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# Temur: Together Survives the Pack

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*

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What is woven may be torn apart. What is torn apart may be mended. What is mended, to the untrained eye, may be seamless.

But there will always be eyes that see the truth of things.

Soaring above the ice-capped mountains, Ureni sees the threads of the world pulse a brilliant blue. They watch them interlace. Azure wraps around the people of the Temur as they sleep, leaping from one family to the next, binding wrists and throats and tongues. Like dye, the blue seeps beneath their skin and leaves its cruel mark upon them; it binds their eyes open even as death comes upon them.

Ureni swoops low to the ground, teeth gnashing at the threads. But it's no use—the blue dissipates between their powerful jaws. Only the cold burn of the deepest frost remains.

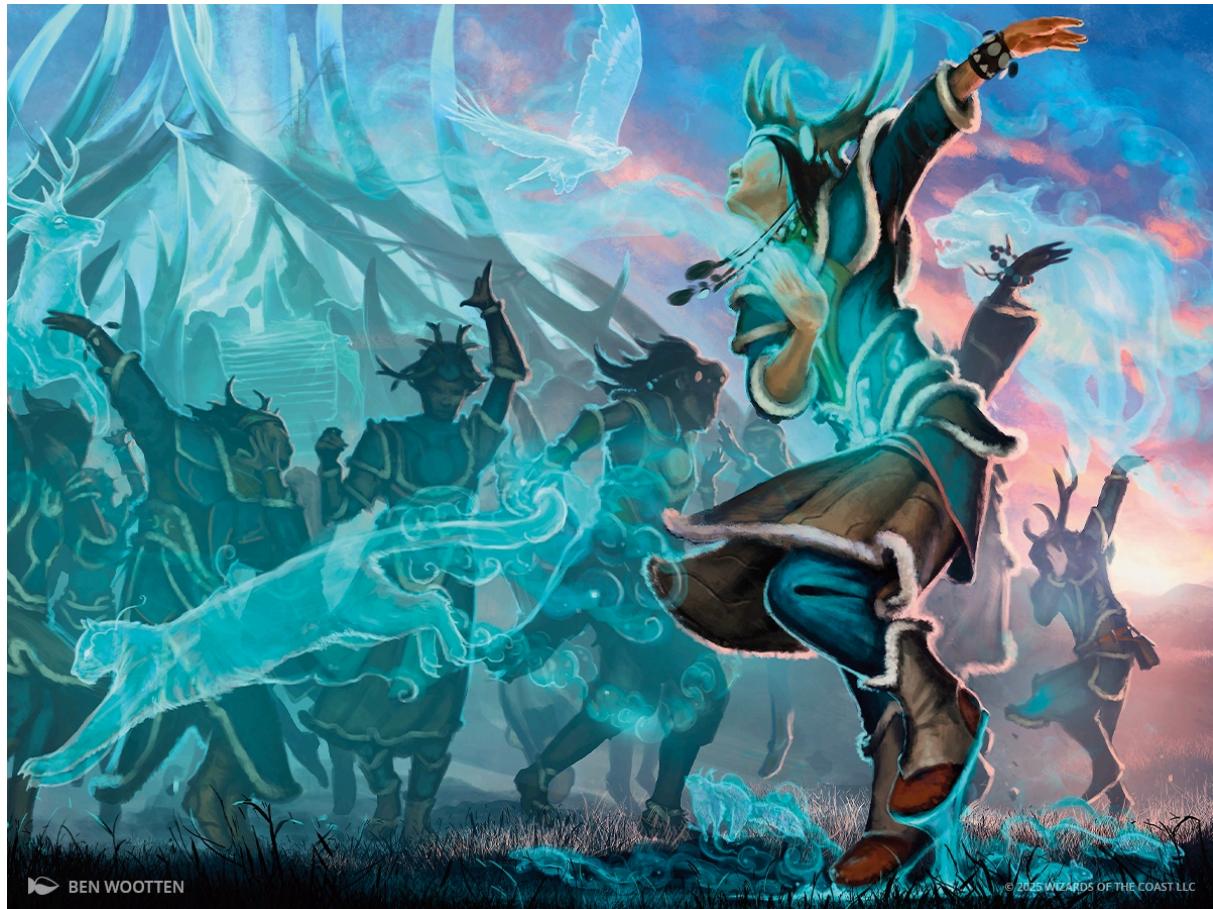
Snow falls upon the wrecked camp: on a fire tended only by corpses; on the half-processed carcasses of their kills; on the lush, grassy roofs that shelter those who will never wake; and on the dragon who stands vigil at its center.

