
Episode 2: Don't Split the Party

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The hallway looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years, cobwebs choking the corners and grime streaking the faded wallpaper. Every footstep lifted a small cloud of dust from a tattered rug as the rescue party walked along it, moving with careful tactical precision. Kaito led the group, with the Wanderer close behind. Both had their swords out and ready, eyes scanning the hall for signs of Nashi. Zimone followed them, her own eyes fixed on one of Niv-Mizzet's scanners, which she clutched in both hands like some sort of strange technological security blanket. Tyvar and Niko brought up the rear, both prepared for something to jump out at them.

Himoto made a chittering sound and swiveled on Kaito's shoulder, looking back the way they'd come. The rest of the group stopped to see what she was looking at—all save Zimone, who kept walking forward with her eyes on the screen and stopped when she bumped into the Wanderer.

"Huh?" she asked, glancing up and blinking owlishly.

"The door's gone," said Kaito.

"That's ridiculous. Doors are static structures, they can't just—" Zimone turned and paused. "The door's gone."

"We tread carefully from here, friends," said Tyvar. "Predators who hide to hunt are more dangerous than those who come to you directly."

They resumed their trek along the hall, walking with even more care than they had before. The corridor widened into a parlor of sorts, the faded wallpaper giving way to peeling velour patterned with wide-winged moths picked out in green and gray against the pale rose background. Each moth had multiple eyespots on their wings, creating an eerie sensation of being watched. More halls branched off from here, openings adorning each wall, and paler squares on the walls showed where pictures had fallen or been removed.

Zimone frowned, looking from her monitor to the room and back again. "One of Nashi's drones kept transmitting all the way to the end of the hall," she said. "This isn't the same room that it recorded. How is that ...?"

"The most dangerous labyrinths can rearrange themselves when left to their own devices," said Niko. "Nothing says those are unique to Theros."

Kaito nodded. "We don't know whether it can only move when no one's looking. We stay close together. Someone should be able to see you at all times, understand?"

"Yes," said Niko.

Himoto chittered.

Keeping close together and never turning their backs to each other, the group began to explore the room, looking for some sign that Nashi had been here—or that *anyone* had been here, really.

Kaito moved to the center of the room, taking a deep breath. "Watch me?" he asked the Wanderer. When she nodded, he closed his eyes.

His training had involved learning more than he would have thought possible about the movement of air. Swift-Arm had been insistent that understanding space would make it easier for that space to be exploited to suit a warrior's needs. Under his tutelage, Kaito had learned how to step into a room and feel from the way the air moved against his skin whether he was the first to disturb it recently, or whether he was walking just behind someone who had slipped out another door.

This room felt like the central hall of the academy, the air so disturbed and distorted that it was moving in every direction at the same time, never settled, never still. Kaito frowned and opened his eyes, finding the Wanderer watching him intently, no more than a few feet away.

"I don't know if Nashi was here recently, but *someone* was," he said. "The air's all over the place."

"The ... air?" asked Niko.

Zimone, meanwhile, nodded enthusiastically. "It's a well-documented phenomenon. Haven't you ever walked into a room and been absolutely *sure* that you just missed someone?"

Niko nodded, more grudgingly. "Yes."

"And haven't you usually been right when you felt that way? Well, that's because your instincts are keyed to the presence of danger on a level the conscious mind can't normally access. They can tell by the way the air hits your skin whether it's been disturbed recently. Some people can learn to read that sense on a conscious level. But it's very unusual. It takes a lot of training."

"That's our Kaito," said Tyvar brightly. "Master of subtlety."

"So *why* do I like you again?"

"Because our foes are so preoccupied by my brilliance that it makes your job easier," said Tyvar.

Zimone blinked after him.

"He's smarter than he lets on," said Kaito. "But subtle, he's not."

"So someone was just here," said Niko. "Do we try to follow them?"

"That might be unwise," said the Wanderer, picking up a frame that had been shoved behind several empty ceramic jugs. The picture it contained looked printed rather than painted, showing a family of three—man, woman, and teenage daughter—all turned toward the original painter. The faces of the adults had been scratched out, reduced to white scabs on the paper, while the daughter continued to smile serenely at the people in the room. Gingerly, the Wanderer placed the picture back on the shelf.

