

# Unbowed, Part 1

## Cassandra Khaw

From set *Core 2019*

“You speak with fish as well? Mademoiselle, your skills are without number.”

The eels receded into the water at the sound of the man’s voice, a lean baritone yet unused to manhood. Not that it’d ever have occasion to mature. Vivien raked a considered look across the new arrival’s countenance, taking in the saturnine features, the boyish softness of his mouth, his bloodless complexion. Vampires were eternal, both in habit and biology.

Vivien unfolded to her feet. She was tall and brown and muscled in a way that compelled troubadours to think of knights in disguise, her dark hair held back in a pragmatic ponytail. If Vivien was beautiful, no one had yet thought to remark upon the fact, more concerned, perhaps, by her martial demeanor and the cold sated intensity of her regard.

The sea billowed and lapped at the ship, hurling jeweled foam into the air.

“I talk to fish as much as I talk to dinosaurs.” Vivien adjusted the placement of the Arkbow, its ligature warm even through her doublet. Frederic, the vampire huntsman who’d elected himself her escort, spent a night and handfuls of a morning endeavoring to convince her the weapon needed to be stowed away: swaddled in oilpaper, kept safe from the abrasive salt air.

But Vivien refused. She would sooner be flayed than parted from the relic, crooked and bright as a spine sleeved in silver, the last piece of Skalla outside of her own skin and tendons.

“So, what you are saying is that you’re versed in their every dialect, acquainted with their similes, and gifted at interpreting their native anecdotes?” Frederic beamed as though he expected to be rewarded for his grandiosity. He smelled of blood and brine and frankincense, a butcher at church, and even after days in his company, Vivien couldn’t bring herself to untense in his presence. “I’m saying I don’t ‘speak’ to fish.”

One of the eels rose to interrogate her with a look, agate eye bisected by a rectangular pupil, goat-like and animate, only to be chased away by the lowing of the ship’s prized captive: a juvenile brontodon. The dinosaur was too big for its prison. Both tail and throat tendrilled from portholes on each side of the vessel, endlessly beset by gulls and gulper-fish. As well as Vivien could infer, the creature did not sleep, only moaned and howled through the hours.

“You do, however, speak to dinosaurs?” A lascivious waggling of his brows. Behind him, Frederic’s crew swarmed and seethed and shouted in a sublimely acrobatic creole; Vivien could only pick out one word in eight, the others too slang-tangled in lurid flourishes. But their excitement required no translation. Home was but a horizon away.



Shadowed Caravel | Art by: Jason Felix

She plucked the last of the fruit from her bucket and flung it at the brontodon, succulent vegetal flesh dripping sugar like beads of buckwheat honey. The reptile snapped its mouth close around the morsel, guzzling a ragged scavenger-bird in the bargain. It gazed dolefully at her and trumpeted in misery again. “No.”

“Then how do you explain what we saw? How do you explain the majesty of you standing there, a hand stretched to the beast? It takes Luneau entire expeditions to return with but one of these beasts. But you, *you* sought them out alone! Mademoiselle, you are either gifted or magic or both!” Frederic twirled a hand upward and then paused, an anticipatory smile hunching his lips.

Unfortunately for the vampire, Vivien had ceased paying attention. “There will be medical attention waiting for the brontodon, I hope?”

“It will, like every new specimen, receive the finest attentions of the Royal Menagerie.” Frederic palmed his breastbone and bowed low.

Vivien took note of how he abstained from a direct answer and how glibly he smiled, filing both observations away behind a grimace she, if questioned, would blame on the wind. The Planeswalker tired of the simpering, the subtle innuendos, the strata of meaning layered one over another, Frederic’s every word weighted with a multiplicity of nuance.

Not for the first time, Vivien found herself regretting her decisions. She should have run them from the jungles. But Frederic, effete yet earnest, had so very many stories of a Royal Menagerie more impressive than myth, so enormous it held entire ecosystems behind its gilded teeth. What a trousseau of rarities, what treasures. Like nothing Vivien would ever see again this lifetime or the next.

