

Episode 5: Till Death Do Us Part

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

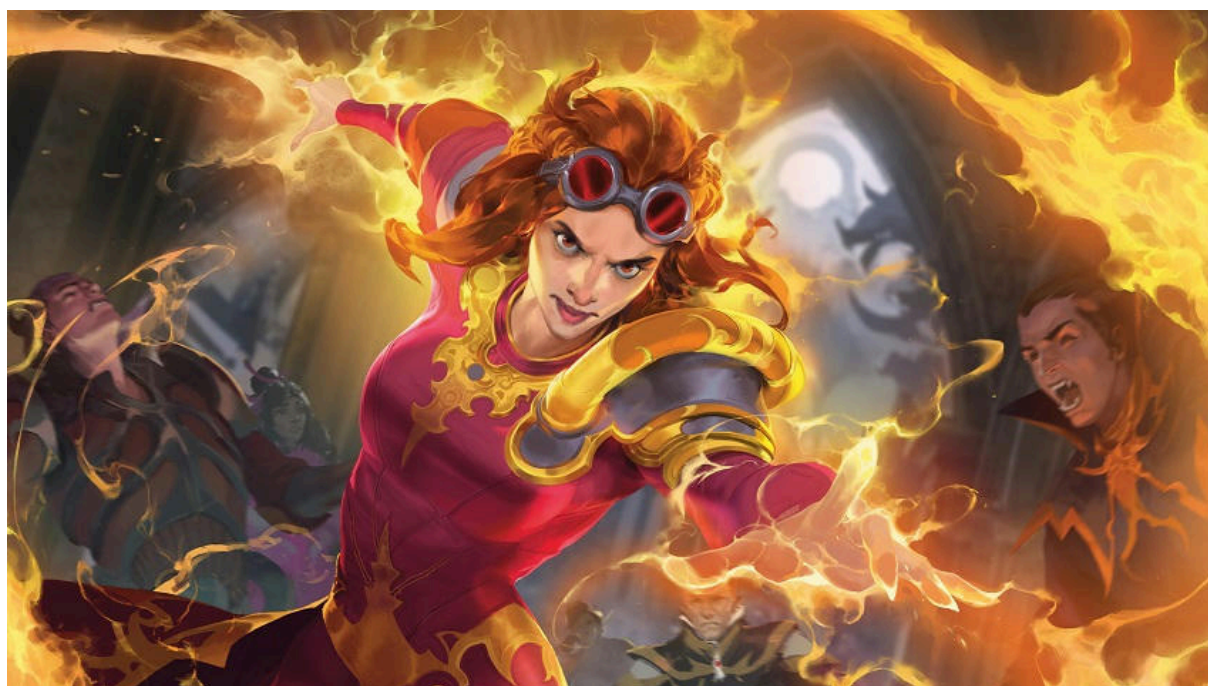
24. 11. 2021

Law is the assertion of order over chaos. You cannot have one without the other. Every day of Adeline's training made that clear to her: cathars will always need to dispense justice, because chaos is the natural state of the world. Deep in the belly of the beast, surrounded by a maelstrom of entropy—that is when the cathar should feel most comfortable, as that is when they're needed most.

That's what they say, anyway. Adeline's beginning to wonder how much of what she was taught was wishful thinking.

There are people who need my help, she thought, and it became her only thought, the only thing that drove her on through the night, the only thing that kept her breathing. A sacred oath to protect the people of Innistrad lent her sword arm strength, even when her flesh grew weary.

Chandra's right at home in the chaos. As a vampire's claw rakes across Adeline's shield, Chandra is there, bounding up onto a table to get a better angle. Their eyes link over the vampire's shoulder. Somehow—despite the screams, despite the obscenities, despite the death grunts around them—Chandra's smirking.



Chandra, Dressed to Kill | Art by: Viktor Titov

A pillar of flame consumes the vampire. Only a pile of ash remains of the woman, her jewelry sitting prettily atop it. Adeline lets out a breath.

Chandra grins. “Hammer and anvil works pretty—huh?”

Her words cut off abruptly when Adeline pulls her close and raises her shield just in time. A wine bottle shatters against hardwood and steel. Red slicks the holy symbol staring back at their assailant and red, too, paints Adeline’s helmet as the excess spills over.

“Guess that makes me the anvil,” Adeline says.

A quick squeeze around her waist—hardly palpable in the armor—signals Chandra’s thanks. “Hey, don’t sound so down. We’ve got this.”

Adeline draws away. A thrall emerges from the melee, armed with a candelabra. Chandra blasts him with fire about a second before he makes contact, the candelabra clattering to the ground. Flames lick at the table runners, which is bad, given how many people have taken to duels atop the tables. There must be a dozen of them going on at least, and not all of them pit humans against vampires.