In the bitter cold of the early morning, Ureni roars for what has happened, what is happening, and what is yet to come.

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Eshki Dragonclaw roars to the crowd—and the crowd roars in answer. The cold snow clinging to her skin leaves a scintillating pain as the cool morning air breezes across the wrestling ring. From the beat of her heart to the clouds of her breath, from the bruises forming on her arms to the blood streaming from her already broken nose, she is alive. Gloriously, wonderfully alive. And that life reflects back to her in the excited cheers of her people.

Surrounded by lands that would have conquered any of the other clans of Tarkir, the Temur have not just survived but thrived. The drums beating their festival tattoo, the smoked meats delicious and succulent, the bright colors of their coats—all of these are testament to that fact.



Art by: Ben Wootten

And no one feels more pride in this than Eshki.

High above her head, she hoists her struggling opponent—the second-largest grappler in this camp. He thought coming at her straight on would leave her overwhelmed. What he *hadn't* accounted for was Eshki catching him in a chokehold that ruined his momentum. Stepping to the side, she'd looped her arm under his chin and squeezed his head against her. As he started to stagger, she hauled him overhead like a hunter with their prized catch.

"I thought you said you'd brought your best!" she says. Though she's grinning, she knows she can't hold this for too long. He's already starting to kick. Showing off can only last for so long before it becomes foolish.

Eshki's not about to squander her lead. Not when the others are smiling back at her. Some of the kids are even wrestling each other on the sidelines, their thick coats providing plenty of cushion aside from the powdery snow. Their ruddy cheeks are bright spots as they cheer their own small victories.

She pivots, moving in a half-spin before using her momentum to drive the man straight into the powder. The fire in his eyes isn't out yet. When he lands on his shoulders, he rolls and reaches for Eshki's calf, trying to reverse their positions and get a grip on her so he can pull her down with him.

Valiant work. But it wouldn't save—

"Yeah! Get her, Papa!"

Eshki's ears perk. *His kid is in the audience?* Well. That changes ... some things.

He yanks her down, and she lets it happen, falling on him like an avalanche. He's not much gentler. Within seconds, they're tumbling about in the snow, each looking for purchase on the other. He goes for a lock on her arm; her shoulder and elbow start to strain against the pressure. *How much longer can she bear it?*

Long enough to hear one more round of cheers from his daughter.

She rolls again, moving with the tempest's own speed, a whirlwind of limbs. Before he knows what's happened to him, she's got him pinned.

Eshki lets out a breath. The smile's back on her face again as she counts to ten in her head—then stands and offers him a hand.

"You did well," she says.

There's a moment where she wonders if he'll take her up on the offer. Some men don't. Pride can be more fearsome than any dragon—and much harder to kill. But when he looks up at her, it isn't with condemnation, but admiration.

"Maybe I'll get you next year, Dragonclaw," he says.

As his daughter bounds up to them, Eshki pats her head. "Maybe it'll be you, but then again, maybe it'll be her," she says. "So long as you come back stronger, I'll be happy to fight—"

"Eshki!"

That voice. *Alniul?* Eshki turns toward it. Sure enough, the Twice Whisperer is at the edge of the circle. But they aren't alone. A hunter is at their side, one with red-rimmed eyes and a hunch to her shoulder that spoke of war. Slung across her back is a stag. A large one, too; more than enough to feed this community for a week if they were careful.

Eshki's heart goes cold. Something has got to be wrong. The music's stopping. Any other time, they'd be celebrating a catch like that.

