

The Education of Ulf

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From set *Dominari United*

I

Ulf was, he reluctantly admitted to himself, a better researcher than a mage. His practical magic was rudimentary at best, and he almost never inscribed a rune properly—but perhaps that would come with time. Until it did, he tried to keep his head down in his Tolarian classes, not drawing too much attention to himself, making himself useful by mucking out the stables and taking on the other menial tasks that nobody wanted to do. Meanwhile he studied desperately, hoping for a breakthrough.



Art by: Adam Paquette

But he could only escape notice for so long. Soon one of his docents, a florid-faced dwarven artificer named Thranegeld, singled him out after class.

“You’re no good at magic, Ulf,” he said in his gravelly voice.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Ulf.

“No good at artificing either.”

Ulf just nodded.

“What are you good at?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to be a mage, sir.”

“Don’t you think the agricultural program would be a better fit for you? I hear you’re an apt hand in the stables.”

“I came here to be a mage,” Ulf said stubbornly. His father had been opposed to it, had wanted Ulf to stay and inherit the farm. His mother might have encouraged it if she’d been around—rumor was that there was magic on her side of the family—but she had died when he was young. It had been an uphill battle all the way.

The dwarf’s eyes narrowed. He took a strange lamp from the table and swung it up, shined it into Ulf’s eyes. Ulf blinked, turned away. When the dwarf turned the lamp off, his expression had softened.

“I worried you might be one of them, but no. That’s good.”

“One of who, sir?”

“A Phyrexian agent,” he said. When Ulf looked blank, he continued. “Denizens of the Machine Hells who hope to make our plane their own. They pass as human, but they’re hideous mixes of flesh and machines. They long to destroy all we hold dear.”

“They’re here, in Lat-Nam, in the academy?”

The dwarf nodded. “They’re everywhere.” He frowned. “As for you, let’s start with what you’re good at. Research. You can do that, I grant you. Let’s have us a deal. You can keep coming to class, but you’ll do a little research for me on the side.”

It seemed an ordinary enough request. Ulf had heard the other students talking: more than a few had been assigned some extra task by one of the docents. Thranegeld’s class was on the ancient world, on what the world had been before the Rift Era. Each student had been given a project to research. Which meant Ulf had his regular assigned topic, on the sylex blast, that he would have to report on in the class. But now he also had another, special project.

“Corondor,” Thranegeld growled. “Let’s see how good a researcher you are, boy. Find out whatever you can. Not the usual, mind: side tunnels.” And when Ulf turned to go: “No need to discuss this with your fellow students.”

When researching the sylex blast, he found himself in the same section of the library as the other students, poring over the well-thumbed collection of books that students had been using to write up the same assignments for years. This quickly gave him enough for his report—though, he also tracked down a book or two farther afield that gave a little more: details that he imagined hadn’t appeared in student papers before. Researching Corondor was harder. In the section where he had first found information on the sylex blast, there was very little, only bland details, the agreed-upon stories that every child knew. Even when he extended his search there was not much. On a lower shelf where the relevant texts were meant to be housed, there was only a blank gap: the books were missing, and there was no clear record of who had them. Misplaced, maybe? Or was there more to it than that?

Or perhaps this was some sort of test. Perhaps Thranegeld had hidden the books himself, was waiting to see what Ulf would do.

For the next few weeks Ulf spent every spare moment in the library. He went shelf to shelf, scanning the titles, reshelving books that were out of place. At first, there were no sign of the missing volumes. Later, he wondered if they had ever existed. Eventually, he found himself away from the main stacks, in side chambers that smelled dark and musty, where scrolls and tomes were piled rather than shelved. But none of these touched on Corondor in more than a cursory way.

And then, in a forgotten corner of one of these side chambers, he saw where a stack had tipped over and spilled some books down against the wall. Among them was an old and mildewed volume, its cover torn away. He picked it up and wiped the grime from it, saw round circles of mold on what remained of the title page, so obscuring it that it was impossible to make out. *Are they really circles of mold?* he wondered, tracing them with his fingertips. *Could they be worn or broken runes?* He opened the book and saw it was written in a stilted script and in Old Vodalian. He couldn't make some of the words out—they were unfamiliar and arcane. The language was so evasive and unclear that he was unsure if he was interpreting it correctly, but it seemed to refer to a figure of myth—Sol'kanar, the Demon King of Corondor. Sol'kanar was once a maro-sorcerer, a forest guardian, until he was cursed by the Planeswalker Geyadrone Dihada. As Dihada's demonic servant, Sol'kanar had wielded the legendary Blackblade against Dakkon himself, as well Carth the Lion, the founder of House Carthalion. The book detailed the curse and a variety of ways the curse could be lifted, one of which was through Dihada's death. He smiled. House Carthalion were the rightful rulers of Corondor, but the kingdom had been usurped by Sol'kanar some time ago. The details of his true history—and even how to break his curse—would be very valuable to anyone looking to free Corondor. This find would impress Thranegeld. He'd have to admit Ulf had really discovered something. All he had to do was sort out what it actually was he found, write up his research, and then Thranegeld would recognize that he belonged here.

