

Old Friends and New

Greg Weisman

From set *War of the Spark*

I.

Hekara was waiting for me on the Transguild Promenade.

I paused for a second or two to soak her in. I know that sounds ridiculous, but she was my best mate, my hero, my role model. She had bells in her hair, and I wore bells hanging from my shoulders—from my shoulders instead of my hair because I *didn't* want it to be *too* obvious that I was totally copying her, copying her look, her style, her *Hekaraness*.

But I was being silly, so I called out and she turned, smiling that big grin of hers as she called out my name: “Rat! C’mere, baby-cakes, and gimme some sugar.”

She talks like that all the time.

I gave her a hug. She’s a lot taller than I am, and she spun me around like we were acrobats in one of her guild’s blood-pageants. Except we were on the ground not up on a high wire, and there were no blades or actual blood involved.

This time.

“Tell me what’s what, the whole crazy lowdown,” she said.

“Sure, sure,” I said, babbling rapidly, as I often do around her (or, you know, whenever I open my big mouth). “I followed Master Zarek to Nivix, just like you wanted. Not sure why he keeps ditching you all the time—”

“I know, right? Why would *anyone* want to ditch me?”

“It is kinda inconceivable. But if it gives me the chance to help you out by keeping tabs on him, you know I’m happy to be useful.”

“You’re my Rat.”

“I’m your Rat.”

“Keen. So who’d he talk to?” My girl Hekara was emissary to the demon Rakdos and had been tasked by her master to keep an eye on Master Zarek of the Izzet League. But said eyeful kept sending her away, which was where I came in, you know? Hekara had tasked *me* to follow Master Zarek when she couldn’t. Trailing someone without being noticed is one of my particular skills, my best skill. And, like I said, I loved being useful to my best mate.

“He shut himself away with his boss.”

“Niv-Mizzet?”

“Uh huh.”

“Shut?”

"In a lab. A big lab. But it was just the two of them in there alone. I had snuck my way into the Nivix, but I couldn't sneak into the lab before the door shut. And I thought if I tried to open it, they might notice."

"Really?"

"It was a very big door and not well-oiled."

"Ah."

"So I made my way into and through the air ducts "

"You're my Rat."

"I'm your Rat. Anyway, I missed most of the action. There was some kinda explosion? So by the time I crawled up to a vent overlooking the lab, almost all I could see was smoke. The vent's fan had turned on—automatically, I think—and it was sucking the smoke right in. I was coughing so much, I was actually afraid they might hear me."

She wagged her finger at me. "No, you weren't."

"No, I wasn't. Problem was I couldn't hear them either. There were a lot of fans blowing, lots of noise. Master Niv-Mizzet did not look happy though. They were both staring at a *big* machine, which is apparently what blew up. I have no idea what it was supposed to do, but it clearly hadn't worked. It was charred, smoking. Even on fire in a couple places, though neither Master Niv-Mizzet nor Master Zarek did anything about the flames. I caught maybe one sentence. Something about a beacon being their only chance now."

"That fits. If anything does."

"If you say so."

"What else, mate?"

"Not much. Master Niv-Mizzet flew off. Master Zarek opened the door to the lab, and a bunch of goblins rushed in to put out the fires. They were very efficient."

"Izzet goblins have lots of practice at fire suppression. Almost as much as they have at fire causation."

"Master Zarek pulled a goblin aside and told him to send messengers to Mistress Kaya, Mistress Vraska, Miss Lavinia, Mister Vrona, and you. I figured I'd better get out of there and give you the heads-up so you knew what was what before you answered his call."

As if on cue, a goblin came running up. Ignoring me, he bowed before Hekara and handed her a slip of parchment. She patted the goblin on the head and dropped a razor blade in his open palm as a tip. He stared at the thing, glanced up at Hekara's dangerous smile, and then backed away slowly. Once he was about five feet away, he turned and took off at a run.

Hekara unfolded the parchment and nodded. The bells in her hair tinkled softly. "You were right," she said. "It's now-or-never time. My mate Ral needs yours truly-truly to activate the Beacony-Beacon to summon the uber-troopers to fight the evil dragon."

"Master Niv-Mizzet is evil?"

"Nah. Different dragon."

"What can I do?"

She looked down at me and stroked my hair. I think if I had an older sister, she'd have been like Hekara. But I didn't need an older sister because I *had* Hekara. She said, "Well, I'll be with ol' Rally-Boy, myself,

so you can take the night off. Let's meet back here, oh just before dawn. If I don't show, it's 'cuz I'm still with him, and you can take the whole day off."