"Alniul!" she calls, stepping forward. "What's happened?"

"Something horrible," answers her old friend. They lay a hand on the hunter's shoulder—she tosses the catch in front of her with disgust.

The stag's eyes are an unseeing, bright blue, a blue which runs along their body like the water running down a mountain.

"Eshki," Alniul says. "We need to speak to Ureni."

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As they travel, Alniul tells Eshki what they have heard. Of the bodies, the blue painting them. The blue already touching the veins of the hunter who presented them with the deer.

"We don't know how long we have," Alniul says, "if this is some kind of curse one of the other clans has laid upon us. The only comfort is that it must have happened in the middle of the night."

But one of the gruesome details stands out to Eshki. Truth has never been able to scare her into silence. "You said their eyes were open."

Alniul is quiet. The wind through the mountains answers for them, as it often has. Today, it is a low whine, a wolf in need of a meal.

"You're afraid," says Eshki.

It is often said that the wisest person in any village is its whisperer—but wisdom comes in many forms, and Eshki has plenty of her own.

Alniul lets the words hang for a while. “My cousin ate at their fire,” they say. “I had always meant to go back. It isn’t usually allowed, for whisperers. But that didn’t make me want it any less.”

Eshki thinks of the battles they’ve fought together. Atarka and her kin did not easily surrender their rule. More than once, she has looked on Alniul for clarity, for steadiness, while cloaked in the gore of their hard-won freedom.

It was Alniul who made her rest in those days. Alniul who helped cleanse her of the things she’d done. Alniul who reminded her why they fought at all.

She lays a hand on their shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” she says. “Will you tell me of them as we walk?”

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Dragonclaw and Twice Whisperer. Body and heart. Brash and thoughtful. The two that approach Ureni’s grove are all of these things and more. Overlaid upon them are the faces of all of those who have come before—gauzy visions of faces hardened by struggle. Ureni does not know their names. All the same, faces are things that can be remembered. Should be.

Eshki bows her head; Alniul does not. With a wave of their claw, Ureni offers them clear water. Together, the two kneel and drink. How striking it is to watch—though they make no sound, the two are in every gesture coordinated. Kneel, lean forward, cup your hand into the water, drink. All in step with each other.

Relief blooms in the dragon’s breast. Perhaps all is not lost.

“You have seen what is coming,” Ureni says.

“We have,” says Alniul, “and we are afraid. We hoped that you might have some guidance for us. Is this a plague, or something worse?”

“Tell us who has brought this upon us,” says Eshki, “and we will see them driven from the mountains.”

Sincerity. Passion. Empathy. Deep as the roots of the tallest trees. Ureni hopes that it will be enough. That they will listen.

“Boldest of warriors, stay your hand; this is not a problem you may solve with violence,” they say. Then, to Alniul: “Nor is this a problem for which I can offer guidance. Much as I wish it were otherwise.”

Eshki grits her teeth, but Alniul leans forward, their eyes wide. “Do you mean that you don’t know what’s causing it, or that it’s something we have to figure out on our own?”

Ureni swirls the trough of water with a single claw.

“The solution to this cannot be granted. It must be learned,” says Ureni. “And the two of you have always been excellent students.”

“How can you be so cryptic when whatever this is has already killed our people?” counters Eshki. She takes a step forward. Anyone else would be trembling in fear, but Ureni knows it is anger driving her now, a fiery need to protect.

“Because if I am anything less, you will never solve it,” says Ureni. “The two of you have what you need.”

Eshki takes another step forward, but Alniul lays a hand on her shoulder. “How long do we have?”

A rumble from the dragon, one which shakes the berries from the trees. Here in the grove they call home, there is always life, always growth, yet even here—there will soon be traces of that horrible blue.

“Two weeks.”

Alniul bows. “Thank you. We’d better not waste any time.”

They guide Eshki away before she can say anything she’ll regret. Ureni watches them go—and the trail of fate they leave in their wake.