The Planeswalker bent and scooped the bucket into the crook of an arm, wiping her fingers on her breeches. As skiffs, each the same tint of pearl as distant Luneau, came to circle the ship, the sailors began a lusty laughing chanty, one full of husbands and husbandry and what debaucheries can be achieved between the two. Frederic looked over his shoulder, smile as false as the words to follow.

“I should apologize for my men.”

“No. That is quite all right.” Vivien said. “It is about what I expect of civilized people.”

It took exactly twenty minutes for Luneau, all byzantine alleys and baroque balconies, to turn its stained sea-glass eyes on to Vivien and another ten for it to decide that the Planeswalker wasn't worth the trouble. Vivien pulled on the human pickpocket's hair until his neck bent like his scruples, until there was barely room for air to slick down his windpipe. Then and only then did Vivien lean down, teeth an inch from his ear.

“Do we understand each other?”

The pickpocket squeaked like the hinges of a rusted skeleton lock.

“Mercy, mistress. A cup of my blood as penance.” His shoulders scissored back as Vivien gave another tug. Luneau, already bored with the spectacle, drowsed around them: its vampire dockhands and its sailors made conversation with the human fishermen while aproned women, each at least as tall and brawny as Vivien, gutted oversized sturgeons by the water. Save for Frederic, no one paid mind to the pickpocket's plight and even the vampire, a half-smile in its customary seat, seemed only amused.

“What is he talking about?” Vivien's flesh pimpled in the limp, listless breeze.

Frederic sank into a crouch and cupped the pickpocket's chin in one gloved hand. With the other, he brought forward a dirk. “This is the currency of Luneau, mademoiselle.”

Vivien loosened her grip while keeping a knee wedged between the pickpocket's shoulders, eyes going wide. Her gaze flicked to the proffered weapon, held out to her hilt-first. “What do you expect me to do with this?”

“Did you not hear him?” Another of the vampire's easy, effervescent laughs. “He wishes to offer you a cup of blood—”

“No. I heard the boy.” Vivien hissed. “What do you expect *me* to do with his blood?”

“I suppose that would depend on the current exchange rate. But I imagine you'd at least be able to finance a new wardrobe. Your proletariat nature isn't without its charm. However, I think the royals would be flattered if you changed your manner of dress for them.” He dragged the red wag of muscle that was his tongue over his teeth, and Vivien couldn't help but think of a leech, so blood-bloated it shone red as fresh paint. “Or if you are feeling generous, you could give him over to me. The Church espouses use of the criminal element.”

The Planeswalker slapped the dirk away. “No.”

“Mercy, mistress.” The pickpocket panted like a dog forgotten on Death's door. “Mercy. I only wanted to leave Luneau.”

“*Leave* Luneau?” Frederic let go of the pickpocket's chin and stood, his silhouette bladed and burnished by the moonlight slanting through the alleys. A knot of nuns paused to review the tableau, the hems of their flowing mother-of-pearl habits teathed with gold. “And what will you do outside this island? Join the Brazen Coalition? Those ruffians don't allow for anything but the most competent sailors. Perhaps, you think to find a city yet civilized by the Church? I suppose you could. But there you would need to work. You would not be able to pay for your food and your housing with drops of ruby from your vein. No, monsieur. You will not leave Luneau. There is no space for you outside of these—”

Vivien lifted her voice over Frederic, not high enough for the timbre to hoarsen or hitch, but enough to signal she was glutted on the vampire's rhetoric. She rose, fingers gliding over the Arkbow. The pickpocket stayed wisely supine. “If I were a different woman, a more cynical one, I'd say you were

bullying this boy into accepting his lot as livestock and that Luneau, pretty as a fresh-minted coin, is nothing but a glorified abattoir.”

“You wound me, mademoiselle.” His imperiousness dissipated, fat melting on an eager tongue. In its place, a new substrate of slyness, worse for its reprobate swagger. “Luneau is hardly a stockyard. If anything, I suppose you might call us a halfway house.”

“Which takes payment in blood.”

“Do you despise the lion as well? Do you take offense at the fact it will not eat grain but instead prefers the meat of the lamb? The Rite of Redemption isn’t without its consequences. We drink blood because we must. But we aren’t *barbaric* about it.” Frederic cocked his head, the breeze coiling through his tiered curls. “A cup here, a portion there. Nothing that might kill the mortal citizenry. We have time tables.”