It seems some of the bloodsuckers are taking the opportunity to settle old debts. In the bare moment Adeline spends glancing at them, she watches a well-dressed woman skewer a beautiful man before drawing him into a kiss. The tip of her blade juts from his back. He’s smiling, somehow.

Everywhere she looks it’s like this. Two mounted cathars are joined by a youth riding a trained pig; all three of them try to take on a Falkenrath flushed with fresh blood. There’s a demon swinging a column at a group of farmers, and Sigarda is there to catch it. A guard cuts the head clean from a warrior’s shoulders, tossing it to a blood-mouthed child, who catches it from the air like a well-trained dog.

Red gushes across the throat of the guard. He falls, bleeding his stolen blood onto the slick marble floor. Behind him, a violet-wreathed Kaya withdraws her knife.

“Any sign of Arlinn?” Adeline asks.

Kaya shakes her head. “We hold the line.”

“Uh, Kaya, in case you haven’t seen, it’s less of a line here and more of a “ Chandra starts.

She stops, again—this time because a column’s toppling over toward all three of them. Adeline rushes to save her—and manages it, if only because the column hovers suspended in its trajectory for a full second. The time mage’s work. Chandra has powerful friends indeed.

“Nice catch, Adeline. I agree,” Teferi says. He ducks an oncoming axe swing, tapping his staff against the guard’s flank. The guard freezes in place long enough for a cathar to finish the job. “Everyone’s scattering. We can’t keep this up for long.”

“Arlinn knows what she’s doing,” Kaya says. “She’s going to finish the job—”

“Avacyn always fought with her sisters at her side. We shouldn’t leave her alone,” Adeline says. “She needs help.”

“Can’t spare anyone,” Chandra says. “We have company.”

And so they do—a dozen burly vampire guards, shields linked, marching straight toward them. A tall order at the best of times. Chandra sends out a gout of flame; their hesitation lasts only an instant.

Adeline sinks into her fighting stance.

Law is the assertion of order over chaos. A cathar is most needed in the maelstrom.

One of the guards hurls a javelin.

Adeline raises her shield.

Impact never comes.

A massive wolf lunges before them. The javelin bounces right off it, unable to pierce the dense muscle at its flanks. The wolf turns toward the vampires. The growl that leaves its throat is so low Adeline feels it rumbling in her lungs.

One paw beats the marble floor. Then: a howl.

Four more wolves—these normally sized—leap in through the windows. And they aren't the only ones. There must be dozens of wolves pouring in now, some big as boulders, from the windows and the open gates.

But why? Why are they here? Not long ago, the wolves tore through civilians during the Harvesttide Massacre. Why save them?

"Did did you guys invite them?" Chandra asks.

As if to answer, the largest of the wolves turns toward them. An arm juts from its great jaws. No—*his*. Adeline knows those scars.

It's Tovolar.



Wedding Crasher | Art by: Alexander Mokhov

"Here to help?" Teferi asks.

The wolf nods. Kaya points out a particular door.

"She went that way," she says.

Tovolar's gone the second she's done talking, bounding over the remains of the chandelier toward Arlinn.

During The Travails, it was hard to know who was friend and who was foe. The lines got blurred. People you knew all your life burst into tendrils and carapaces.

This isn't as bad as The Travails—but Adeline's not sure what to make of the wolf, either.

Sorin Markov is well familiar with the dark. For thousands of years, darkness has been his best companion. And now, sinking into a pit of blood, he realizes that it might be the only companion he has left.

The other planeswalkers from before dead or gone, or shadows of their former selves.

Nahiri. A girl he once trusted. A woman who locked him in stone and forced him to watch the Plane crumble.

Avacyn, his most treasured creation. All of his hopes for the future in a single perfect frame. Unmaking her *hurt*, truly hurt. Even vampiric powers won't heal that wound in his heart.

And now

Blood rushes against his eyelids. If he opens his mouth there'll be plenty to drink, plenty to give him strength. But if he does pull himself out of here, what's left? Seven thousand years of existence settle against his body. He's sinking further down into the sanguine depths.

What's left?

He strains to think. There must be something. People such as him see the greater image, not the smaller one. His grandfather taught him that.

His grandfather, who even now fought for the dreadful privilege of marrying Olivia Voldaren. His grandfather, who hurled him here for the same reason. Of all the wounds Sorin bore, Edgar had inflicted the first, and still, Sorin had loved him for thousands of years.

Had that been part of his grandfather's plans, too? To use Sorin only when convenient? To indulge all those long conversations, as if indulging a child's tea parties?

The grander picture, not the smaller.

Yes, he sees it now.

Sorin's chest aches.