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They don’t speak about what it is that needs doing. The two of them have spent too long fighting for the clan. They know each other as ice knows water.

In the old days, people did not question what their fate would be. The dragons crushed any sort of imagination they might have. There was no room for anything except survival. Often it was not your own survival you could secure; what meat you found had to be offered to Atarka’s brood before it ever met your campfire. So many of their people had learned to live on the meager scraps that remained to them.

No one survived that life without resourcefulness. And no one who had lived through it would inflict it on another.

The answer, then, is clear: if Ureni will not give them the answers, then they will find them elsewhere.

Alniul leads. The winding paths along the mountain take their price. Alniul’s calves burn, and no amount of bundling can truly save their cheeks from the chill. That the tip of their nose survives to this day is a testament to the hardiness of the Temur.

There are other places to go to speak with the spirits of the land, easier things to reach. Alniul has spoken to them in clearings, with clear water running over their feet; they have spoken to the spirits beneath the shade of great trees and in warm caves.

But that is not what must be done here.

The spirits with which they need to speak most do not leave themselves to an afterlife of calm and luxury.

Up and up. Higher and higher they climb, until they must struggle with the air itself for breath. Nothing here is easy. Their heart aches for those who have never known it any other way.



 SAM BURLEY

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Art by: Sam Burley

As they crest a rise in the mountain, they turn to Eshki, their hand laid on a jagged stone. Perhaps the tooth of some long-gone member of Atarka's brood.

"It lies beyond here, doesn't it?" she says.

Alniul nods. "I'm sorry, but I have to do the rest alone."

She does not argue. Other warriors used to. Alniul has heard from other whisperers, and from their ancestors, that you must speak carefully around those with strong sword arms and treat their tempers as bolts of lightning waiting to strike.

This is not true of Eshki. It has never been true of her.

She claps them on the shoulder. "Go with all of us woven into your coat, Alniul."

They turn to face the wind, a little warmer than when they left.

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Alniul calls to the spirits for an answer.

They receive it.

That is all there is to tell.

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What feels like hours later, Eshki hears the crunch of snow behind her. At long last, her friend has returned. But all is not well: they sway from side to side with each step and light clings to their eyes like the coal of a campfire.

Eshki springs into action. She pulls them past the sacred boundary and back into the realm of the mundane, then wraps their arm around her shoulder. Her hand finds their waist. Weak, and with a wound deep in their spirit, they begin the journey down the mountain.

“Rainveil,” Alniul mumbles. Their voice is so quiet that the wind threatens to drown it out.

Eshki holds every syllable as dear as a hard-won meal. “Is that where we need to go?”

Alniul nods. “I saw … a wounded reindeer. Where its blood … seeped into the ground … the roots of the trees went bright blue.”

Their legs give beneath them.

But that is no great ill. No Temur walks alone. So it has been for centuries, and so it will be. Eshki scoops up her old friend. She carries them the rest of the way down the mountain—and when later they awaken, she makes no mention of it.

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In good times, the journey from the mountains to Rainveil Forest would take no more than one week. It’s a journey the two have made twice a year, every year, for as long as they can remember—part of the natural paths the Temur follow through the year in search of food.

These are not good times. The land itself is turning against them. Overgrown paths lead nowhere when uncovered; clouds obscure the guiding stars; snow that should yield to their feet takes a double-tax of exhaustion.

There are villages they come across on their journeys. Some are in good spirits. They welcome Eshki and Alniul to sit by their fires and eat their food. The blue-vein sickness has not touched them. To these camps, a warning and a wish for better times will suffice. They do not have to linger.

But not all camps are so lucky.

One they find is already tending to their dead. These do not welcome Eshki and Alniul with smiles, but with wariness. How can this be happening to their loved ones? What will be done? They are in search of solutions and comfort and sense.

The world is often senseless.

But Eshki and Alniul linger at these fires all the same and make what sense of things they can. They sing the funeral songs; speak the deeds of the dead; answer what questions come to them.

“In two weeks, this will be over,” Eshki says.