"You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Don't need you to follow the guy if I'm with him."

"Okay "

I think she must have sensed I was reluctant to leave her. She lifted my chin and said, "Hey, you're my Rat. Not my moth. I know I'm the brightest light in the Multiverse, but no need to hover. I'm a big girl. Can take care of myself."

"I know that," I said, maybe a little resentfully. A little.

She took some pity on me then. Hugged me and swung me around again. I'm a little old for that game, but, honestly, I still love it. She put me down and kissed my forehead.

"Gotta go, baby-cakes."

"Bye, Hekara."

"Bye, Araithia." It struck me as odd that she used my full name. She almost never calls me Araithia. But I shrugged it off. I watched her cross the promenade. Then I turned to go. I hadn't eaten in a while, and I was hungry.

I made my way to a Selesnyan market, which was just closing—or maybe just preparing to open. I stole a ripe plum. I might have also picked the pocket of an Orzhov ministrant, who was collecting a debt from the fruitier. I didn't really need the coins, but they were polished and shiny, and I like shiny things.

What can I say? I'm the Rat.

I nearly went to see the Rakdos perform their Flaming Jubilee, but it felt a bit like I'd be cheating on Hekara, which is nuts. Maybe I just wasn't in the mood.

So I wandered, killing time. I thought about going home to the Gruul lands, maybe spend some time with my folks. But I didn't. I felt restless. They'd be hugging me and hugging me, and the thought of it made me, um, what's the word *claustrophobic*, yeah. I wanted to stay in the open air.

Brilliant notion, as it soon started to rain. Not that I mind the rain all that much. I holed up in a doorway, watching Ravnica's sparse night traffic pass me by. They all had places to go, or so it seemed.

Finally, hours later, I could taste dawn in the air, so I scurried back to the Transguild Promenade to meet Hekara. She wasn't there. I waited, but she didn't come. She was still with Master Zarek, of course, and wouldn't need me. I knew I could leave, but I lingered for no good reason, as the sun began to rise

And as a sand-covered boy materialized right in front of me.

II.

The boy—who looked to be about eighteen or so—was on his hands and knees, coughing up sand. He wiped a sandy arm across his eyes in a futile attempt to clear his vision, then looked up at the sky with a confused and perhaps pleading sort of expression. I watched him 'cuz he looked kinda pathetic. I wondered a little where he'd teleported from that had that much sand.

Then, still spitting up sand, he lowered his head and looked in my general direction. I kept watching him, while absently picking a small blood-red berry off my belt and popping it in my mouth.

Told you I was hungry, right?

He was bleeding a little from a wound on his forehead, and as I bit down and tasted the berry's blood-red juice, his blood-red blood trickled into his own mouth to mix with all that sand. He spit again, fought off a fit of coughing, and—still on his hands and knees—called out for help.

Surprised, I pointed to myself, and said, "Me?"

He nodded desperately, and coughed out, "Please "

Immediately, I hopped off the railing and raced to his side, saying, "Hardly anyone notices me. I'm so insignificant." I helped him to his feet and began brushing sand off his tunic.

He murmured a thank you and asked, "Where am I?"

"Transguild Promenade," I said with a shrug.

"What?"

"You're on the Transguild Promenade. And there'll be thrull-carts coming through here any second in both directions. So unless you want to be crushed beneath 'em, we better move."

He let me pull him forward. Rubbing his hand furiously back and forth over his scalp, he tried—and failed—to get the sand out of his hair as we walked across the bridge.

I was pretty excited to be meeting someone new and, as usual, began babbling at my standard mile-a-minute pace: "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Rat. I mean Rat's not my real name, of course. It's more of a nickname. Folks call me that. Well, not a lot of folks. But you get the idea. My real name—or, you know, my *given* name—is Araithia. Araithia Shokta. So Rat is shorter, easier to say. You can call me Rat. I'm not offended by the name at all. Truth is, it's kinda perfect for me. Perfecter than Araithia, I guess. Although I think Araithia is prettier, you know? My mother still calls me Araithia. So does my father. But they're pretty much the only ones. Well, there's this centaur I know, but he's kinda my godfather, so it's the same idea. Parents get stuck on the names *they* pick. But I'm fine with Rat. So you go ahead and call me Rat, okay?"