"I don't know if we want to find the people who live here," said Zimone.

Niko stepped forward. "When we did labyrinth exercises back on Theros, we would search in a pattern to help us be sure we didn't miss anything. We take the right-hand turn and keep following to the right until and unless we wind up back where we started. That way we're never lost, and we know what we haven't looked at yet."

"We don't want to find the locals, but we *do* want to find Nashi," said Kaito.

"And we want to get as much data as we can for the research team," said Zimone, aiming her monitor at the picture. It beeped, apparently recording something, and she gave a satisfied nod. "Right-hand turn? This tactic matches simple fractal logic."

"Glad to have your approval," said Niko, and indicated the door to their right. "This way."

They began walking. The rest of the group followed, Kaito tense as he waited for the House to change itself again, still unsettled by the feeling of the air against his skin. The room hadn't felt unoccupied when they entered it, and it didn't feel unoccupied now. All his training said that he was leaving an enemy at his back.

Still, he walked on.

Following Niko's route through the House took them through a nonsensical jumble of rooms, connecting to one another with neither rhyme nor reason, kitchens leading into bedrooms, bedrooms leading into conservatories. One echoing room seemed to have been constructed to contain an indoor swimming pool that was still half-filled with dark, murky water, its surface blooming with algae and broad, improbable water lilies. Their flowers were a bruised pinkish white, like the flesh of a drowned sailor, and Niko shivered as they looked at it, turning their face away.

This was as far from the wine-dark seas of Theros as they could imagine, and they had seen quite a lot during their travels—their imagination was wide.

Barely wide enough to encompass the next room, which lay beyond a set of tall glass doors with moths worked into their metal frames. In the vast space on the other side, an abandoned funfair loomed above a field of rustling, unharvested corn, ears hanging heavy on their stalks and rotting where they fell. The funfair bore little resemblance to the traveling games of Theros, but the commonalities were enough to make the tents and rough constructs of wood and steel make sense. Nothing moved there but the wind.

"We found an exit," said Kaito, beginning to step forward. Zimone caught his arm. He stopped to look at her, and she pointed up, at the lightless sky.

"Look," she said, and called a small fractal equation into being, mathematics made magical and manifest. It leapt from her hand, shedding blue and green light as it hung in the air a few feet above their heads.

The light it shed wasn't much, but it glinted off distant panes of glass, making it obvious that even this impossible place was part of the House. The rustling of the corn seemed suddenly sinister. If they were indoors, there could be no breeze, and without a breeze, why was it moving?

"We go back," said the Wanderer firmly.

"But—" began Niko.

"We go *back*," she repeated.

"Royalty speaks in commands, and commoners answer in action," said Tyvar, amiably enough, and the group turned away from the looming, terrible shapes of the deserted amusements, moving back into the room with the pool.

"Where I'm from, we elect our leaders," muttered Niko, and Tyvar laughed.

The water looked no less dangerous on their return visit, and no less likely to drag down anyone who got too close. Keeping close to the wall, they walked on, back through a door that should have taken them into a pantry filled with half-empty jars and bushels of rotting root vegetables. Instead, they found themselves crossing an echoing ballroom, cobweb-snarled chandeliers dangling overhead and cracks patterning the windows.

"Still no sign of Nashi." Kaito paused, looking up at the windows. "Maybe a rooftop view would be of use?"

"No," said the Wanderer, with absolute firmness. Kaito turned, eyebrows raised. She shook her head. "You were the one who realized we had to stay ever visible to one another. None of us would be able to follow you."

"I might," said Niko.

"I wouldn't trust 'might' in a place like this," said the Wanderer.

"It wouldn't matter anyway," said Zimone. They turned to her. She had slung her monitor against her hip and produced a paper notebook from inside her vest, pencil moving fast as she wrote her calculations. "The architecture of this place doesn't make sense. Some of the angles measure differently depending on whether you look at them from the left or the right. If you climbed to the windows above us, you'd be just as likely to come out in a basement or an attic—and you'd still be inside the House either way."