“And what of those who die in the interim?” one of the men asks her.

There is no easy answer to the question. Eshki is wise enough to know this. She does not offer a platitude or a promise she cannot keep.

“My heart aches for them. We will think of them every day in the dark of the night, and they will keep us from our slumber.” A pause. “Please. I will do *everything* I can.”

They have many such conversations, each one harder than the last.

Sometimes, they go even worse.

"We will save all we can," Eshki will swear, and the answer will come:

"Why not leave them to die? They are weak, and the disease is only culling them from our ranks."

On hearing words like these, Eshki cannot stay her hand. The speaker is flung into the snow heedless of the danger, heedless of the conversation itself. Her breath fogs around her head like the steam of a dragon's maw as she bears down on them.

"We do *not* leave our clan behind," she says. "We are no longer what the dragons made of us."

It happens more than she would like to admit. But she will throw as many as need throwing, say as many apologies as need saying.

Eshki insists they cannot abandon the suffering—even if it means they take longer to reach their destination.

"The living," she argues, "are just as important as the dead."

The last fire they come to is long burned out. The bodies that sit around it are blue-veined, the frost already riming them, slumped over with their heads on each other's shoulders.

Whole families.

Eshki is quiet. Through arranging the bodies, she is quiet; through the funeral rites, she is quiet; while Alniul wakes, she is quiet.

But, that night, she lets herself weep, and she remembers their names.

Each one.

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The forest rises before them. Eshki and Alniul approach it, their feet leaving long trails in the snow behind them. Even proud Eshki's shoulders are rounded by the weight of what they've had to carry. Between the old friends, there is only the silence of what they have had to hear and see.



Art by: Jesper Ejsing

Even the forest has no comfort for them. As they take their first steps beneath the canopies, no creatures dart before them. They hear no birds alighting from the trees, no wings flapping overhead. The cries of the wolf do not come, nor the distant calls of the reindeer.

For the first time either of them can remember, Rainveil Forest is totally silent.

Eshki catches Alniul's eye. She gestures for them to wait as she scouts ahead, and they wave their hand. No. They will go together.

Eshki tilts her head. She waves a hand at the space ahead—runs a finger along her veins. It's dangerous. Are they sure they want to do this?

Alniul nods.

Together through the brush. Alniul walks with purpose, though their legs are weak from the travel and their spirit bowed. The vision was clear enough to tell them where they needed to go. A tree with leaves already going white would mark their arrival.

But, in truth, they hardly need the prophetic visions to make way. Only a few steps into the forest, they spot the blue veins of the disease spreading into the earth.

Eshki's head pounds. So much of it. To see it as the falcons did, they were treading through a vast network of streams and rivers, each pulsing a violent blue. *How had it gotten this bad so quickly?*

It does not take them long to follow them to their source. At its core, there glows a lake of awful blue light, an affront to nature and everything it represents. The trees grow ashen leaves here, the water bubbles with murk, there are no animals but those that persist as bone and marrow.

And in the center of all this, laying with his arms wide out, is a man.

Surrak is paler than Eshki has ever seen him. The blue that flows through the forest is there in him, too, flowing from a wound on his chest the size of Eshki's balled fist. He does not stir when they approach. His eyes remain fixed on the horizon. Were it not for the silent movement of his lips as he shaped unseen words, it would be hard to notice he was alive.

The last man to lead their people. The man whose ribs she had cracked like a roasted bird's before an army of their countrymen. In the end, it had not been enough to stop him—he had broken her nose, blackened her eye, and shattered her left arm before she dealt him the wound that ended the fight. Then Eshki pinned him in front of the army. There was no recovering.

“Surrak ...?”

Eshki is the one to break the silence. With no fear for her own safety, she rushes forward and kneels at his side.

But when she tries to lift his hand from the cursed ground, she finds she can't—all the strands of blue have tied him there.

“Why have you come?” Surrak asks. “Was it not enough for you to take my people from me?”

It would be better if he had shouted. The whisper that leaves him echoes through the forest as if he had spoken directly into their ears.