"I—"

"I'm currently Gateless, in case you were wondering, but I was born into Gruul Clans, so my parents want me to officially join their clan, except I just don't think I'm *angry* enough, you know? Plus, I have good friends in Rakdos and Selesnya—yeah, yeah, they couldn't be more different, but some days I feel like I fit well in the one, and then the next day, the other. Anyway, those are my big three: Gruul, Rakdos, Selesnya. I'll definitely join one of those. Probably. Are you in a guild? I don't recognize the outfit."

"I—"

"Oh, and what's your name? That should come first, I guess. I don't talk to a lot of new people, so I may not get the order of things right. I always have so many questions, but I usually have to figure out the answers on my own, you know?"

"I—"

"That was rhetorical. We just met. I don't actually expect you to know how I get through life instantaneously. Besides, we're having a conversation here. There's no rush. We'll get to all the important stuff eventually, right? How's your head? That's a pretty nasty cut. I don't think you'll need stitches, but we should really get it cleaned up, get the sand off it, and stick a bandage on it or maybe find you a healer who can cast a little mending spell. I can take you somewhere they can do that for you, but even a *little* healing magic can get a little pricey. Still, it's *such* a little cut, they might do it gratis, if you ask

nice. Or if you're too shy to ask a stranger for help—you seem shy to me, but I don't want to presume too much since we only just met—I can patch you up myself. I mean, I guess I'm a stranger, too. But I feel like we're bonding a little. In any case, I'm a fairly decent medic. I've had to learn to do that for myself over the years. It's not like my mother wouldn't do it for me, but she's a Gruul warrior. She's not always available. Besides, I've never really been hurt all *that* badly, you know? Cuts and scrapes. I'm relatively short, and bigger folks are always bumping into me if I'm not too careful. Ravnica's a busy place, you see."

"I—"

"I don't have any healing magic, mind you, and I don't think I have anything I can use as a bandage, but I can steal something easy enough. Or maybe you wouldn't want a stolen bandage. I forget that not everyone's okay with me being a thief. The Azorius Arresters wouldn't approve, that's for sure. Um, you're not Azorius, are you?"

"I—"

"Nah, look at you. You can't be Azorius. I'm guessing you're—"

Suddenly, he stepped into my path and grabbed my arms, shouting, "Listen!" I think he kinda scared himself, because he immediately looked sorry for yelling, frightened even—like I might take *vengeance* or something for getting yelled at.

Boy, he does not know me, right?

I smiled up at him to let him know I wasn't so fragile and said, "I talk too much, don't I? I spend a lot of time alone, and I talk to myself too much. I'm always telling myself that. Then I get with other people, and you'd think I'd learn to listen more. I want to learn to listen more. So, yeah, I'll listen to you, uh you know, you still haven't told me your name. Start with that, and I promise I'll listen."

"Teyo," he replied, his voice rising at the end, as if *he* was asking *me* whether he had his name right.

Trying to be helpful, I repeated it back to him: "Teyo. That's a nice name. Are you in a guild, Teyo? You're injured and off your game. Is there somewhere I should take you? Someone I should take you to?"

"I'm not in any guild. I'm an acolyte of the Shieldmage Order."

"Huh. Never heard of it."

"You've never heard of the Order? How is that possible? What do you do during a diamondstorm?"



Teyo, the Shieldmage | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

“Never heard of a diamondstorm either, but it sounds pretty. Sparkly. I like sparkly things. It’s kind of immature, but there you have it. If I see something sparkly, I take it. I mentioned I’m a thief, right?”

He let go of my arms and stumbled over to the bridge’s stone railing to look down at the river passing beneath. His eyes went wide and his hands gripped the railing tightly, turning his knuckles white. He muttered, “She’s never faced a diamondstorm? Never heard of the Order? That makes no sense. The Monastic Order of the Shieldmage is famous the length and breadth of Gobakhan. The people depend upon it.”

Joining him at the railing, I smiled and shrugged, making an effort to speak at a more moderate pace: “I’ve never heard of ‘Gobakhan,’ either.”

He slammed his hand down on the railing and stomped his foot on the ground. “This is Gobakhan! Our world is Gobakhan! You’re standing on Gobakhan!”

I put my arm through his and propelled him forward. “Teyo, *this* “ Without slowing my pace, I gave a little hop on the paving stones, causing my shoulder bells to *jingle* softly. “ is Ravnica. This world is Ravnica. Teyo, I’ve a feeling you’re not on Gobakhan anymore. I’m guessing you’re a ‘walker.’”

“We’re walking. *I’m* walking. Of course, I’m a walker.”