He opens his mouth.

Blood—sweet, sticky, intoxicating as wine—pours in. Sinew weaves itself back together. Bones crack into place. Wounds stitch shut. His muscles swell with stolen vigor—his vigor. They thought this cellar would drown him, but it's only made him stronger.

Sorin begins to climb.

It takes longer than he'd like. With every reach of his hand, his body continues to heal itself, continues to stitch itself back together. He grunts. But he throws himself fully to the work, to the effort, and when he crests the lip of the pit, there is no longer any place for doubt within him.

The ballroom. That is where his grandfather—*Edgar*—has gone.

One step after another. It is a predator's slink that propels him through the halls of the sanguitorium, a predator's nose that guides him through the muttering corridors, a predator's instinct to pick up a greatsword along the way.

The sounds come to him before long: the clatter of metal, the groans of the dying, the beating of an angel's wings. Each one infuriating. Infuriating, too, the howl of wolves on Voldaren lands.

Well—it would have been infuriating days ago.

Now, a grim satisfaction comes over him. For millennia, the vampires have plotted and schemed, torn out throats and staked hearts just for the barest taste of more power. It is only natural that the wolves—true pack animals—have come to rout them.

It occurs to him he has family in that ballroom, and it occurs to him—distantly, like a whisper through padded cloth—that he no longer cares.

Sorin steps into the maelstrom. An arrow whistles over his shoulder. He catches it, driving it into the throat of an oncoming Voldaren guard. The man struggles to breathe. Sorin twists the arrow's shaft.

"Quiet," he says.

The man collapses when Sorin pulls the arrow away. Sorin doesn't much care. Already, he's surveying the room for Edgar. Olivia hardly matters anymore. She might be the one who arranged the wedding, but Edgar agreed to it. Edgar fought for it. Edgar cast away his own grandson for something as simple—as disposable, as fleeting—as power.

He is looking for Edgar.

There—rounding on Teferi and his companions, flanked by Markov duelists. Edgar wields his greatsword like a much younger man, cackling with glee. Has he always seemed so decrepit? His flesh so sullen, his eyes so beady?

There are those who try to get between Sorin and Edgar. A foolish way to stamp their own death warrants. Limbs fall from them like leaves from autumn branches. Sorin marches on.

Edgar swings on Teferi. The time mage slows the blow down, but only so much—he barely manages to block. The cathar takes on two of the duelists herself; the pyromancer's flames lick at Edgar's fine clothes. Two geists fade into existence in time to deal killing blows to the duelists.

The tide is turning. Edgar must be able to feel it as easily as Sorin does.

The face Sorin once thought beatific and wise wrenches in disgust. "You again?"

Sorin's attack is too quick for the humans to follow, and Edgar's parry just the same. Swords meet again and again, hands a blur, sparks flying around them. Sorin's onslaught is vicious, unrelenting, uninterested in peace or parley. Edgar might be powerful—but the blade has long since been Sorin's favored area of study.

Those who come to Edgar's aid also find swift ends. Sorin hasn't the mind to keep track of it beyond the most passing sense, but he knows the others are keeping them at bay.

In the end, it is Edgar who falls from the rumble first, scrambling backward, his sword clattering to the ground like a toy.

"Sorin," he says. "You have to understand—"

Sorin rests the tip of his borrowed sword at the base of Edgar's throat. "I understand, Edgar. The larger picture, not the smaller. Sacrifices. Power. I understand perfectly now what you think of me."

And he understands, too, how easy it would be to kill the man here. A simple flick of his wrists is all it would take. A moment's resistance, a dying gasp—that would be all.

Yet something stays his hand.

Perhaps the unseen hand of an angel, long gone.

Sorin scowls. “Go. Get out of my sight.”

For all his blustering, for all his power, Edgar doesn’t need to be told twice. Like a frightened cat, he scampers away. Where he’s going is no concern of Sorin’s. Instead, his eyes remain on the spot where his grandfather had just been—the place where he might have died.

“Are you alright?”

The pyromancer, probably. He’s surprised at the concern in her voice. She never seemed to like him.

“Yes,” he lies. Sorin wipes his blade clean. When at last he looks up, he sees that the others are giving them a wide berth. Vampire corpses litter the floor like the dregs of a feast.

“Sorin, I know—I know that must have been hard for you, but you did the right thing,” says Teferi.

Sorin wants to glare at him. How can he know? How can he judge? And yet it occurs to him—Teferi, too, is old. Teferi, too, has known loss, has seen things beyond his imagining.

And the others might be shorter lived—but there is something that they all understand about one another inherently. A restlessness. A wanderlust.

“Thank you.”

It is all he can think of to say.

Arlinn Kord dreams of forests.