“What sort of question is that?” Eshki says. “We're here to save the Temur. This disease—whatever it is—it's spreading. Our people are dying, Surrak. This has nothing to do with you.”

linebreak She slips her fingers beneath the bulk of his body and sets herself to lifting as hard as she can. There's nothing for it—he simply won't move.

“Leave me and leave the others,” Surrak says. He spits, darkening the collar of Eshki's coat. “I don't need your help.”

Anger is a fire in her veins. She grabs him and shakes him, his head lolling against the earth. “That's what you have to say? We came here to stop whatever this is, and you'd rather just let everything die?”

“That's what you don't understand,” Surrak answers. “Everything has to die. The strong live as long as they can in spite of that. Anyone who doesn't claw their way back to life should be left behind. We can't feed every open mouth.”

Eshki grits her teeth. Before she can speak any further, Surrak glances at her from the corner of his eye.

“Not that you care what I think,” he says.

Eshki balls her hands into fists. More than anything, she wants to strike him. There's part of her that wants to argue how well she understands that. She, like every other Temur, grew up under the tyranny of Atarka's brood. But all of that is in the past now. *Why would anyone cling to it so tightly?*

But it is Alniul who answers, and Alniul who stays her hand with a gentle touch.

“Eshki, Surrak—please, listen to me. We don't have long to fix this, and we're going to need each other to even try. You *must* work together, or this curse is going to kill everyone we've ever known,” they say.

Silence in the glade again. This time, it is broken by a grunt as Surrak, once huncaller, pushes himself up. He is staggering on his feet, his shoulders swaying. With every breath he takes, his wound glows blue.

“You're only coming here because you need me,” he says.

"We came here to save all the Temur, you crags-for-brains," counters Eshki.

Alniul pinches their nose. "I don't ask for much from the two of you. I hope you'd agree. This is your last chance to work together before I have to ask the spirits for help, and I don't think either of you want them to see it get to that point."

Eshki and Surak stare at one another like bears who have spotted the same meal. Eshki is trying so very hard to keep from looking at his wound—and Surak refuses to break eye contact first.

At once, they both take steps toward each other.

"I'm tired of you always getting in the way," says Eshki.

"And I'm tired of you acting like you can fix—"

Alniul stands between the two of them with arms spread. Two translucent walls of frost form at their fingertips—veils of snow to keep the warriors from seeing one another.

"I'm going to explain this ritual only once," they say. "Our people are counting on us. More die every second we spend arguing. Please, listen." Eshki is the first to relax—and she has the good sense to look a little ashamed at how worked up she's gotten. She rolls her shoulders and touches her head.

"... Right. My apologies, Alniul. I shouldn't be putting myself first."

"What a change of pace that is," says Surak. He sniffs. "Tell me, Whisperer. I have had this wound in my chest here since your *friend* took my title from me. Will your ritual let me fight again and take back what is mine?"

Alniul's training had been extensive, although shorter than that of many others who had been Twice Whisperer. Like their predecessors, they'd been taught in secret. It was too much of a risk to train openly when being a whisperer at all was a death sentence. Let alone one as sensitive as Alniul. They wondered if this was going to be the most pressing thing they ever had to navigate. *How could these two still be at each other's throats at a time like this?* At least Eshki had stepped back.

"I cannot say that it will. But if we do not attempt to heal what has been broken, then there will be no one left to fight but bones, and no one to see your triumphs. You will live a life of pointless struggle, and your skin will not know the warmth of a fire. Is that really what you want? To let the cold have the best of your strength?"

Surak's hand rises to the wound in his chest. It hovers there. Alniul spots the slightest tremble in the old warrior's fingertips. *Just how much pain is that man in? And to still be trying to fight ...?*

"Help us, and you can challenge me after, Surak," says Eshki. "Only help us first."

Surak takes a breath. Though he tries to hide it, both Eshki and Alniul hear the painful rattle of it. "Fine."