“Not *that* kind of walker. I don’t know too much about it. Just stuff I overheard Master Zarek and Mistress Vraska discussing when they didn’t know I was hanging around. I mean, Hekara asked me to follow Master Zarek, so it was almost a mission, an assignment, right? She wanted to know where they went when they went wheres without her. That’s almost a quote, by the way. She talks like that, Hekara. Anyway, I was supposed to follow them, but I also eavesdropped a bit. I probably shouldn’t admit this, but I’m a chronic eavesdropper. I really can’t help myself.”

“I swear by the Storm, I don’t know *what* you’re talking about.”

“Okay. Yeah. I get that. I mean I saw you materialize all covered in sand back there, so I probably should have guessed. But your mind always goes with the simplest explanation first, you know? I figured you knew how to teleport from place to place. Do you know how to teleport from place to place?”

“No!”

“Exactly. So what you *can* do, if I’ve got this right, is teleport from world to world, plane to plane.”

“I promise you I don’t know how to do that either!”

“I think maybe the first time, it’s like an accident or, no, um, I mean not on purpose. Like an involuntary flight thing. Like to save your life maybe? Was your life in danger, maybe?”

He stared at me wide-eyed. Wider-eyed than he stared at the river, anyhow. “How— how’d you know that?”

“Oh, yeah, no. I didn’t. But I think those might be the rules. Plus I’m very intuitive, and you were *really* covered in sand. Buried alive, maybe?”

He nodded and then said, “So I’m not on Gobakhan?”

“Ravnica.”

“Ravnica.” His accent, which I hadn’t really noticed before, seemed subtly more foreign when speaking the word.

Already knowing the answer, I asked, “And you don’t—you couldn’t—know anyone here, right?”

“Just you, I suppose.”

I gave his arm a squeeze. “Then I’m officially adopting you. Until you’re ready to leave, you and I are family. Don’t worry; I’ll take good care of you. I’m great at that. I’ve had to learn to take care of myself, you know?”

“Uh huh.” He responded, although not necessarily to what I was saying.

“So let’s think about what you need to know to live on Ravnica.” I glanced up at him as we walked. He looked about the city, at all the buildings and roads and the passers-by (who took zero notice of him or me), and his wide-eyed stare kept getting wider and wider. I started to worry his eyes would just bust out of his head, so I decided that he needed to eat this meal in smaller bits. “Okay, here’s what you need to know: Ravnica is one big city. And a lot of folks live here. A whole lot. Mostly humans, I guess, like you and me. But plenty of elves and minotaurs and cyclops and centaurs and goblins and angels and vedalken and viashino and giants and dragons and demons and, well, pretty much anything you can think of. Mistress Vraska’s a gorgon. I’ve only ever seen three of those, but I think they’re really, really beautiful, you know?”

“I—I don’t think I’ve ever seen a gorgon.”

“They’re striking. You can trust me on that. Anyway, I don’t know who runs things on Gobakhan “

“Abbot Barrez? Or, no. He just runs the monastery.”

“So you’re like a monk? I thought all monks had to shave their heads.”

“I’m not a monk yet. I’m an acolyte. And shaving your head’s not a rule. At least I don’t think it is.” He threw up his hands. “Right now, I’m not sure of anything!”

“Calm down. That’s why I’m telling you stuff. So the abbot runs Gobakhan. But here on Ravnica, it’s the guilds. There are ten guilds, and between them, they run everything.”

“They had guilds in Oasis. That’s a big town on Gobakhan.” He stopped and looked around. “I suppose Oasis isn’t *that* big.”

“But it’s big enough to have guilds?”

“Yes. There’s the Carpenters’ Guild. And the Stablemen’s Guild. But I don’t think they run anything. I think they just get together to drink ale and complain. At least, that was my impression. I was only in Oasis for a few days.”

“Well, our guilds are kind of a bigger deal. Although I’m sure they drink ale and complain as much as they do anything. I know my father drinks ale and complains a lot, and he’s an important warrior in the Gruul Clans.”

“So you’re in this Gruul guild?”

“I told you already. I’m Gateless. That means I haven’t committed to any guild yet. Gruul, Rakdos, Selesnya. They’re all kinda wooing me. I’m in high demand.” I laughed. He didn’t get the joke. “I’m kidding. I’m *not* in high demand.”

“All right. If you say so.”

“You’re sweet.”

“I am?”

“I think so. I like you already. I’m glad I adopted you.”

“I—” He laughed. Or I think it was a laugh. It was kinda hard to tell. “I think I’m glad of that, too.”

He was looking at me in a way that made me feel well, I don’t know how it made me feel.

Is this what embarrassment feels like?

I looked away and said *Stop it* to myself.