She dreams of boughs beneath her padded feet, of autumn leaves falling in lazy circles around her, of the wind through her fur.

Boulder and Patience run shoulder to shoulder with her. Streak bounds ahead. She is sure, somehow, that Redtooth is behind them.

A pain in her chest.

For as free as she feels with her wolves at her side, the truth is unavoidable. They’ve left.

She is alone.

“Arlinn.”

Wolves have many means of speaking—but her name has always eluded the maws of her closest companions. Arlinn furrows her brow. She wants to slow, but her packmates keep her marching on.

“Arlinn, it’s time to hunt.”

It feels terrible. Like her head’s the cathedral bell, and the voice is the hammer.

She wants to stop.

But then—a warmth. Something at her side, solid, its heart beating in a rapid tattoo. Warmth against her face. A familiar scent.

The stag can wait.

When she opens her eyes, Tovolar is the first thing she sees—still bearing the wounds from their last encounter. The softness of his expression throws his powerful body into relief.

“You’re here?” she asks.

“You called for aid,” comes the answer, roughly shaped from his muzzle.

And it’s when she stirs that she realizes they’re not alone. Boulder’s at her side, too—they all are. Relief and joy overtake the pain of her injuries as she throws her arms around them. Her pack! And they are just as eager to see her, too, lapping at her face, bopping her with their noses.



End the Festivities | Art by: Chris Rallis

But the embrace isn’t meant to last long. With joy comes clarity, and with clarity comes memory.

Olivia’s the one who hurt her like this. And Olivia’s the one with the Moonsilver Key.

Boulder and Patience help her to her feet. She shifts, again, knowing her human nose will do her no favors here. Nor will her human healing. She needs the wolf.

Yet there’s one thing nagging at her, too—the near-sheepish rounding of Tovolar’s shoulders.

“Tovolar,” she says, “this doesn’t change anything between us. What you did “

“Tonight, we settle this,” he says. Words are hard to form in that shape—but it isn’t as if Tovolar can change as easily as she can. “Afterward, come find me. We’ll settle it like packmates.”

Arlinn’s skin crawls. Tovolar isn’t her pack—these three are. But it’ll have to do for now, won’t it? The Voldarens gaining absolute control over the other vampires—and the angels—wouldn’t be good for the wolves, either.

She doesn’t dignify him with a response. Olivia’s scent is thick in this place, her blood upon the marble fresh and enticing. It’ll be easy enough to track her down.

Arlinn doesn’t need to tell Tovolar to follow.

She doesn’t need to tell the wolves, either. Together the five of them run through the halls of Voldaren Manor, staggered two at a time, blood rushing in their ears. It hurts. Of course, it does.

But that’s nothing compared to what’ll happen if Olivia gains control over all of Innistrad’s angels.

Her trail takes them not back toward the ballroom, but up somewhere higher. Stairs are hard to negotiate on four feet. They make do. There isn’t room for anything else.

It isn't long before Edgar's voice comes to them from down a hall.

"You promised you had everything under control."

"I did. All of this this *nonsense* "

The wolves round the corridor. There, at the end of the hall, surrounded by statues of herself, is Olivia Voldaren. Edgar Markov stands with her, covered in blood, his breathing ragged. Olivia's face is alight with fury; her hand flies once more to her sword. Edgar reaches for her shoulder.

"Olivia, it's over," he says.

She bats his hand away. "You touch me only when I allow you to touch me."

The wolves draw near. Arlinn comes to a stop before them, a rumble low in her throat. Olivia knows what she wants. Tovolar bites at Edgar—but Arlinn's sharp bark cuts him off.

This is Olivia's mess. She gets a chance to make it right.

Arlinn isn't sure what wins out in the end: Olivia's pique, or her lack of patience. Maybe it's her own sniveling cowardice.

But she drops the key.

It clatters, without much ceremony, against the floor.

"Have your little toy, if it matters so much to you," she sneers.

Arlinn wraps the key with a length of torn curtain and picks it up between her teeth. Olivia's already taken off through one of the windows. Edgar soon follows. Tovolar leaps up the side of the walls, scrambling to get at them—but he comes back down with only the tails of Edgar's coat caught between his jaws.

He's glowering. She expects he would. No doubt he wanted to tear them apart and end this threat forever.

Part of Arlinn does, too.

But there'll be time for that later.

As Arlinn shifts back to human form, she catches Tovolar's eye.

"If you've got a problem with how I run things, come find me later," she says. "Me and my pack will sort you out."

The Moonsilver Key lends weary feet new speed. The whole way from Stensia to Kessig, they take no breaks, make no stops. Teferi's efforts to speed them further leave him exhausted—by the time they arrive, he's fast asleep within the carriage.