Alniul waits before saying anything else. Part of them worries that Surak will change his mind, or that, once the three of them make for the center of the clearing again, he will strike at Eshki. It pains their spirit that they think this of Surak.

Eshki anticipates the blow, too, but is it not hers to weather? If he is going to strike anyone, it should be her. Now that peace has been struck, she lets herself look at the injury. Her fingers tingle. If she had known it would fester like this, she never would have ...

"What do we need to do, Alniul?" she says. It's always better to act than to wait. Especially when they have so little time. Something in her knows they will have to sit in the glowing blue core of all this—she walks toward it, her boots sticking to the ground with every heavy step.

Alniul follows. In a few strides they overtake her, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the mass.

“On either side of me, please,” they say.

The warriors take their seats. A cold wind blows through the forest—yet it makes no sound, and the leaves do not rustle.

Alniul takes their hands. Surrik flinches, but Eshki does not.

And when Alniul tilts their head to the endless eternal blue overhead ... they begin to sing.

Eshki has never counted singing among her talents. Nor would any of her clanmates unfortunate enough to hear her, deep in her cups, trying to join in on the hunting and drinking songs so vital to the Temur. Her voice was always too sharp, her timing too eager. But it made people laugh, sometimes, to sing with her. That was enough.



Art by: Danny Schwartz

Deep in Rainveil Forest, she is not certain if it's enough anymore. As Alniul's voice rings through the clearing like a struck bell, each note brings with it a magic as delicate as morning frost.

Snow-haze figures around the edges of the clearing sit around a fire that does not exist sharing drinks and food. Young warriors throw each other into the snow and help each other back up. A child rides around on their father's shoulders batting at the falling flakes.

*If she speaks, won't it ruin all this?* Yet there's no mistaking the look Alniul gives her, the way they nod their head at her. They want her to join in.

At least there are no words for her to ruin. She feels silly doing this—silly, and a little ashamed. But she raises her voice all the same to try and match theirs.

Yet the voice that leaves her, the melody that springs to her lips, does not match Alniul's at all.

And the visions begin to change.

A young girl is running full tilt away from a great shadow. Her face is half charred; she will never smile as other children have.

A man, wiry and lean with hunger, finds a bear picking apart the corpse of a dragonling. Desperate to fill his belly, he attacks—and the bear tears him apart.

Eshki's voice starts to waver. *What ... what is all of this? What is going on?* Though she tries to steady herself, to turn the melody into one of the many she's ruined by a campfire, all that comes out is this awful discord.

Cold in her gut. Cold that climbs up her throat, to her voice box. A prickling feeling that only gets worse with every passing moment.

More of the snow shadows around them: Warriors adorned with tooth and fang, weapons cobbled together from whatever they can make. Two dozen of them, if not more, stand around the clearing and watch Eshki and Alniul sing. And unlike every spirit Eshki has seen before this—their eyes are anything but peaceful.

She wants to ask what will happen to them, what any of this means, but by the time she can force herself to say the words, Surrak is already on his feet.

“Keep doing whatever it is that needs to be done,” he calls. “I will keep you safe, if she won’t.”

Eshki's voice cracks—yet Alniul squeezes her hand. A polar glow lights their face as they answer both leaders at once without ever breaking the song.

“They are the spirits of those who have died in this forest. The shapes they wear are those that speak best to you. To see their real forms is forbidden,” they say. “Animals, humans, those who are both. Those we know, those we have never known, those we may never know.”

As Alniul sings, their form ripples, the snow-magic coming over them, too. Another face is overlaid on their own—another voice speaking the same words.

Even Surrak stops in his tracks. Eshki watches him as he looks at his own outstretched hand—and sees there a reflection he hadn't expected.

“They are ourselves and they are not,” Alniul says.

Eshki's hair stands on end. The snow-visions tighten their circle around the clearing. As they advance, she sees their faces blur—two sets of them staring back at the group, even now.

“We must invite them to our fire. We must sing their stories, and let them sing to us, or we are lost.”