Or did I say it out loud? Please, tell me I didn’t say it out loud!

He took a deep breath and asked, “What else do I need to know?”

“Oh, um let’s see. The guilds are always fighting with each other. It seems idiotic to me. It feels like they should all be able to get along, since they’re all so different. What they care about barely overlaps. But they think being different means they need to pick at each other and stuff. So if things start to get out of control, the conflict’s supposed to be resolved by this guy named Mister Jace Beleren. He’s called the Living Guildpact, which means whatever he says goes. You know, magically. Problem is, he’s been missing for months and months. I think he’s like you. Traveling from world to world. Only on purpose, maybe. Anyway, with *him* gone—things have gotten iffy, you know? The guilds all tried to get together to stop some kind of evil dragon, who’s supposed to be on his way. But Mistress Vraska—she’s the Golgari guildmaster—assassinated Mistress Ispيريا, the Azorius guildmaster.”

“Wait, she killed her?”

“Uh huh. And now the guilds all hate each other. Or, you know, don’t trust each other anymore.”

“And the evil dragon?”

“I dunno. I guess he’s *still* on his way.”

We turned a corner, and I stopped in my tracks. We had meandered our way to Tenth District Plaza, and I found myself staring up at a tall obelisk in the center of the plaza topped by the statue of a dragon. An evil dragon, if I had to guess.

“Huh,” I said. “That’s new.”

III.

I'd barely had time to register the brand-new obelisk in the center of the plaza when my eyes focused on the *massive* pyramid at the far end. Sometime—sometime *very* recently—it had risen out of the ground, displacing buildings and gardens and whatever else used to be there. The whole thing hit me as so overwhelming, I could hardly remember what things had been in that spot only the day before.

Had those things been so insignificant?

The irony of someone like *myself* forgetting wasn't lost on me, you know?

"Is that the evil dragon?" Teyo asked nervously.

At first I thought he was talking about the statue atop the obelisk. But his eyes were also focused on the pyramid. Sure enough, atop it sat another dragon statue—except this statue suddenly turned its head to look in our general direction. I was pretty confident it wasn't looking at me, which led me to believe Teyo might be right when he said, "It feels like he's looking right at me."

But I said, "That doesn't seem likely." Or at any rate, I started to say it. But the last half of my sentence was obliterated by a loud sonic boom and a rush of dry desert air from behind us that literally knocked Teyo and I off our feet.

I scampered up first. He remained on his hands and knees, shaking and muttering, "Wake up, wake up, wake up "

I turned to look as the sound of crashing masonry echoed across the plaza. A *gigantic* portal—easily fifty yards tall—had opened up behind us, instantly decimating the Embassy of the Guildpact, sheering it right in half. Soft violet light poured forth from the portal. It almost looked soothing—you know, except for the destruction the tear in space had caused and was still causing. An ogre stumbled forward before collapsing; a full quarter of her body had been evaporated by the portal's arrival. The embassy's crumbling façade fell, crushing two more bystanders beneath it.

It was a horror show. And not the fun Rakdos type.

I looked back over my shoulder toward the dragon. We were too far away for me to see the expression on his face, but I'm a little bit psychic, and his mental gloating radiated off him in waves. His gloating and his name.

Bolas. Nicol Bolas.

It sent shivers down my spine.

And then it all got worse

IV.

A raven-haired woman in an elegant black dress stepped gingerly up onto some wreckage. She reached the top of a fallen balustrade, stood up straight and paused.

Teyo murmured, "*Something's emerging from that geometry* "It took me a moment to realize he meant the circular tear in space. I looked toward it.

An army. An army was marching through the portal. They shone a metallic blue in the morning sun. I thought they looked pretty. But I'm not a complete idiot. An army marching on Ravnica is not a good thing—no matter how shiny it is.

The raven-haired woman raised some other shiny thing to her face. When her hands came away, I could see it was a metallic veil of burnished gold chain links that also glinted in the sunlight. Her ex-

posed skin began to glow with purple lines, etchings, like tattoos. I thought maybe I heard her scream. But I wasn't sure if she was screaming out loud or just in her mind.

Or just my fears, you know, projected?

As her bare arms glowed brighter, the metallic army began to glow, as well. Even from this distance, I could see their eyes turning purple to match the color of Miss Raven-Hair's tattoos. At any rate, the army stopped as one and turned to look her way, before, with a clear wave of her arm, she ordered her shining forces to turn and march toward everyone, toward all the folks still recovering from the portal's destruction, and all still standing there, stupidly staring at the approaching horde.