And to Vivien’s revulsion, he pouted.

“As for the matter of the boy,” Frederic sighed. “I suppose I might have misstepped. But the Legion of Dusk does see itself as caretaker of Ixalan. Here in Luneau, we have the facilities to take care of people like him. But the rest of the world isn’t so lucky, and what manner of gentry would we be if we did not do our part to protect these lands?”

“And the brontodon? The myriad wildlife you dragged across the water to Luneau? Is that for the same purpose?” Vivien tapped the pickpocket with the curved edge of the Arkbow. *Go*, she mouthed, and the boy fled down the pier. Into Luneau proper where the buildings stood pale and lustrous as cream.

“Preservation, mademoiselle. You never know when a species might go extinct. Ixalan is such a savage, unforgiving place.” That smile again. As though they were all accomplices to the same good-natured lie. “But please. We have wasted enough time. The wonders of Luneau cannot be encompassed by words. Let me show you my city and perhaps then, you will begin to see how wrong you were to assume poorly of us.”

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Vivien sat silent as Frederic unrolled reams of praise to Luneau, gesticulating and genuflecting at the splendor of both country and capitol. He narrated, with indecorous gusto, the preeminence of the sovereign couple, their virtues, the circumstances that precipitated such an exquisite union. Then he went on to alphabetize their accomplishments, chasing compliments with more of the same.

It was all, Vivien thought to herself, so gauche.

That there were lotus flowers laced through the balustrades of the city, gardens charting the plunge of its towers like the grasping hands of a desperate lover, trees parasitized by softly luminescent blossoms, was beside the point. At best, it only accented Vivien’s disgust with the island nation. The air reeked of excess. Luneau was artifice and arrogance, its every last wonder a contrivance. Its buildings were white marble, all dainty cafes wherever Vivien turned, all museums and shopfronts showcasing rich gowns and towering wigs. Luneau resembled someone’s dream of a city, clean and cultured and bereft of common things, things like butcher shops and bakers and bailiffs patrolling cracked-cobbled lanes. Only in the margins, only where Luneau could tuck such eyesores away, hidden behind alley or a crook in lanes, could Vivien see where humanity might toil.

If there was any true beauty here, it was a piteous thing, strangled and suffocated by the whimsy of its undead tenants.

But Vivien divulged nothing of her ruminations, only hooked fingers along the string of the Arkbow and smiled dispassionately, an expression her companion interpreted as invitation.

“What it is like where you come from?” Frederic traced a finger along the knob of bone that rose from Vivien’s brown wrist, the motion precise as the pleating of his lace jabot, and turned her arm onto its back. His touch wandered up the tributaries of her veins, while Luneau, dusk-lit and haunting, flaunted itself through the window.

Vivien tried not to think of an antlered silhouette rising into the sky, tried not to think of the screaming, the *pop* of skin as it crisps and breaks, tried not to think of how *soundless* it became as the world burned to white. She tried not to think of fire.

“It was beautiful.” she whispered.

The carriage rolled on.

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She counted the bodies on the wall until the numbers fled from her mind and then, Vivien murmured the numbers like a chant. For one terrible moment, the Planeswalker could understand Nicol Bolas, the death of Skalla, the end of everything she’d known and loved.

Here, flanked by the corpses of a hundred extinct species, their bodies threaded with wires, fat-starched and stiffened by a taxidermist’s concoctions, the antechamber gold and garish against the waxen sheen of fur, Vivien could think of nothing but the desire to see all this gone.

“Like nothing else, no?” Frederic’s grasping hand on the crook of her elbow again, fingers locking around the joint. “The Hall of Treasures is a church unto itself, a worship of the natural world.”

Vivien peeled herself from his grip. “Your idea of how to demonstrate reverence is very different from mine.”

“As it should be. We are not creatures of the same world.” Noblemen and their entourages drifted past the pair, effete and absurd in their towering wigs, minarets of hair teased into strange, unsubtle configurations. “And that is what is so beautiful about existence.”

“Beauty isn’t something to be pinned to a wall.”