Tyvar scoffed. "It's only a house. How large can it be?"

"Large," said the Wanderer. Collectively, they switched their attention to her. She pressed one hand to her temple, shaking her head. "This place is ... I can't walk the planes any longer, but I can still feel them, the way I did when they pulled me across the Blind Eternities without my consent. This place is *wrong*. It feels encased, like a moth caught in amber, and rotting from within. I'm not sure anything remains of what was once here *except* the House."

"There are some fungi that will swallow entire hillsides if allowed to grow unchecked," said Tyvar, uncertainly.

"Yes, like that," said the Wanderer. "This feels like a shell surrounding everything there is of what once was, and I fear it has no limits. We should return to where we lost the door back to Ravnica and see if we can't find a way to open it again."

"The door vanished," said Niko.

"We're pretty smart," said Zimone. "Collectively, I mean. I bet we can figure out how to make the door come back."

"So, we backtrack," said Kaito. "This way."

They began to move, but had only taken a few steps before someone screamed, deeper in the House, beyond one of the left-hand doorways they had been ignoring during their methodical progress. Tyvar jerked to attention like a hunting hound hearing a huntsman's horn. The voice screamed again.

"*HELP ME HELP ME OH SWEET SUNS HELP ME !*" it howled.

Tyvar's thin leash on his own heroic urges snapped, and he took off running, shouting, "Fear not! I shall save you!"

Zimone's eyes widened. Years of dealing with impulsive Prismari underclassmen had honed her reflexes to a fine point. When someone raced toward danger, it was often down to her to pull them back, so they'd still be alive to pull *her* back when she started wandering toward danger in a more academic manner. She ran after Tyvar.

"Come back!" she yelled. "Tyvar, come back! We have to stay together!" Something shattered on the doorway next to her head as she ran through, and then the ballroom was gone, and it was just her, Tyvar, and the sound of screaming.

On the other side of the door was an empty hall. There was no one there. No one in danger, no one screaming, only Tyvar, slowing in confusion as he registered the lack of someone in need of rescue. Zimone caught up to him, putting a hand on his elbow.

"We have to go back," she said.

"But I heard—"

"We all did. I think the House is playing tricks." She glanced back over her shoulder, then froze, paling. "That, or it heard us say we didn't want to split the party and thought it would make the decision easier for us."

"Houses don't *think*," said Tyvar, half-laughing as he turned to follow her gaze.

"Yeah, well, apparently neither do elven princes, because here we are," said Zimone.

Behind them, where the doorway back to the ballroom should have been, was a wall, papered in faded blue and patterned with more of those ever present, increasingly ominous moths. These had long, swooping tails on their hind wings, giving the impression that they were melting off the paper.

Tyvar stepped cautiously forward, reaching out to touch the wallpaper with his fingertips. He pulled back as soon as he made contact, grimacing. "Solid," he said, looking to Zimone. "What do we do now?"

Zimone shook her head. "I don't know. But we're going to need to figure it out."

"I thought you never missed!" said Kaito, wheeling on Niko, who was staring at their hands in confusion. "Why didn't your shard stop her?"

"I ... I don't," said Niko. "I never miss."

"And you didn't," said the Wanderer. "The doorway moved as Tyvar passed through it. Not very far, but enough to skew your aim. Zimone was already running, she adjusted without thought. This was a trap."

"How does a house set a trap?" asked Kaito.

"I don't know, but I have the feeling we don't have long to figure it out."

Kaito had started after Zimone as soon as the girl began to run and was now standing several feet away from the others, alone in a sea of faded marble tiles. He frowned. "They'll be back. They have to come back."

"Do they?" asked Niko.

"I trust Tyvar."

"The man who just ran off into certain danger at the first excuse?" Niko shook their head. "I saw him try to arm wrestle a giant once, because he thought it would make a good story. He may not worship Birgi, but he's one of hers, no question. I like him, but trust him? To choose safety over glory? I don't think so."

The doorway remained empty.

"I think ..." Kaito chewed the inside of his cheek briefly. "I think we go after them. They can't have gone very far."

"We need to stay together," said the Wanderer.