Liliana, Dreadhorde General | Art by: Chris Rallis

Teyo whispered, "What do we do?"

It frankly hadn't occurred to me to do *anything* —except maybe run and hide. Instead, I stood there, silently frozen, as the first of the metal warriors reached a young human woman, who was trying to free her husband or boyfriend or brother from under fallen stone. She looked up at the approaching warrior. She didn't move a muscle as it stepped up and quickly snapped her neck. We were some ways away, but we heard the crack, felt it in our own bodies.

"What do we do?" Teyo repeated.

I didn't know. The carnage continued as the advancing army continued its march, killing everyone in its path. As they approached, I could see they were undead creatures: humans, minotaurs, aven, and other species, covered top to toe in some kinda metallic blue mineral. Soon, they'd get to us. I couldn't think. Couldn't move. Couldn't even talk, which is *really* weird for me.

Suddenly, I heard the crack of thunder. We both turned. It was Master Zarek, firing lightning bolts from hands white-hot with electricity at the blue metallic attackers, often taking out two or three at a time. He strode forward, a look of fury on his face, his hair standing on end, and the blue warriors exploded before him.

Mistress Kaya was there, too; she had drawn her long knives to protect a red-haired mother huddled over a red-haired son and had launched herself at the undead killer that was raising a sword over the

young woman's head. Mistress Kaya's daggers, glowing purple with her magic, sank deep into the creature's back. It collapsed in a heap in front of the shrieking mother, who pulled her son closer to her bosom and stared up at Kaya, more frightened than grateful.

Mistress Kaya said, "Run."

The woman snapped out of it and ran with her child in her arms.

For some reason, this served to snap me and Teyo out of it, as well.

"Can we help?" he asked.

"I think we can try," I said, though I still wasn't quite sure how.

Two more of the shiny monsters rushed Mistress Kaya. The closest and largest swung an axe, but Kaya turned incorporeal, which I knew was one of her mystic talents, and the axe swished harmlessly through her. This seemed to confuse her attacker, and Kaya made use of the time to re-corporealize and slash the throat of the incoming second creature. The pale-purple light from her daggers seemed to briefly war with the dark-purple light radiating from the warrior's eyes and cartouche. But like a poison, Mistress Kaya's powers seeped through the corpse, infecting it. It fell.

She turned back to the axe wielder, who swung at her again. Again she went intangible and again the axe passed through her, leaving her opponent open to take both daggers in the abdomen. He didn't go down right away, and—solid once more—she dragged the blades up and gutted him. It was the kinda thing my mom would do.

Or Hekara. I wondered where she was. But I was maybe kinda glad she wasn't here. She'd be having too much fun—and might get herself killed or something.

Master Zarek, meanwhile, was making a stand from atop a park bench, defending three more children, one of whom cradled a rubber ball with much the same protectiveness that the mother had used for her son. Master Zarek was smiting the metallic warriors, one after another, but as Mistress Kaya moved to join him, it was clear they—all of us—would soon be overrun.

Soon another of the creatures was on her. Again, her body lost substance, and the warrior stumbled right through her. It turned. She turned. She solidified and drove her daggers into its eyes, deep into whatever was left of its brain. It dropped like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

But she watched it for a second too long. A mineralized minotaur slammed into her and sent her sprawling across the cobbles. She groaned and struggled to her feet.

That's where we came in. Finally.

I didn't think I could take the minotaur in a frontal attack, so I ran around behind the beast. It ignored me, continuing toward Mistress Kaya faster than I had anticipated. Faster than I could make my play.

And then out of nowhere, Teyo was there. He stood over Mistress Kaya, erecting a triangular shield of light to protect her and himself from the creature. (I guess that's what it means to be an acolyte of the Shieldmage Order.) The creature's mace smashed into the triangle, which flashed brightly but held its form. Teyo grimaced but held his ground, chanting low. I was both surprised and impressed and—though I had no real reason, as my godfather Boruvo would say, *to harvest this honor*—proud of my adoptee.

The minotaur reared to swing its mace again, but by that time I was ready. I had drawn my own two (much smaller) daggers. I leapt onto its back and drove them down into the beast's neck. It roared and bucked and threw me off. I went flying, though I did manage to hold on to my knives. I landed hard on my butt.

Cuts and scrapes, like I said.

Suddenly, a bolt of blue-white electricity ignited the creature, which exploded into flaming piles of melting blue.

As Master Zarek approached, Teyo dropped his shield. A small circle of light at his ear also vanished, and his shoulders slumped. He helped Mistress Kaya to her feet.