Every step is hard-won. Every step is a victory.

But all will mean nothing if the ritual isn't completed.

Katilda assures them they still have a chance. Her spirit bound to the Moonsilver Key as it is, she's followed them on their journey. Kaya keeps her company for most of the trip—but Arlinn has questions for her, too.

"How can we be sure it'll work?"

"How can you be sure it won't?" says Katilda.

Being a spirit must make you more inclined to mystery—not less.

“I just like to be sure of things,” Arlinn answers. They’re walking through the woods, most of the others asleep in a carriage. Adeline’s charger has taken up the yoke, along with Kaya’s borrowed gelding. They are the only ones awake of the whole group—the cathar, the wolf, and the spirit. “You can’t fault me for that.”

“You don’t know yourself very well,” Katilda answers. “If you acted only when you were certain, you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

They say the worst dog bites come from pups you raise with your own two hands. Arlinn winces.

Her eyes fall on the carriage, again. She thinks of everyone within it. Chandra curled up on one of the benches, Kaya somehow asleep leaning against the wall, Teferi taking the other bench. And all along the floor—her wolves, slumbering peacefully, their bellies full.

“Were you certain of them?”

The question startles her from her thoughts. Arlinn glances toward Katilda. “Of course I was. Some of the strongest mages around. How could I not be?”

“You knew I didn’t mean the mages.”

Another wince. There’s no fooling witches, is there? “Sorin had his own reasons for wanting to help us. He’s made his mistakes, but at the end of the day, he loves Innistrad as much as I do. I knew he’d come around.”

Left unspoken is that Sorin didn’t make the journey with them. He said there were things to which he still needed to attend. Cryptic, as always. She suspected that it wasn’t just brooding obfuscation on his part this time. He stayed behind to help them attend to the fallen, to the injured. Anyone who needed long-term support was moving into Markov Manor for a few months. He insisted it was only because he had access to medical texts the others could only dream of.

And maybe it was.

Or maybe it was something else, and he just didn’t want to admit it.

Thus—“I have other matters to attend to.”

Thinking of it does bring a smile to her face. She knew there was a heart in there somewhere.

But the smile shrinks at Katilda’s next needle: “You know I didn’t mean him, either.”

The woods are lovely at night, the scent of pine clear and bracing like good whiskey. Arlinn lets it linger in her nose for a little while.

“There’s a day coming where you won’t have to ask that question,” she says.

“A day many years past the Harvesttide Massacre,” Katilda says. Her spectral form flickers.

“He’ll pay for what he’s done,” she says. That’s the real question here—she’s sure of it. “Once all this is taken care of, I’ll start tracking him down.”

“And yet how will he pay?” Katilda asks. “What currency can he give us for the lives he’s taken? You are a human who wears the skin of a beast. He is a beast, no matter the shape he wears.”

It isn’t the conversation she wanted to have. Still, it needs saying.

“Tovolar rebuilt the Mondronen Howlpack out of fear,” Arlinn begins. “He’ll tell you there are other reasons, but at the end of the day, it’s fear. Too many of his friends walked the same line I do—and they got killed for it, no matter how good they were.”

There is a man lumbering ahead of her in the woods. He doesn’t talk much. He doesn’t need to. They understand each other.

Arlinn pushes the memory aside.

“When you’re a werewolf, you’re never just yourself. Doesn’t matter who you are—people will assume things about you. You’re responsible for any villager any wolf has ever killed, and you don’t want to be. You’re afraid. You run. You find a pack. They don’t judge you for what you are, and they tell you it’s okay to be that way. That you *have* to be—because otherwise, humans will kill you. And they’re right enough that most people never have a second thought.”

Avabruck through a wolf’s eyes. Her parents, wondering where she’s gone. A secret she can’t share.

“It isn’t until you get some distance that you realize they’re wrong. There is another path. Not an easy one, by any means—you’ve got to change what you expect about humans, and humans have to change what they expect about you—but it’s there. If *everyone* can agree to work toward a different Plane, we can build one step by step, each of us a brick. It’ll take years. Decades, maybe. But we can get there. Still—when you’re a werewolf, you worry about right now. What you’re going to eat, who’s hunting you, what you’re doing to stay safe during the day. It’s hard to see the bigger picture, and harder to feel connected to it.”

Tovolar around the fire, staring at her as if she’d grown a second head.

“I told him all of this years ago. I told him there was another way. He didn’t believe me. To him, humans will never change. They’ll always think we’re monsters—so why not be monsters? Why keep ourselves from his idea of greatness?”

She swallows.

“Something like Harvesttide doesn’t come from nowhere. If you asked him, he’d say there are a hundred times more wolves that have died over the years. That Harvesttide was only the beginning.”