Kaito turned to flash her a bright, cocky smile. “That’s why I said ‘we,’ isn’t it?”

He stepped toward the doorway.

The floor he stepped onto opened like the mouth of a lamprey, wide and circular and ringed with jagged, downward-facing teeth. Kaito fell, barely managing to jam his sword into the remaining sliver of the floor before he dropped entirely out of sight. The Wanderer lunged for him, shouting his name as she reached. He reached back, and their fingertips almost brushed before the hole in the floor gaped wider, dislodging his sword, and Kaito fell into the blackness, Himoto’s eyes the only light that tracked his descent.



Art by: Billy Christian

The Wanderer tensed as if to jump after him, only to stop when Niko grabbed her wrist. She looked back at them, disbelieving, and they shook her head.

“No,” they said. “Not even for Kaito. He’s the only one of us who can get out on his own. He’s got this.”

Desperate, she looked back to the hole, and found that it, too, was gone, replaced by smooth floor as if it had never been. She wrenched her arm out of Niko’s grasp and sank to her knees, staring at the smooth tile.

“But he’s alone,” she said. “He’s alone in this house, where everything is wrong, and everything is rotting.”

“So, we find him,” said Niko, offering her a hand up.

The Wanderer looked at their extended hand for a moment, blankly, then took it and allowed herself to be tugged back to her feet.

“So, we find them all,” she said.

Tyvar hammered on the wall with both fists, sending up a terrible din and bringing cascades of dust down from the crown molding at the top of the walls.

"Kaito! Niko! Very pleasant swordswoman without a name!" he shouted. "Can you hear us?"

"I don't think they can," said Zimone. She had her monitor out again and was facing away from the wall. "Tyvar ..."

"What?"

"Problem."

"I feel we have those in plenty," he said, and turned.

They were no longer in a hallway. It had been replaced by a massive, towering library at least three stories in height, the ceiling above them open in a sort of central courtyard shape to show the levels above. Wrought-iron railings shaped into moth wings and spreading branches surrounded each layer of the opening, presumably to keep people from falling to their deaths. The walls were lined with shelves, each one groaning under the weight of dusty books crammed in until no space remained.

"It changes when neither of us is looking," he said.

"Quantum superposition," she replied. At Tyvar's blank look, she explained, "It's the observer effect. It holds true in physics. In some forms of magic, too. Some interpretations of the Vorzani Conjecture say that the Multiverse itself seeks observation, in the form of people capable of seeing it from multiple directions at once—I haven't proven it yet, but I'd posit that's part of why the opening of connections between planes has been met with a matching decrease in the number of people who can travel them under their own power. The Multiverse can remain stable and observed without that investment of resources."

Tyvar didn't look any less blank.

Zimone sighed. "It can't change if we're looking. Or at least not as much."

"I see." He looked back to the wall, relieved to find it was still there, not replaced by a bookshelf or another endless hall. "Is there any reason to think this wall is loadbearing in any way?"

"Not that I can see," said Zimone. "Why?"

In answer, Tyvar's skin rippled, taking on the hardwood sheen of the floor beneath his feet, and he pulled back his arm, slamming his fist into the wall hard enough to send fractures racing through the wood beneath the wallpaper.

"Ah," said Zimone. "Violence."

She should probably stay and watch him fight the wall. She knew that. Looking away risked losing him. But the sound of him punching his way into the body of the House was loud and consistent enough that she wasn't particularly worried about him disappearing without a trace: sometimes being the elvish equivalent of a Lorehold stone mover had its advantages. So she turned and began scanning the shelves around them, making note of the titles she saw represented there, seeking patterns.

There was a mighty crashing sound followed by Tyvar's jubilant declaration of, "I'm through! And there's a stairway on the other side!"

Zimone flicked her fingers, unspooling a cascading spiral of energy. "Take one end of this with you," she said, pushing it toward him. "I'll keep the other one, and hopefully that means we won't lose each other."

She should go with him. She knew that. But the *books*—the lost knowledge of an entire plane, however dangerous, wasn't something she could walk away from easily. Holding tightly to the end of her ribbon of fractal light, she stepped closer to the nearest shelf, trying to decide where to begin.