Master Zarek addressed Teyo: “You’re a Planeswalker.”

“I’m a what?”

“How do you know he’s a Planeswalker?” Mistress Kaya asked Master Zarek.

I was zipping around between the metallic blue creatures. Stabbing them here and there to distract them from their targeted prey. I cut the hamstrings of one, and when it dropped to its knees, I stabbed it in the eyes.

Well, it had worked for Mistress Kaya.

Fortunately, it worked for me, too.

I scurried back over to Teyo, dodging another monster en route.

At which point, Mistress Kaya looked directly at me and said, “Those things don’t seem too interested in you. What’s your secret?”

I think I stared at her for a beat.

Master Zarek, thinking she was talking to him, said, “They’re interested enough.”

Ignoring him, she addressed me again, now with some concern: “You okay?”

Once again, I had to snap out of my stupor. I muttered something like, “Oh, yes. I just never expected the mighty Orzhov Guildmaster to take any notice of me.” Then under my breath, I muttered, “Wow, two in one day. That’s almost weirder than the big hole in the world.”

Master Zarek, still under the mistaken impression that Mistress Kaya was addressing him, said, “I’m fine. Sorry. It’s the goggles. They’re the Firemind’s design. I can use them to identify Planeswalkers. It’s mildly disconcerting.”

“Any others around?” Mistress Kaya asked. “Planeswalkers, that is. Not goggles. We could use the help.”

Master Zarek lowered his goggles down over his eyes and scanned the skies, slowly tracking something downward. I could tell from his expression—and a slight buzzing noise in my brain—that he was having a psychic conversation with someone. I wasn’t powerful enough to intercept it, but I recognized the signs.

I followed his line of vision and saw four humans approaching. Two were men I didn’t recognize and the third was Miss Lavinia, the former assistant to the Living Guildpact. You know, Mister Jace Beleren, who was also with them. They fought their way toward us. The largest of the men was using an ordinary broadsword to make hash of any creature that came within his reach.

Master Zarek unleashed a lightning bolt that took out a couple of the monsters in the foursome’s path. Then the big man shouted, “Chandra!”

We all turned. Four more warriors were fighting their way toward us. Two human female pyromancer’s were in the lead. One, with flaming—*literally flaming*—red hair fired off tremendous blasts of fire that reduced the enemy to puddles of molten goo. The other, this one with long steel-gray hair, was using

more precision blasts that were just as effective. Behind them were a male leonin and massive silver automaton.

Both groups of four converged beside the four of us, and the one-eyed leonin seemed to glory in the fellowship, raising his arms toward the heavens and roaring in—what seemed to me to be somewhat premature—triumph.

Quick introductions were made. The big man was Mister Gideon Jura. The other man was Mister Teferi. The red-haired pyromancer was Miss Chandra Nalaar. The grey-haired pyromancer was Miss Jaya Ballard. The leonin was Mister Ajani Goldmane, and the automaton, who seemed to actually be alive and sentient, was Mister Karn. Like Teferi, he had no last name. Seems like a whole bunch of these ‘walkers didn’t get one, almost like it was the cost of doing business in the Multiverse. I was about to ask Teyo if *he* had a last name, but he was busy attempting to introduce the two of us to the others. But he was nervous and muttery. So when Mister Jura put his large hand on Teyo’s shoulder and, *addressing only him*, said, “Good to have you in the fight, Teyonraht,” it made me chuckle just a bit.

Teyo tried to correct the impression that “Teyonraht” was his name, but by this time, Mister Jura was shouting, “Form up! The Eternals are still coming! We need to save as many people as possible!”

So that’s what the metallic warriors were called: *Eternals*.

It was a name that didn’t exactly bode well for our survival, you know?

V.

The elegant Miss Raven-Hair in her elegant black dress was crossing the plaza from the portal to the pyramid, surrounded by a phalanx of Eternal bodyguards. She watched us as Mister Jura led us forward against what he called “the Dreadhorde.”

She watched us lift urchins smaller than me into our arms to ferry them out of harm’s way.

At one point, Mister Jura was holding three.

She watched us run interference for bystanders too frightened to mount any defenses of their own.

She watched us destroy Eternal after Eternal.

And the last thing I saw of her, before losing sight of her entirely, was her shaking her head in pity, if not disgust.

I turned to Teyo—whose last name turned out to be Verada, by the way—and he just looked exhausted. He was raising shield after shield to protect all sorts of folks—all perfect strangers to him—from these undead Eternals. I was too busy trying to stay alive to read his literal thoughts, but I got the gist: he didn’t trust himself, didn’t think he could handle the cards he’d been dealt.