“Oh, absolutely not.” Frederic smacked his lips. “Better if it is allowed to remain alive, beautifully framed by filigree. I remember when they brought home the monstrosaur breeding pair. What a joy that was. It was an *event*, as they say. And they were such generous guests of the Royal Menagerie too. Some animals, they simply expire, unwilling to put up a show. But there was so much theatre with the pair. So much bombast. The male wasn’t halfway as hardy as his counterpart. He died too quickly and she followed after, wasting away in a show of tragedy so profound, it was immortalized in a manuscript.”

Vivien swallowed around her rage. “Show me more of Luneau.”



Charging Monstrosaur | Art by: Zack Stella

The Perfumed Court lived up to its nickname: its aristocracy was anointed with ambergris and rose water, its knights dusted with salt and musk and holy incense. Even the supplicants and the servants, loose-wigged and cotton-garbed, stank of powders, always more powders, a glazing of particles that turned their skin nacreous in the evening's blue light.

Vivien pressed a handkerchief to her nose and choked on its odor. Gagging, she ran fingers along the edges, discovering too late the potpourri sewn into the hems. Nothing in Luneau was sacred. Nothing here was natural.

"Mademoiselle Reid, are you all right?" Frederic extended his arm. In the half hour they were apart, he somehow found time to exchange his hunting attire for a more flamboyant display. Ruffles and stuffed breeches, rendered in lilac and cream-colored satin, made bulbous his silhouette.

"I'm fine." She threaded her arm through his, folding the handkerchief into quarters. "I suppose I was just dumbstruck by the glories of your homeland."

"In that case, do not let me distract you too much. Luneau demands worship. There is nothing else on Ixalan quite like her." He leaned in, voice sharpened to conspiracy. "The Baron of Vernot, he believes there are giants among the lizards we hunt. *Gods*. Creatures bigger than even language can encompass. One day, we will have them for the Royal Menagerie and after that, history will never be able to name a rival."

"I see."

Frederic sniffed. Pigment stained his cheeks. Not pink, as was traditional, a rosy counterfeit of vitality, but a blush of turquoise which evoked in Vivien the memory of a crab-nibbled carcass she'd once fished from the sea. "Ah, mademoiselle. I'm sure you think the patriotism unwarranted, but you've seen the Royal Menagerie. Surely, you must understand."

Anger a frisson across her skin. The Arkbow seemed to thrum against the swoop of her spine, and for a moment, it subsumed her, a hunger like a well with no end. It wanted to be knocked—no, *she* wanted



the relic's power knocked and angled at Luneau's heart. The Arkbow loathed this place. Vivien knew, the way the oak and the alder knew to rouse themselves in spring, the way fire knew to find the fat within one's flesh, there would be no walking away from Luneau. Together, they would see it gone.

But not yet.

Not yet.

They needed to wait.

Vivien schooled her voice for politeness, a smile tipped into place. Charm was too much to ask for. Their reflections regarded them from every angle of the high-ceilinged building. Where the architecture wasn't indigo stone, it was gold and shining metal, florid marquetry and grand stucco work, oil-lamps and mage-lights cunningly positioned to ensure no one might ever need squint against an unseemly glare.

It held, in Vivien's opinion, all the tenderness and compassion absent from certain other elements of Luneau.

"Forgive me, but all I saw were cages full of sick and dying animals and a hall resplendent with a circus of cadavers." Her mouth pinched. "If that was your pride and joy, you may wish to consider investing in another."

To her surprise, Frederic laughed, gauzy and unperturbed by the warning grooved in her tone. "Madoiselle, if we turned ourselves inside out to keep everything alive, where would we put them all? The Royal Menagerie is the largest of its kind in Ixalan, but it is not *magic*. Besides, how would the baron pursue his science if there were no bodies to use in an autopsy?"



Pride of Conquerors | Art by: Tomasz Jedruszek

The corridor spread into a palatial lobby. Above them, a vaulted ceiling frescoed with ships in conflict with a kraken. Waitstaff ferried brass plates laden with goblets through a growing crowd of courtiers, their corpses doubled in the mirror-plated floor.

*The clothes do not make the monk*, Vivien thought to herself. No matter how they primped and perfumed themselves, no matter how many acres of crushed velvet they draped over bodies embalmed in dark magic, how they played at refinement, these creatures were still corpses. Frederic patted Vivien's hand, and it took all of her to not slap his fingers away.