Tyvar frowned a little as he caught the end of Zimone's thread, watching her move closer to the books. He knew a lure when he saw one. Many monsters used them to catch their prey. Give the appearance of sweetness and something truly desired, and they could take things far too canny to be snared.

"Zimone ..."

"Just come back quickly. There's something about the way the floors are layered here that makes me think you won't be gone long."

Tyvar blinked. Then he shrugged, turning back to the stairs. He'd tried. Short of picking the young woman up and carrying her with him, or staying trapped where they were, he really didn't see another option.

He tied the fractal thread around his wrist, then stepped through the hole he'd opened in the wall and began climbing up. The walls of the stairwell were decorated with painted portraits of ordinary people, humans and elves, which became more distorted and *wrong* as he continued onward. Teeth extended into fangs, hands into claws, and smiles grew too wide for the faces that wore them, until it seemed like their heads should split in two. Tyvar shuddered and kept walking.

After Phyrexia, anything which distorted the body without the invitation of its owner transcended horror, becoming a violation of the natural order of things. True, these people could have sought their transformations, but there was a glinting despair in their painted eyes that made him think they had done no such thing. He walked through a gallery of nightmares, and he was well pleased when he saw a doorway up ahead at the next landing. He walked faster.

The thread around his wrist extended to stay with him, and as it didn't rebound to flutter uselessly against his skin, he assumed Zimone still held her end, safe in the library that seemed to be her natural environment. Tyvar kept walking, stepping through the doorway and into a narrow aisle between heavily laden bookshelves. They were filled with dusty, tight-packed books. He was back in the library.

His stomach sank. He continued onward to the end of the aisle, where he heard Zimone's voice call, "Psst, Tyvar! Over here!"

He looked to the left. There was Zimone, the other end of the thread tied around her own wrist, waving vigorously with her free hand. He walked toward her, dispirited.

"I fear we may be in dire danger, friend Zimone," he said.

She nodded. "I think you're probably right. Come help me move the archivist's ladder. I need to get to the top shelves."

She tugged the thread, which dissolved into glittering light as it fell away, and walked deeper into the library. Not wanting to lose sight of her again, Tyvar followed.

Niko and the Wanderer attempted to backtrack their way through the transformed, ever-shifting house, taking the turns that corresponded to the ones they'd taken before, moving with grim purpose through eerie, unfamiliar rooms. For a whole series of lushly appointed parlors and bedrooms, the air was so hot their clothing became almost unbearable, leaving them miserable and sweaty. It was followed by a long corridor with walls of glass that looked like it had been built for a grand royal conservatory, a passage for the gardeners to use in their daily labors. But outside those glass walls was no garden green, but a drowned world of flooded rooms, filled with rotten, floating furniture and bloated books that floated to and fro on impossible currents.

"I'm going to take a bold stance and say that I don't like it here," said Niko. "It's pretty awful, actually."

The Wanderer cracked a slight smile—her first since Kaito’s disappearance. “I think you’ll find general agreement for that position.”

“I’m sorry about your friend.” Niko paused, then added, “The one we came here to find.”

“Nashi, yes. His mother was very dear to me, and I owe his family a great debt. She died in the invasion.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I was sorry to kill her.”

Niko shook their head. “If she died in the invasion, you didn’t kill her. Phyrexia did. You just made sure it would stick.”

The Wanderer sighed. “If I could believe that, I might sleep easier. I owe my life to the people of Kamigawa, and she was among the best of them. She may have died at Phyrexia’s hand, but we’ve seen some lost that way returned to us. If I’d been slower in my defense, less determined, she might be with us now.”

“Or Kamigawa might be gone.”

The Wanderer blinked. She hadn’t considered that, and so for a while they walked in silence, her thoughts threatening to overwhelm her.

A door came into view ahead of them, heavy metal with frosted hinges, entirely out of place in the delicate glass wall. Both frowned, but it was Niko who reached for the latch and pulled the door open, releasing a burst of freezing air.

Cautiously, they slipped through, and the door swung shut behind them, sealing them in.

