery flavor permeating her throat. “What have you done?”

“Apprehended you, it appears.” Slowly, definition returned. Her vision penciled in details: the deep hollows of the baron’s sockets, the pinch of his nose, so stubby in a face otherwise meant for lupine angles. “We took your bow.”

She lunged before she could even fit two thoughts together, before she’d even had time to take inventory of her condition, the manacled wrists, the way her body ached from being suspended, the nervelessness of her feet and the manner in which the ropes sawed into her ankles. The hand rooted in her hair gave another yank, sharp, more vicious than the last, and Vivien howled objection.

“Quite an interesting device.” The baron slid his hands into overly wide sleeves. Even his smallest mannerisms were affectations, no more authentic than the smile, the paraffin quality of his skin. Vivien twisted in her confinement, hissing. “How have you kept it from killing you? We tried so many things. We had a bear emerge once. But it survived for seconds. Just long enough to kill more of my men.”

He paced circles around her, head angled just so, pausing on the third rotation to clutch her jaw, fingers turning like keys at the point where the mandibles met, coercing her mouth open. The baron stared down her throat like she was a prize horse.

“What *are* you?”

Vivien glared.

“Not a nature spirit, surely. Not a god. You appear human.” His voice quieted. “I wonder if you are a Planeswalker. We have some of those here. But if you are one, mademoiselle, you’re unusually sloppy. No protective spells, no direction but forward. A sledgehammer without a master.”

He let go.

“If you’d like to threaten me, I believe we’ve reached a natural pause. This is where most of these exchanges take place. At the cost of sounding presumptuous, I hope you won’t take your time. I’ve so many questions.”

The room—*cell*, Vivien corrected herself, noting the absence of windows and the lack of ambient noises—was white, low-ceilinged, seamless. A single entryway and nothing else. Enough of her faculties had

returned to allow for intelligent observation, some measure of analysis, and the conclusion she derived from both was discouraging. They'd been paying attention. "Give it back."

"What?"

Vivien licked her dry mouth, a gesture that did nothing. "Return the Arkbow."

"No." His breath puffed against her cheek. The other man strode into view. He wore blacksmith gloves and the accoutrements of an executioner, was barrel-chested yet crane-legged, and he slouched like a dying tree: a caricature, hilariously proportioned, but no less dangerous for the matter. "No. I will not. Now, tell me: what are you?"

Vivien glared.

"Is this the game that we shall play? Fine. *Don't* tell me what you are. Tell me about the Arkbow. How does it work? We've already managed to call up the bear. But the serpent? Have we spoken about the serpent? It died. It dissipated within seconds of its conjuration, stillborn and poorly made." Behind him, the other man attended to a train of tools, silver laid out atop burgundy velvet, a threat implied in his meticulousness.

Vivien shuddered. The devouring wurm had been another early memory, a juvenile triumph, and although the Planeswalker had no attachment to that particular specimen she'd had quivered, it reminded her of better days. "Skalla."

"You said that word before. I remember now. 'The dead of Skalla.'" The baron's visage came alive with an academic's careful sense of wonder. "Is that what you are? Ghosts enslaving ghosts? An entire history of them."

"Return the Arkbow."

He barked an unpleasant laugh. "No. Never."

The Baron of Vernot returned twice and then twice again after that, each time with questions about the pedigree of the Arkbow's inhabitants and Skalla's storied history, each time more incensed than before. The artifact proved foully disposed toward its captors: the Arkbow had discombobulated several of the baron's assistants, reducing them to their constituent particles, a wet layer of black soaking deep into the tiles.

"How does it work?"

Vivien held her silence. The baron was uncommonly clever. Torture as Vivien understood it was a mathematics of knives and precise cuts, but such primitive behavior was only the beginning for the baron. He had additional, more sophisticated means of tormenting her, ways to hurt that inflicted no physical scars.



Bishop of Binding | Art by: Bastien L. Deharme

“How does it work?”

Each time he asked his questions, the baron’s magic reached out, found the blood coursing through Vivien’s body, and brought it to boil. Slowly. But the Planeswalker only laughed at the burning in her veins. Nicol Bolas had done worse already. No matter how the baron chased her with magic and forceps and scalpel, no matter what he did, he couldn’t find traction, couldn’t find a place that Nicol Bolas hadn’t already scarred with the death of Skalla.

Vivien spat curses at the baron and guffawed at his rage.

He kept healers at his side throughout Vivien’s ordeal: nuns in nacreous robes, their mouths sewn with gold thread, who guided Vivien back to sanity together with sutra and sorcery each time the baron was done, their humming incantations like cricket song. Whenever the baron tired, whenever he grew bored, they came together to wash her, feed her rounds of stale bread, sips of vegetable broth, rainwater so cold and pure that it burned her tongue.