"By the way," Frederic said, exchanging air kisses with a pale woman who barely deigned to glance at Vivien, her cleavage frosted with diamond dust. "I must congratulate you on your sense of timing. You chose the perfect occasion to visit Luneau."

"And why is that?"

The woman turned, snapping open a fan. Lace foamed at her collar and down along the ends of her sleeves, wove into the gaudy edifice of her alabaster wig. She alone of the attendees smelled of nothing but mausoleums and marrow and bone and dirt. "Poor thing. Do they teach you nothing from where you come from, mademoiselle? Tonight's festivities are famous across Ixalan. It is—"

A sigh, as if to broadcast the burden that was translation.

"—the *Tourdion with the Truculent Thunder*. Did I say that correctly, Frederic? No. No, don't tell me. I don't care enough." She pumped her fan slowly. A beauty mark punctuated her philtrum. "Just know that you are *unbearably* fortunate, mademoiselle. There are rurals in Luneau who would hawk their firstborns to attend this gala. Honestly, Frederic, why did you even bring her?"

"For novelty, I imagine." Vivien's attention made an orbit of the space. Too many of them, and too little known of what they were capable. She would have to wait and watch and wonder for the time being. "Like everything else in this place."

Tittering greeted Vivien's riposte, high-pitched and theatrical, while Frederic looked on like an indulgent uncle. "Sweet mercies, this one has teeth! What a delight, my dear."

Before Vivien could marshal her rage, double doors creaked apart, admitting first a straight-backed couple in gaudily elaborate regalia, their skulls crested with ivory wigs. Of the two, the woman, severe and slim, appeared less comfortable with the finery: she had a hunter's stalk, the gait of someone more accustomed to leathers and the thump of a sword against her hip. Despite that faint air of unease, her expression was beatific, as was the look worn by her partner, a gaunt-faced man with immaculate facial hair, shoulders stooped as though weighed down by the crown he wore like a burden.

"King Lucard and Queen Salazar," Frederic murmured into Vivien's ear, his breath cold on the lobe. "You should bow to them."

She flicked a look behind her. "No."

The sovereign rulers of Luneau tipped their heads, and the crowd responded in kind: the women curtseyed, the men bowed, the heels of their palms pressed to their hearts. Alone of them, Vivien stood unbowed, chin tipped up. The assembled gentry straightened as the royals drifted past, children in teal frocks coming to take hold of their trains. If any of them took notice of her impudence, they did not think it fit to comment.

"Audacious," murmured Frederic's pale acquaintance as she rose again to her full height. "You have such interesting tastes in friends."

"Only the finest."

The doors opened again. A hush ran through congregation. From the penumbra emerged a rangy fellow clad simply in a cassock, white hands steeped at his sternum. His manner exuded a choreographed austerity, every motion imbued with purpose. He raised his head, and the crowd sighed at the sight of him, an ecstatic noise.



Vivien cocked her head. “And who is he?”

“The Baron of Vernot.” The woman sighed, fanning herself, tongue wrapping about the honorific, cradling it like a newborn messiah. “Marcois Jean-Jaquent. He rules over the Royal Menagerie and the wonders in the Hall of Treasures.”

“Monsieurs. Mademoiselles.” His ophidian gaze found Vivien through the press of bodies, lidded and lazy, held her, golden sap hoping to drown an unsuspecting insect. “*Special* guests. We are ready for you.”

The opening act spoiled the breath in Vivien’s lungs, left her panting, and she sat, blood seeping from where her nails gouged half-moons into her palms, as a man wafted a torch beneath a lizard’s belly. It shrilled while its hide blackened in the fire, splotches of color radiating from the burns. Arabesques of puce and orange, venous trails of fading blue: its terror coaxed into an art.

The show only grew worse thereon.

The performers brought forward bears in ill-fitting frocks and absurd panniers, raptors dressed as marquises, viscountesses incarnated as knock-kneed cranes, waltzing across hot coals in halting leaps. Each was tortured, tormented, teased in turn, while the audience howled song titles to a brass cabaret in the pit, and the monarchs of Luneau conversed with their ministers.