They were in a cold room with stone floors, heavy iron chains hanging from the ceiling, the hooks at their ends driven into massive cuts of meat. The Wanderer scanned the raw, skinned bodies, relieved when she saw nothing that appeared either human or nezumi. The House didn’t bring them here to gloat over Nashi’s death, at least.

Not yet. Niko and the Wanderer moved in silence between the dangling cuts of meat, careful not to lose sight of one another. The House had already claimed three among their number. All they could do now to help their companions was make it back to Ravnica and ask Niv-Mizzet for aid. Surely, he had a plan for what to do if the first team went missing. Surely, he would give them the resources to bring their people home.

Surely.

The cold room seemed almost endless. There were no walls in sight, only hanging carcasses and chains waiting for the delivery of the next kill. Abruptly, Niko thrust their arm out, stopping the Wanderer from going any farther. She shot them a sour look and they nodded toward the far side of the room where they could see the chains swinging back into place, as if something massive had pushed the hanging carcasses aside.

The Wanderer drew her sword, taking up a fighting stance, while Niko pulled several shards of magic out of the air, rotating them above their fingertips. The pair prepared for the battle sure to come, and, as such, were entirely unprepared for the hands which reached out from behind them and yanked them hard behind the nearest hanging, flensed behemoth.

Whatever it had been in life, it had resembled some sort of sloth, all solid muscle and long limbs tipped in wicked claws. Now it was a serviceable wall.

Niko and the Wanderer whirled, ready to fight. The pale, narrow-faced man who had pulled them behind the beast backed away, hands up like he was trying to ward them off. He pressed a finger to his lips, pulling a sheet of paper out of his pocket and holding it out to them.

There, written in several scripts, including Theran and Kamigawan, was the phrase BE QUIET. It didn't translate exactly; the Kamigawan text read UTTER NO SOUND. But the meaning was the same, no matter what.

The pair looked at him in quizzical silence, and he nodded exaggeratedly before pulling a slingshot out of his other pocket. He produced a ball of what looked like blood-matted hair from the same pocket, slipping it into the slingshot's cup as he pulled it back and nodded toward the room behind them.

Niko and the Wanderer turned to peer around the edge of the carcass into the chain-filled gloom. As they watched, a figure came stalking through the carcasses, tall and wiry. Wild and unkempt hair sprouted around a mask which covered the upper part of its face, revealing only two mad, searching eyes. It wore a canvas apron covered in unmentionable stains and carried a cleaver.

The stranger pulled back the cup of his slingshot even farther before letting fly, sending the ball of bloody hair sailing into the dark beyond the figure. He missed. He missed, and the figure continued to stalk silently, menacingly toward them.

Then, the ball of hair hit one of the distant chains, setting it rattling, and the figure whipped around with terrifying speed to face the sound. It stalked toward the motion, only to step into a beartrap that had been concealed by the fog on the floor. It howled, struggling to free itself. The smell of blood filled the air.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

The stranger pocketed his slingshot before gesturing for the others to follow him, a satisfied look on his face as he slid silently between carcasses. Niko and the Wanderer followed, unsure of what was happening, but seeing no better solution.

Finally, a door, this one polished with a small window set at eye level. The stranger eased it open, and they followed him out to yet another parlor, this one warm as if to offset the freezing room they'd just

escaped. A small fire crackled in the fireplace at one end of the space; the bookshelves were almost empty, clearly looted to feed the fire.

“Razorkin,” said the stranger. “The ones you find in the Floodpits aren’t used to hearing sounds not echoed through water. You can distract them, sometimes. That was a big one. You wouldn’t want to fight it head-on. You’d lose.”

Niko, meanwhile, was giving the newcomer a frank once-over. He had spiky, scraggly black hair and wore a long, loose jacket-vest over clothing that looked like it had been patched together from a dozen different sources; Niko was sure some of the pieces had originally been wallpaper. “What’s your name?” they asked.

“Winter.”

“And how long have you lived in the House, Winter?”

“All my life,” said the stranger. He shrugged. “There isn’t anything else. The House is the world, and the world is the House, and once it has hold of you, there’s nowhere else to go. You’ll see that soon, if you don’t already.”

“You belong to Duskmourn now.”