Time became measured by these events, hours and minutes replaced by the creaks of doors, the hiss of fabric dragging along the floor, the scrape of a knife on velvet.

“How does it work?”

Vivien regarded the baron through an eye, the other bruised shut. “Return the Arkbow, or I will see you die. *Screaming*.”

There was no subsequent visit. The nuns, however, came one last time. Except on this occasion, they arrived with chemise and petticoat, partlet and robe, all tucked into long, gleaming walnut boxes filled with potpourri. Dried hyacinths were woven into Vivien’s hair as they washed her, stripping away the clothing that had crusted on her flesh, the fabric so stiff that there were handfuls that had to be sawed away.

The nuns performed the ablutions without comment or censure, fingers cool along the muscled turn of her thighs, the tendons of her neck, the latter too tense, too gentle even with repeated applications of boiling, lilac-scented water. Vivien twitched under the nuns’ care. When they’d finally concluded, the

nuns then dressed Vivien in a modest ensemble the color of a mourning dove's wing. The Planeswalker caught a glimpse of herself and grimaced. Her new apparel made her look smaller, meeker, her silhouette diffused by the soft, shapeless cloth. She resembled a penitent come to beg succor from the church.

Vivien hated it.

But she said nothing, silent as the nuns laced her wrists with filigree chains, their expressions slack and serene. *Drugged*, Vivien thought at first. However, the nuns' gazes, for all their absent personality, were sharp. Automaton, Vivien decided, as they led her down through corridors that ran warren-like under a firmament of dirt, no trace of Luneau's opulence to be seen. The stink of brine curdled into a texture.

Vivien ran a look over her surroundings. There were rats everywhere, and maggots in thumb-thick clumps, moles and earthworms, but nothing that she could use; the rats would just as soon devour her as they would the rest of Luneau. The maggots would take no interest nor would the earthworms, and the moles might accidentally collapse the roof. Discouraged, Vivien did nothing, permitting the nuns to lead her onward.



Profane Procession | Art by: Bastien L. Deharme

Another corner, another turn. Earth became palatial marble, rose-gold and draped with red silk. The passageway crested upward, became enveloped by candlelight. Vivien gagged at the sudden stink of potpourri: attars of rose, jasmine, primrose, and ylang-ylang. The procession halted in front of rosewood doors, a broad-shouldered brute on each side. Both men had been stuffed into waistcoats and ruffled shirts, the trims too long, the sleeves too tight, cravats awkwardly knotted beneath their Adam's apples. Luneau could slather all the polish it wanted, but these men remained unmistakably criminal, shanty-side thugs to their bare-knuckled cores. As one, they bowed their heads to the nuns, an affected motion poorly executed by bodies more accustomed to violence.

Neither the nuns nor Vivien provided comment. The men opened the doors and the Planeswalker was walked inside. To her surprise, it wasn't another cell, or at least, not one that conformed to the traditional aesthetics of a prison. Vivien had toured chapels with less lavish embellishments, city halls more

decorous in design. The room was sumptuous, even tawdry. A queen's dowry in mirrored surfaces and expensive wood, the flooring onyx and curlicues of gold.

Inside, there was a single round table, a chamber pot, a meagre cot, a chair carved to resemble a gryphon. Atop the table sat a bowl of fruit so vibrantly colored that it seemed unreal and a tankard of piquant wine.

The door closed behind Vivien.

She was trapped, again.

As before, Vivien soon found herself unable to measure the passing of time. Her torture and its correction had at least provided some structure to her day. Now, there was nothing, not even the sound of the world outside, nothing but her own endless pacing, the crunch of her teeth through the meat of the fruits, juices splattering on the tiles. Vivien could almost discern her own heartbeat in that endless, empty quiet.

She counted the length and breadth of the room twice, then twice again, first measuring it with her stride and then with the precise length of her feet. Magic kept the room immaculate, the fruit bowl filled. Vivien experimented. She fed apple cores and peach pits to the chamber pot; the enchantment took them away, but not the shoe she fitted into its mouth, or soft tangles of Vivien's hair.

The Planeswalker continued to pace.

This was worse than the torture, worse even than spectacle at the coliseum, worse than anything but the sight of Nicol Bolas rising into that burning sky, laughing as Skalla winked to white. Here, Vivien could do nothing but revisit the moment over and again. Not even sleep could divert from her recollections. When Vivien slumbered, she dreamed Skalla.

Eventually, the door opened again, some point between the first instance of captivity and a point in time, the Planeswalker nearly fell over herself in gratitude, elated for the distraction. A man stood at the exit: it was one of her guards, tugging nervously at his collar, his face pink and greasy with sweat.

"The baron wants to see ya." Unlike everyone else she'd met, his accent was provincial, sloppy and rounded. The man swallowed. "E says he's got something important to ask you."