The words taste disgusting, even as she speaks them. Arlinn can’t imagine a worldview she disagrees with more. Yet even still

“You asked what justice looks like there. Tell you the truth, I’m not sure. How do you punish someone who lives their whole life in fear and anger without stoking those flames? I want him to pay for what he’s done. But I want him to get better, too. I want him to see that there is another way. That we can work together toward a better day—but Harvesttide set us back decades. It will make humans more likely to kill us, not less.”

Arlinn takes another breath of the cool air. It brings her less clarity than she’d like.

“You asked me if I was sure he’d come. I wasn’t,” she admits. “But I thought that if he did, he’d see that we *can* all work together. I wanted him to see that if he helped, people would be grateful, that we wouldn’t have to fight. I thought it was important.”

Katilda, floating beside her, looks up to the moon. For a long while, neither of them says anything. The weight of her speech settles across her own shoulders, heavier than a bearskin. To be honest, she hadn’t thought any of it through—just said what her heart felt. Now that her mind’s had a chance to hear it, she’s still processing.

She's not sure she's ever going to be done sorting through it.

"Do you think it helped?" Katilda asks.

And the answer's as obvious as it is hard to say, each syllable wrung from her like water from a rag. "I don't know. But I had to try."

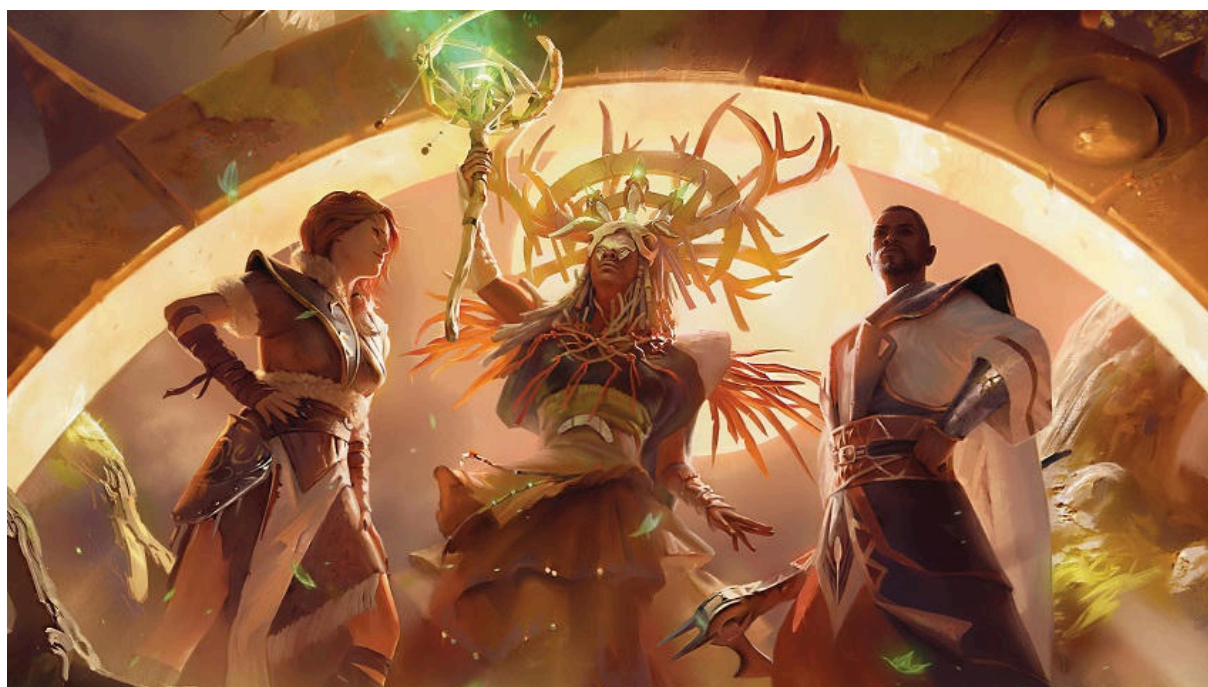
"I would give you advice, Arlinn," Katilda says.

Arlinn rolls her shoulders. "Let's hear it."

"It's admirable not to forget the man behind the crimes," she says, "but nor should you forget the crimes themselves. Whatever your hopes for Tovolar, he's betrayed them as often as he's fulfilled them. One day, you're going to have to reckon with that. It won't be enough to simply hope for better."

Again—each word a needle. Arlinn closes her eyes. The earth is cool and springy beneath her feet. It is night on Innistrad, and they are on the way to save it.

"I know," she says. "I know."



Glorious Sunrise | Art by: Andreas Zafiratos

"So, we're sure this is going to work, right?" says Chandra.