The melody swells—though not with triumph. As Eshki watches, the watching warriors open their mouths and add their voices to the song. Screeches of discord are worse than arrows when they pierce her ears. Even the great huntcaller doubles over as the nausea overtakes him. Gasping breaths do little to assuage the dizziness, the pain, the overwhelming wrongness of what's going on.

Words come, and horrors follow as Eshki comes to understand them.

*For months, I ate nothing but the marrow from the bones I was allowed to keep—*

—*the visions said we would triumph over the other clans, that is why I did what I did, and in the end, I saved us all*—

—*Oh, forgive me, forgive me, mother; I know you'd want me to live*—

—*He was just a boy and he was as hungry as I was and I struck him down*—

Voices overlaid, laments and dirges, war chants and wordless screams.

Eshki's forehead touches the cold blue earth. She sucks in a breath to try and steady herself. *Their ancestor's sorrow ... How could the Temur survive in the face of this torment?*

Alniul's double voice cuts through the din. “Eshki Dragonclaw, do you welcome those who have transgressed in the name of survival? Do you welcome them to the fire?”

Those who had stolen food from their families, those who had been forced to kill by the dragons, those who had subsisted for months on things no man should eat ... *Could she truly look on them as clanmates, knowing what they had done? Could she forgive them?*

Her eyes land on Surrik. Like her, he is doubled over as the sound attacks him. With each one of his shaking breaths, more of the blue light spills from him. And as his hand rises to the wound, as he strains to cover it, Eshki remembers the day she gave it to him.

“A whelp like you will never be able to defeat Atarka,” he’d said then. His fists had come down on her like boulders, each blow heavier than the last. Sometimes it still hurt to laugh after the beating he gave her.

But Eshki had refused to surrender. With her body bruised and broken, she fought back time and again. She had to. Too much rested on her survival—on the clan’s.

He’d knocked her over. Scrambling to break her fall, her fingers had closed around a jagged piece of ice. At the time, it felt like a sign—a gift from the ancestors she could use to free them all. When she drove the ice into Surrik’s chest, she told herself she’d done it for the sake of progress.

Surrik could not see a world without Atarka, and if they were meant to live in that world, the clan had to cast him aside.

But, in casting him aside ... she’d done the same to all the spirits around them now. Eshki plants her foot on the uncertain earth. Though the sound is as unrelenting as a blizzard, she hauls herself up anyway.

“Alniul,” she says. Each breath is hard fought; it is as if someone has tied something around her ribs to prevent them from expanding. “I will welcome all to the fire.”

“Sing the words, Eshki Dragonclaw, and let them be sung to you,” comes the answer.

Another breath. This one is harder even than the last. When she lets it out, she sings as loud as she can, heedless of the creaking sound of her voice.

“All are welcome at our fire! Pile the logs together, let the flames climb higher!”

She takes a dizzy step forward. The song rises. Now, for the first time, she starts to hear her own words coming back at her.

A final step forward and she made it to Surrik. Eshki claps a hand on his shoulder. “That means you, too, old man,” she says.

The warrior turns to her. In his eyes: anger, perhaps even hatred. But Surrak has fought for the Temur as much as she has. Perhaps more. The faces he sees staring back at him here ... *How many of them did he know in life?*

There are tears at the corners of his eyes. Eshki will tell no one she sees them.

He takes her hand. When she hauls him up, she slings his arm around her shoulder so that they may sing together.

For hours, they sing. From purple sky to violet morning, they sing.

And as dawn breaks on Rainveil Forest, a reindeer wanders into the clearing.

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What is woven may be torn apart. What is torn apart may be mended. What is mended, to the untrained eye, may be seamless.

But there will always be eyes that see the truth of things.

Ureni circles high above a camp on the farthest edges of the Temur frontier. It has been months since the threads of Rainveil Forest were torn and rewoven.

Around the fire, Alniul, Surrak, and Eshki share a meal far greater than any they'd ever had under Atarka.

Surrak says, "This is not over between us. I will take back my clan from you one day."

"When you're well enough, you're welcome to try," says Eshki.

And she pours him a drink.