Anointed Deacon | Art by: Winona Nelson

“This is cruelty,” Vivien hissed, half-risen from her seat, voice coarsened by rage.

“No, this is entertainment.” Frederic sucked at his teeth and clinched fingers around her wrist. “Now, sit down, Mademoiselle Reid. *Please*.”

The crowd roared as the band laid down a triumphant anthem, brass scaffolding a rolling, rippling drumbeat. Something was happening. Vivien jerked her attention toward the stage, a finger hooked over the Arkbow’s bowstring.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” There he was once more: the priest of this place. The man stood alone, no accoutrement or accessory, no chains of office. Black robes, calcium-pale hands raised to the masses. The music dimmed to a shiver of a flute, like some lonely thing dying in the dark. “I thank you for your patience, your tolerance of the lesser acts. We know why you are here.”

Silence washed over the coliseum, taut. The man commanded their gazes, hallowed in his pulpit of light. He lowered his voice as Vivien took aim, his voice a holy hush.

“Our finest spend their months in the savage wilderness, stalking through the undergrowth. They wage war against nature. They die in droves, all in service to your pleasure.” Here, his tone warmed and the crowd murmured in pleasure. “All in the pursuit of the grandest of prizes, the finest of monsters to bring home to you. Tonight’s specimen is particularly intriguing, a behemoth even the Golden City fears. Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to this evening’s most special *guest*. “

And the curtains drew back, red velvet pulled away by lush ropes of braided gold. The spotlights abandoned the man in black and joined like hands laced in prayer, illuminating a route for whatever would soon emerge. From the dark, something screamed its rage.

“A new monstrosaur from the depths of the Ixalan jungles,” whispered the baron, his voice carrying like a curse. “More impressive even than our breeding pair. Fiercer, still full of that primal fire.”

That *sound*. It wasn’t the brontodon. It couldn’t be. Vivien *knew* ruminants. They did not have the throat for such sounds. There wasn’t space in a body like that, no room with the multiplicity of stomachs, the knowledge of death riding low in their bellies. This was something else. Something bigger, angrier, something that’d eat up the world if it was given half the chance and judging by that call, it wanted nothing less. It *ached* to swallow them whole.

But the shambling, sad thing that emerged from the gloom could barely hold itself upright, let alone put up a fight. Vivien forgot herself at the horror that stumbled into view, a gasp rasping up her throat. The creature was *once* massive, majestic even, but now it stood stooped and sunken, starved of everything but fury. Someone had tortured it. Someone, Vivien realized with a pang of horror, had plucked the largest teeth from its head.

“I am done.” The Arkbow sang out at the downward stroke of Vivien’s finger, suddenly lambent with power, and Skalla as it was, as it should have been, as it should have *stayed*, was alive again, if only for that moment.

The audience did not care. Not for Vivien, or for the plight of the monstrosaur. And why would they? Vivien thought. Nothing mattered to these vampires but their games, their posturing and preening jibes. Soldiers advanced on the creature, a flashing half-circle of steel and plumed hats. Their caution was performative. There was no way it could have retaliated. Not like this, not with manacles on every limb, its hide stippled with scars, two men at each end, tugging its hunched body down low. Nonetheless, that didn’t make its suffering less of a sport for its audience. If anything, it seemed to delight the crowd. *This* way, the soldiers had space for invention.

What misery those soldiers brought to being. They worked holes through the monstrosaur’s hide with their pike tips, constellations of new wounds amid a patchwork nebulae of scars. They scratched at its eyes, one already filmed with milk, the other jaundiced and rolling in its socket. They worried at its body like crows, or dogs, or spoiled children drunk on the absence of consequence.

“Madame, *please* —” Before Frederic could speak another word, Vivien notched an arrow. Before Frederic could breathe out, she let go.

The wood blazed green as the projectile sang through the air. It hit the floor beside where the man in black stood, shaft trembling from the impact. And Vivien had enough time to salute him, two fingers

to smiling lips, before the seething, glimmering green outline of a hydra wrenched itself from the arrowhead and howled its hunger for the world to see.

Luneau did not know how to contend with hydras.