Arlinn smirks. "Yes, we're sure."

She stands at the center of the Celestus, the others gathered on one of its outer arms. Katilda is before her, returned now to her rightful body. In Arlinn's hand is the Sungold Lock—along with the blood and offerings from before the ritual's sudden interruption.

The Moonsilver Key, token of victory, sits in the witch's hands. A faint magical glow surrounds her.

"*Root and soul, blood and fang,*" she intones—and it is not her voice, but the voices of all the gathered witches, the voice of the Plane itself. "*Let Innistrad stand united beneath the warmth of the sun.*"

Raised by the joined magic of the Dawnhart Coven, the Moonsilver Key floats toward the Sungold Lock. Arlinn holds it aloft, just as she's been instructed.

Part of her worries that it won't fit—that they've gotten a duplicate.

But that worry dies the instant gold meets silver.

A flash of light floods the Celestus, yet not a frightening one. It's warm as sunlight, warm as promises, and Arlinn's skin is happy to drink it in. She doesn't even have to close her eyes. All around them, the Celestus roars to life, shaking off centuries of overgrowth. Some of the trees still cling as the arms begin to rotate. Arlinn's never seen a tree clear over her head before, and admittedly, it fills her with a childlike sense of joy.

So, too, does the sight of her companions scrambling from their arm to another before they fall off. It happens so slowly they aren't in any real danger, especially not with Teferi around, but it's funny nonetheless. The rim—thankfully—is far more stationary.

With each passing of the arms overhead, the light around them increases in intensity. Eventually only a single column remains, running from this very platform to the moon itself. It's difficult to watch it and feel anything but eternal.

Arlinn can't think of anything to say. She thinks there isn't anything to say, at all, about this. Sometimes you just have to shut up and appreciate what's happening—appreciate the absurdity of life itself.

A blacksmith's daughter stands beneath an ancient device and watches day return to Innistrad.

When the light fades—and it is long in fading—the moon has already begun her descent, sinking like a dropped coin beneath the waves of the horizon. Next to her, she hears Katilda picking up the key.

Arlinn raises a brow. "Don't you need that?"

Katilda looks up at the sky. "If all goes well, not for another thousand years. There is another here who has greater need of it."

Best not to argue with witches. As the moon sinks below the horizon, Arlinn walks with Katilda toward the rim of the Celestus. There, the others are sitting, their legs hanging over the edge.

Ahead of them, the Kessig woods run on and on and on. She knows every inch of them as well as she knows her own skin. She knows what they look like in the night, in the morning, and in the precious dawn hours, when every bough is painted pink.

Yet the thought of seeing all of it again is almost enough to bring her to tears.

She sits among them, her friends, and her wolves quickly surround her. Patience lays in her lap. Katilda joins them, too.

Together they watch the first sunrise over Innistrad in months. It is the same as every other sunrise—but therein lies the beauty. Every single sunrise is a gift. It is something that defies expectation, something that almost defies belief: every morning a golden ball of fire crests the horizon, and that act alone is enough to bring light to the Plane.

It is the first sunrise in months. It is like every other sunrise. And it is all the more perfect for that.

Cheers erupt the moment the sun finally shows herself. Arlinn can't keep from joining in, the joy as golden in her soul as the disk they're celebrating. Even the wolves join in—howling, for once, at the sun. Lovers kiss, friends link arms. Ancient songs with familiar melodies lift the spirits of the attendees.

And, of course, there is drink.

Someone slips a goblet into Arlinn's hand almost without her noticing. The spiced wine is warm against her skin even through its container, and warmer still when it blooms across her chest.

But there is a coldness that follows it as she realizes it's time for the others to go.

In the gathered crowd—now a party—she finds her friends.

Chandra and Adeline come first. She finds them, just as she expected, secreted away beneath the boughs of a willow tree. A veil of leaves keeps the secret of their parting. Arlinn can't hear what they're saying from here, either—only just barely make out their embrace. It feels right, to stay at this distance. Chandra will find her later to say goodbye—but for now, best to let them have this.

She's only gone a few steps away when she hears Kaya. "Spying, huh? Didn't think you had it in you."

"I just wanted to check in on them," Arlinn says.

"Sure you did," Kaya answers. She crosses her arms, looking toward the willow. "Didn't figure she'd like this place so much."

"Innistrad's more than just doom and gloom," Arlinn says. "I hope you've found that, too."

Kaya smirks. "Maybe. Or maybe I don't mind doom and gloom," she says. "It's been nice working with you, Arlinn."

"Nice working with you, too," Arlinn says. "I hope it's not the last time."

"Of course not. There's a lot of ghosts here with unsettled business. I'm sure you'll need my expertise before too long. Just remember I don't work for free," she says.