"Tell him to return the Arkbow."

The man shrugged. "I would, but I ain't anyone who can do nothin'. The baron says you can either come along or you can stay here."

Death, at that moment, appealed more than the continued ennui. Vivien gritted her teeth against the truth of this. The Baron of Vernot had to know, had to have predicted this aversion to the stillness. Capitulation felt too much like a personal betrayal, but Vivien was done with this place. She'd take her chances, and the baron could have her pride as payment.

"Fine."

"Mademoiselle Reid, welcome."

She blinked against the glare. They had emerged into a ballroom: vaulted ceilings and murals inlaid into the walls, gold and pearl and shades of rich plum where it wasn't windows that stretched from roof to polished flooring. Outside, Vivien could see the ocean, its waters crested with silver.

The Baron of Vernot stood in surgical equipment in front of the monstrosaur from the show days before, mask over his narrow face. King Lucard sat in half-hearted attendance, ringed by courtiers, ministers who separated their time between affairs of the state and avid scrutiny of the baron's activities, the latter of which was performed through dark viewing glasses. He was, Vivien realized with a dazed start, not performing an autopsy, but a vivisection. The monstrosaur *lived*.

But only barely. Mirrors across the room, cannily positioned so that the baron's audience could see from every angle, offered every view of the procedure. Bellows and pulleys, complex machinery of varying sizes, twitched and throbbed. Each time they moved, the monstrosaur bellowed in pain. The nuns who had attended to Vivien, their robes now grubby with dark fluids, ringed the baron's subject. Whenever something ruptured, they rushed to repair the damage, their magic a lamina of shimmering gold. The baron's audience watched the procedure dispassionately, occasionally breaking into polite applause. The vivisection was entirely peripheral to their evening, a conversation piece, a distraction, and one that was less important than the woman who'd strode into their midst.



Axis of Mortality | Art by: Bastien L. Deharme

The baron wiped his hands on a cloth held up by a gamine and tugged his mask low, smiling like the sight of Vivien was as welcomed as an unexpected bag of gold. Like they were old friends, raised in the same courts, bequeathed the same ambitions. Allies, as opposed to torturer and victim. Quiet rippled through the ballroom, absolute. They didn't need to breathe, Vivien thought distractedly, her adversary stalking closer, the baron trailed by a woman with a silver cart.

"The Queen of Ghosts. I must be honest. I have missed your company, but research will have its way with us scientists. How are you? How have you been?" The baron looked over his shoulder and nodded to his companion, who responded in kind. His smile remained effulgent. "You certainly look better than you had before. Did you enjoy the fruit?"

"The Arkbow." There were too many of them for Vivien to act. Too many bows, too many swords, too many opportunities for it to go wrong. But that onto itself wasn't the problem. The issue was what lay in the middle of the ballroom, dying in degrees, breath spuming through its teeth. Though great lengths had been taken to keep the creature alive, no one had taken time to repair its leg. And why

would they? Vivien thought bitterly. Better to keep it like this, hobbled, helpless, unable to do anything more than shudder through its torment.

“That word you kept mentioning. Skalla. It is your home plane, is it not?” The baron continued glibly, expression sated.

A beat.

“Was,” he corrected himself, venom in his enunciation. “Was your home plane. I apologize. I can be inconsiderate. One must never confuse their tenses, especially when it comes to the dead. Skalla was your home plane, was it not? Before it was razed to ashes, at least.”

Vivien said nothing.

“And you are the last living relic of the plane. A ghost.” The baron nodded again toward his companion, a more succinct motion. It was, as it turned out, a signal. The woman pushed her cart forward and pulled back its draping of ivory fabric with a flourish. There was the Arkbow, its body spackled with black gore but otherwise almost innocuous-looking beside Vivien’s emptied quiver. “I have always had a gift of understanding things that will not surrender their secrets easily. But even I was surprised by how accurate I was. You are a ghost, Mademoiselle Reid. A ghost who carries her dead on her back.”

Still, Vivien said nothing. Blood cataracted the dinosaur’s eye, rolled halfway now to the whites, the fluid thickest along the circumference of the iris. It panted in shallow gasps. From where she stood, Vivien could see the bruising in its lungs, a bloom of black along the pale, pinkish organs.

“But the time for secrecy is over. Skalla is nothing but cinders and corpses. You have an option, however. Teach me how to make use of the weapon and we will garland you with glories, ensure that you are never with an unfulfilled desire. We will make a proper queen of you, and Skalla will live again in these halls.”

Vivien exhaled.

“Fine. But I need the Arkbow.”

The baron arched his brows. “And what promises do I have that you will not use it to escape?”