It had, over the years, learned to accommodate dinosaurs and megafauna of comparable size, but these were separate taxonomies of dangers. The wildlife of Ixalan, while ferocious, responded to decapacitation in the traditional fashion: they laid down and died. The hydra, however, did not.



Hungering Hydra | Art by: Daarken

The fact it was made of magic didn't help either.

Two of its heads, shimmering and green, took hold of a screaming noble: one dug its jaws into his shoulder, the other latched onto a calf. They pulled and he came apart.

Vivien loped down through the stands and into the stampede of evacuating guests, guards racing behind her, shouting for the Planeswalker to stop.

The Planeswalker continued to run; she vaulted over a duke who'd dropped to his knees, wig clinging to his skull by a strip of sweat-soaked prayer; she ran as the monstrosaur, forgotten by its handlers, roared in defiance. In the chaos that had ensued, the beast had snapped a leg, trying and failing to snare one of the fleeing performers. Bone protruded from the rags of its knee, but that wasn't enough to dissuade it. It screamed. For retribution, for rage, for whatever ineffable hope that dragged it forward, inch by inch, toward the guards advancing on the hydra.

The dinosaur swung its head; teeth found flesh, the hollow of a poorly armored hip. It bit down. Crippled, it had no way to stand. But it could still pendulate its skull, still crush its quarry against the mortar and the marquetry of the stage, the body inside the ornate armor rendering to bone-bitten mush. And as it did, it screamed and this time, there was triumph in the noise.

Vivien swiveled, fell to a knee, took aim, and let fly an arrow. The Pelakka worm launched itself forward, all mouth and sinuous body, glowing green. The guards paused, dumbstruck by the sight. Vivien



did not wait for the aftermath. She stood instead and renewed her sprint toward the stage, even as screaming rose up at her back, the sound quickly muffled by the *snap* of the worm's jaws. She didn't have to look. She knew what'd follow. As was often the case with the worm's victims, they likely died with astonishment on their faces. No one ever expects to be perfectly bite-sized.



Pelakka Wurm | Art by: Daniel Ljunggren

Vivien leapt onto a railing and allowed the momentum to carry her down. She nocked an arrow, fired again. On this occasion, it was an herbivore that burst from the point of impact, staggering colt-legged onto an uneven canter, the stag—body a carapace like a pangolin, spade-shaped antlers swept back from its skull like raised wings—making several orbits around the arena before at last it took notice of the guards.

Startled by its appearance, someone had flung a pike at the animal. Their throw was perfect. It sailed through the green glimmer of the stag's muscled shoulder, but the ethereal creature *bucked* like it'd been hit, kicking out both sets of legs before at last rearing onto its hind hooves. The guards had accounted for dumb instinct, animal reflexes tethered to the trigger-points of pain and rapture. But Skalla, beautiful and voracious, Skalla of the mangrove-strangled monsoons and the fireflies and the wildfires that sang giddily of new seasons, Skalla's wildlife, down to the last coral-striped ant, was cannier than that.

The stag did not panic. It barreled down on its assailant, shimmering antlers bent at a ninety-degree angle, rage in its eyes and in the set of its expression. The guard had enough time to inhale before the stag, taller than Luneau's finest by several hands, scooped him up and flung him into a wall. A crack: short and sudden and sickening. His body wrinkled to a heap as he slid down onto the floor.

Vivien landed delicately beside the stage, Arkbow still at ready.

The Pelakka worm's last triumphant bellow shuddered through the arena, its percussions amplified by the acoustics of the theatre, so loud that it thinned the world in Vivien's ears to a whine. It was followed by shouting. She snapped a look across the coliseum, gaze walking up the tiered seats to where the Baron of Vernot stood in the aisles, ringed by men with crossbows. Her surviving pursuers stood with them.

“You.” His voice, oratorical, carried easily to where Vivien crouched.

The Planeswalker bared a snarl. “This place is an abomination.”

Something flared in the baron’s gaze, a look not unlike recognition, half-smile fixing itself in place as he descended the steps. Only a handful more arrows. Vivien narrowed her eyes at the crossbows, wondering which of her magical menagerie to call: the wasps or the rainbow-breasted birds with the scimitar beaks, the devouring wurm, the grizzly bear from her earliest memories, smelling of cold water and mountains and animal spoor.