"Sure you don't," Arlinn says, smirking.

But Kaya's already shimmering out of existence.

Teferi isn't far, either—and he has company. Katilda's with him. As Arlinn approaches, they both turn toward her. In Teferi's hand is the Moonsilver Key.

"Ahh, so you're the one who needs the key," Arlinn says.

Teferi smirks. "She's been kind enough to lend me the key. Moonsilver has a number of fascinating properties, particularly for temporal magic."

"I hope it serves you well, then," she says. "But remember, you've got to return it, or I'll hunt you down."

Teferi smiles and hugs her. "I'd never escape a wolf on my tail. It's been good to see you, Arlinn."

"And good to see you, too," she says.

But there's something hanging in the air, something yet unsaid. Teferi holds her at arm's length searching for the words.

"Bad news?" Arlinn asks.

"Might be. You're going to have to keep an eye out. We've had trouble, lately. Old trouble."

"That means something, coming from you," Arlinn says. She hopes a bit of levity will make things easier, but Teferi isn't cheered at all.

"I know better than most how serious the threat is. They're called Phyrexians. If you see any strange black oil, beings of flesh and metal anything strange at all, let the rest of us know. I had hoped we might find a clue during this endeavor, but it turned out well. This key is promising."

Teferi once spoke of a place he'd known before, a place he'd failed. From the look in his eyes, she had the feeling the two are related.

"Something might be coming. Be certain you're ready for it."

"I will," she says. "No matter what, Innistrad will endure."

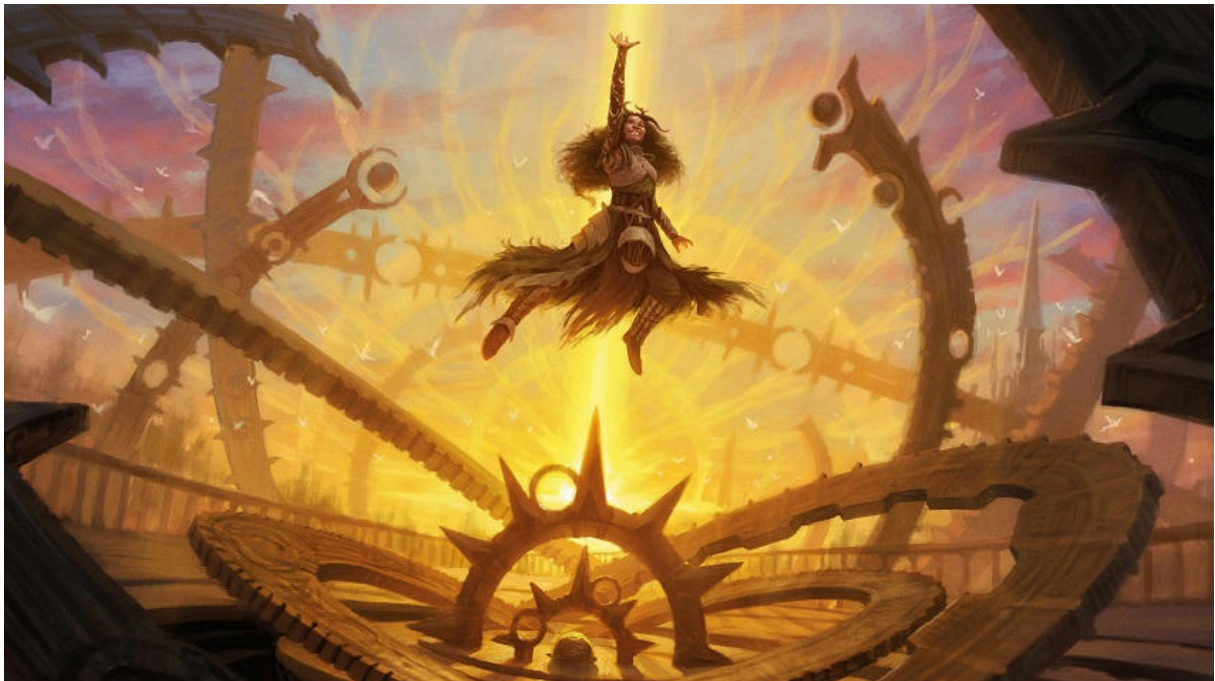
He smiles at her again—but with only a shadow of his usual mirth. "It's in good hands, isn't it? Take care, Arlinn."

Soon, he too fades.

She knows the Kessig woods.

But they call to her, all the same, the light now filtering through the leaves of evergreens. Snow falls like flower petals upon the forest. The air is bright with the scent of winter.

Even though her friends will soon be gone, Arlinn Kord has her pack.



Katilda's Rising Dawn | Art by: Manuel Castañón