“You have none.” Vivien shrugged, trying and failing to take her eyes from the dying reptile behind the baron, her face contorting into a grimace. “But obviously, you have the upper hand. I’m here, am I not?”

Silence rewarded her statement.

“The Arkbow has a unique mechanism.” Vivien was raised for the hunt, and she knew, the way she knew the migrations of the birds and the habits of the arctic fox, when she has drawn the attention of her quarry. The baron, for all his poise, his measured expressions, his overtures toward indifference, was piqued by Vivien’s declaration. “At the moment of a creature’s death, it draws an image of the dying into itself, preserving the being in its fibers forever.”



Skalla Wolf | Art by: Luis Lasahido

The baron turned midway through Vivien's exposition, already gesturing at his armada of assistants. "That sounds simple enough to do."

"Only if you're me."

The baron paused.

"Pardon?"

"You can try all you want, but it won't work unless I'm performing the ritual."

"Oh?" The baron slanted an impatient look in his direction, hands coming together behind his spine. He pivoted on a heel, a slow motion, deliberate in its grace, and began stalking toward Vivien. "Is that so? An interesting boast to make."

Vivien shrugged, a loose clatter of her shoulders. "The Arkbow is mine. It was made for use by the shamans of Skalla. More specifically, it was made for me, and intended for my hand. You can try all you want, but you will do nothing but suffer for your impudence."



Art by: Ken Lashley

It wasn't a lie. Not really. A truth, perhaps, wound through the charred bones of everything that Vivien had loved, and so what if she wouldn't unravel its nuances for the baron, wouldn't cut the truth apart and set it down on his table? At this juncture in history, it may as well have been made for Vivien. Of all the people who could have laid claim to the artifact, she was the only one left.

"And what if I don't believe you? What if I decide to endeavor this myself?"

"Then, your people will keep dying." Vivien licked her chapped mouth, tongue gliding over her teeth. "You know I'm right, *Baron*. You've seen the wages of your obstinance. Are you willing to risk more of that, Baron? How many more weeks will it be before they bring you another specimen? How many opportunities for escape will you give me?"

The hush twitched with laughter. Vivien flicked her eyes up and watched as the baron's expression transformed, his unflappable veneer giving way—just for the sliver of a moment, a gasp of time so infinitesimally short that she'd not have seen it if she weren't looking—to something like rage. He spackled that crack in his defenses with a near immediate smile, but it was enough for Vivien to know she'd drawn blood.

Her own smile grew. "We are both prisoners of the situation, Baron. I have very few choices, and so do you."

The baron worked a disgusted noise through his throat. He raked a cold look down from the roof of Vivien's skull to her slippered feet, the Planeswalker's own regard filled with quiet, waiting challenge. She had him in her sights. The baron knew this, and so did Vivien. She tipped her head toward his ear. Vivien had five inches of height on the nobleman and almost as many across the shoulders. Behind them, the monstrosaur moaned again, death running soothing hands over a body that should have been given to the grave a lifetime ago.

"Do you know what you learn from watching your plane die, Baron?" Vivien pitched her voice low. "From seeing everything you know and love go up in flames? From the permanence of such a knowledge? Are you aware of what it does to a person?"

This time, it was the baron who said nothing, cheeks indented as he chewed on their meat. Vivien wondered if their audience was listening. She knew the rumors, the varied gossip about what talents vampirism might provide, and "enhanced senses" was a phrase that repeated itself in every story. The silence in the ballroom certainly contributed to the veracity of those folk tales. It was a knowing silence, smug, indulgent, cut from the same diamantine material as the jewelry that ringed King Lucard's throat, nearly feline in its demonstration of those qualities.

Vivien hoped she was right. Luneau seemed to delight in its dramaturgy, regardless of who might be skewered at the denouement; anything went so long as the proceeding show impressed. And Vivien plotted to use that greed. Her smile spread further.

"It tells you that there are things worse than death, worse than torture, worse than any one horror that man might visit on another. You do not scare me." The Planeswalker strutted her fingers up his sternum, tapped the baron's nose to spectacular effect: the silence flexed and then gave way to a roar of laughter. "But I think I scare you."

"I think you may be making too many presumptions for your health, mademoiselle." The baron growled through gritted teeth.

"No." Vivien flicked her gaze to King Lucard, who'd long since abandoned his conversations and sat now, with a look of avaricious interest. Upon eye contact, he crooked two fingers at one of his ladies-in-waiting. She nodded and circled around the clump of courtiers, moving toward a trolley festooned with crystal decanters and graceful wine glasses. The woman poured a generous serving of something

honeyed and nearly black, the light nearly iridescent through the prism of the alcohol, began moving back toward Vivien, who allowed herself then a low, rich chuckle.

“I really don’t think so.”



Hierophant's Chalice | Art by: John Stanko