“You rurals are always the same, always so sure of the shape of the world.” The words spilled like oil, slick. “Always so *frightened* of the idea of change. Do you have any idea as to how many of you I have seen? How many of you I have dealt with?”



Vivien of the Arkbow | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

Half of the baron’s entourage poured past him and down, down into the fray where corpses lay, gleaming slickly. They broke into two rows: the first went down to their knees, while the second stood braced. They took aim at the hydra as it began to come apart in a convulsion of emerald sparks.

“Speeches are such a thing with tyrants, aren’t they?” Vivien freed another arrow from her quiver. The wasps, she decided. “People like you are so in love with your voice.”

“Tyrant?” His laughter was effervescent. “Please, mademoiselle, I am nothing but a humble researcher. Even my barony was forced upon me. A gift from her Royal Highness.”

Vivien thought back to her first glimpse of the queen, of the sharp-featured face beneath its stiff crown of marble curls, that unsmiling mouth and abstracted gaze, attention already elsewhere. She had sat slumped at her throne, chin held in the cup of her palm, bored with the tableau, bored with the cruelty. Such a woman wouldn’t play at favorites. But the baron did not look like a man who cared.

“Whatever the case,” Vivien nocked her arrow, every motion deliberate. The crossbowmen rallied around the baron. “I will see Luneau pay for what it has done to this world.”

This time, they did not hesitate. They released their crossbow bolts, only to see their assault sail harmlessly through the hydra, even as it finally dissipated.

"I'm sure you'd like that. But what I would like is to know more about that bow of yours." The baron's gaze ticked to the Arkbow in Vivien's grip. "What a *fascinating* weapon. How do you use it? Where do your creatures come from?"

In answer, Vivien let fly her arrow. Wasps corkscrewed from the ensuing contrails, translucent wings iridescent for a moment before they shook loose of the enchantment, the insects coalescing into a swarm so thick, it darkened the air. Vivien sprinted forward in their wake, feeling every copper-banded body thrum beneath her thoughts. The lambent wasps were the size of hounds, of horses, all with appetites to match. No queen in sight, no nest, but that hardly mattered: hunger was even older than the memory of them.

"Skalla." Vivien panted as she traded the Arkbow for her daggers. The wasps parted, revealing the baron, hands pressed together as though in prayer, his smile serene. "We are the dead of Skalla."

She brought her blades down. *Twisted*. Felt steel slot between ribs, felt the iron catch in soft tissue. Vivien jerked her wrists, and the daggers sliced through membrane. But the baron's placid expression did not change. He only looked up, and when he smiled, full-teethed, Vivien had a moment to think on how red his tongue was, how plump his mouth, and how much he reminded her of a sated lamprey. His fingers closed around Vivien's own, almost tender, his touch scorching.

"My turn."

The baron backhanded Vivien, a blow so casual, so artless that Vivien found herself surprised by its force. She skidded backward, away from the point of impact. A wet heat dribbled along the corner of her jaw. Vivien mopped at her chin with the back of a hand and snarled.

"Ah, were you expecting a dandy then?" The baron's voice stayed mild. He wrenched Vivien's daggers from his chest and flung them onto the floor. "I'm afraid I'd have to disap—"

"I'll manage." You couldn't rely on weapons alone in Skalla. Nature did not wait for duels, for rituals, for men to unsheathe their swords. Often, it was nothing but tooth and talon and tendon. Vivien spun into a roundhouse kick, stopping the baron mid-sentence, hooked a leg along his shoulder, and allowed momentum to pull them both down onto the ground.

Pain burst along her shoulder; the fall hadn't gone quite right. She had taken too much of the baron's weight on her, but Vivien refused to be deterred. She reared up, bringing the Arkbow down like a bludgeon, taking aim at the baron's temple. Vivien managed three sharp shots to her quarry's head before his minions arrived to drag her away.

Vivien fought. Rabidly, and with the bitter abandon of someone who had run out of things to lose. She took two guards to unconsciousness with her: the first with a strategic kick to the head, the other with a blow from an elbow, one so forceful that Vivien heard the small bones of the man crack in the recoil. It was, she decided as awareness bled from her, at least a decent last stand.