I leaned over and said, “Aw, you’re doing all right.”

He swallowed hard and nodded to me and put up another shield, a circle that expanded over his outstretched hands, giving two elven kids the cover they needed to run away from the mineral-covered—or *lazotep-covered*, as Mister Jura called it—Eternal that had been chasing them. His shield held, blocking the Eternal from chasing the elves and giving me the opportunity to use my little daggers on its less-than-Eternal eyes.

I’d already done that move six or seven times by now. It was *really* effective. I could just scurry right up to them and stab. The first time, I thought Teyo might vomit, but he swallowed it back and was

now growing used to my trick. I'd never had anyone study my tricks quite this much, except maybe my mother, but I tried not to let that mess with my head.

Teyo summoned a new shield to block the incoming flail attack of another Eternal.

Mister Jura shouted, "Teyonraht, push that one this way!"

"It's just Teyo," he squeaked while attempting to obey. I noticed that whenever he needed leverage, Teyo summoned up a small circle of light beneath his right ear. It hung there like a bright, shiny earring that held my attention dangerously. I had to resist the urge to grab at it, resist the urge to stare at it too long.

Teyo expanded his left-hand shield, transforming it from a circle to a diamond. He smiled just a little, perhaps slightly proud of the maneuver, and then used both hands to add dimension to the diamond shield and walk it forward.

The Eternal's flail bounced off the odd angle, throwing the monster off balance. Teyo leaned in and *shoved*. The Eternal stumbled back, and Mister Jura cut off its head, real smooth.

"Good," he barked before turning away to attack another of the creatures.

Teyo smiled again, and I smiled for him. Then he shook off the smile and turned his shield to protect Mistress Kaya's back.

Mister Beleren shouted, "We need to summon the guilds! Bring them into the fight!"

Master Zarek blasted another Eternal and shouted back, "I'm not sure that's possible! I can command the Izzet into the field and maybe Kaya could do the same with the Orzhov"

Miss Lavinia finished his thought: "The rest of the guilds have retreated to shore up their own territories, more suspicious of one another than of Bolas."

Mistress Kaya said, "And that's not even counting the guilds that already serve Bolas. Golgari and Azorius. Maybe Gruul, too."

I couldn't believe Gruul would serve the dragon. I knew my father and mother never would.

Miss Lavinia also scowled. She clearly didn't like the idea of the Azorius serving Bolas, either.

Teyo and Mistress Kaya were back to back, parrying blows between two Eternals. Thinking I could help, I slipped in between them. I leaned over and whispered to Mistress Kaya, "Call Hekara. She'll bring the whole Cult."

Mistress Kaya stabbed her Eternal, then paused to shake her head sorrowfully. "Hekara's dead," she said.

And that was it. My world just reeled.

It couldn't be

I had seen her only last night. She was fine. She was cheerful. She was Hekara. She was my best mate in the whole world. The whole Multiverse.

Behind his shield, Teyo stared at me with concern.

"Hekara was my friend," I said hopelessly. "She knew me. She saw me."

Teyo looked the way I felt: helpless. He wanted to comfort me; pushing his shield off his right hand and onto his left, he reached over and gave my arm a little reassuring squeeze.

I won't pretend I was reassured in the slightest. I still couldn't get my head around what Mistress Kaya had said. I couldn't imagine a world without Hekara in it, without her laughter, her ricocheting thoughts, her loyalty and friendship, even without her bloodlust. But Teyo was trying, and so I tried to acknowledge the effort with a grateful smile. I had no idea what expression actually appeared on my face.

Hekara couldn't be dead. She just couldn't be.

"*Hekara's dead*," Mistress Kaya had said, and I knew she liked Hekara enough to never lie about that kind of thing. I *wanted* to believe she would. But I knew better.

My best mate wasn't waiting for me on the Transguild Promenade. She'd never wait there again. She'd never hug me or tease me or tickle me or swing me around or *talk* to me again.

"*C'mere, baby-cakes, and gimme some sugar*." I'd never hear that again. Or anything *like* that again. Not the tinkle of the bells in her hair. Not the little giggle she made when she manifested a razor blade. Not the snorting guffaws that escaped her mouth when she found something particularly hilarious. It was all gone. The curtain had come down. Her show had gone dark.

More Eternals advanced, and I wondered why we even bothered fighting them.

Ravnica was dying all around me, and suddenly it didn't seem worth saving.

Hekara was dead