His smile faltered. What if this was all nonsense? Surely if it was truly an important tome, it would have been preserved with more care. What if this book was a mere child's tale? Or a fantasy?

Before seeing Thranegeld, he would have to get a second opinion.

Ulf knocked on the door to Silas Brotten's chambers. Brotten only taught the advanced students. He was an esteemed author, a specialist in Old Vodalian as well as the time period in which the book had been written. For a long moment there was no answer. Ulf was lifting his hand to knock again when he heard Brotten clear his throat and say softly, "Yes?"

Ulf opened the door and stepped inside. Brotten sat in an overstuffed chair, an old scroll open in his lap, a pipe resting on a pewter plate on the table just beside. For a moment, he looked puzzled, and then his face cleared. "Ah, the stable boy. Not bad news about my steed, I hope?"

Ulf blushed. "No sir," he said. "I have a question."

Brotten rolled the scroll up and set it down. "I hadn't realized you were a student as well," he said. "Agricultural program?"

"No sir," he said. "I'm studying magic."

Brotten raised an eyebrow. "I suppose I can spare you a few minutes." He gestured to a chair. "Please sit."

"I've found something," said Ulf, and thrust the book at him.

Brotten took the book lazily, thumbed through it, reading a few words. Suddenly, his attention changed. He sat up straighter, turned back the pages, began to read from the beginning. He glanced at Ulf. "Where did you come across this?" he asked.

When he admitted that he had found it in the library, Brotten's gaze sharpened. "What were you looking for that caused you to find this?"

"I'm on a project for my docent," said Ulf.

"Which docent would that be?"

“Thranegeld, sir.”

“Ah, the dwarven artificer. His first-year report.”

“Not exactly,” said Ulf, but hesitated to go on.

“It’s all right,” said Brotten, smoothly. “You can tell me. After all, I’m a docent.”

“A special project, sir,” admitted Ulf. “He sent me to research Corondor.”

Brotten nodded. “Well, this is quite a find,” he said. “In fact, it might be best if you were to leave it here with me.”

Ulf hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t think I can, sir.”

“No?”

“I should show it to my docent first.”

For a moment Brotten held onto the book, staring at his hands, and then he handed it back. “As you wish,” he said. He turned away, seemingly bored, disinterested. “I’ll leave you to see yourself out.”

Thranegeld’s hands shook as he held the book. “Do you know how long this has been lost? Where in hell did you find it?” He peered at Ulf closely. “I’m beginning to think there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Me? Nothing. Wouldn’t be wise for me to keep it since I didn’t do the finding. Rules of the mine: You dig it up, you keep it. No, not just keep it: stash it somewhere safe.”

“Where?”

Thranegeld shook his head. “You decide, but don’t tell me. Don’t tell anyone, hear? And don’t tell anyone you have it.”

Baffled, Ulf agreed. He took the book and turned to go, then turned back. “Sir, isn’t this exactly the kind of knowledge we should share?”

“Well, yes,” said Thranegeld. “In principle, at least.” He patted Ulf on the arm. “We’ll share it,” he said. “I’ll write to a friend to set things in motion. When the time’s ripe and when we’re sure of who our friends are, we’ll share it.”

II

In the stables, on the wall where he kept the shovels and rakes he used to clean the stalls, was a little inset cubby. He wrapped the book in oilcloth and secured it there, under a double handful of straw.

He continued to act as normal, returning to the library. He looked for more books on Corondor, but without any real success. A few days later, coming back in the evening from another futile expedition, he found the door to his room ajar. Looking more closely, he saw the doorframe was cracked, the lock forced.

He paused and listened, but he heard no sound from inside. Strange: at this time of night, all three of his roommates were usually there.

Cautiously, he pushed the door wider. He first saw pages strewn all over the floor, then bedding scattered and torn apart as well. The closet was open, its contents spilled out. Had one of his fellow students practiced a spell that had gone awry?

“Hello?” he started to say, but once he opened the door wider, he fell silent.

The far end of the room was bespattered with blood. What he saw next made him feel like his own heart had stopped beating. One of his roommates was lying there, cuts on his arms, throat slit. Another lay turned to face the wall, in a pool of his own blood. The third, he didn’t see until he came a little farther in, but he was the worst of all. He had been dismembered, the pieces of him piled in a careful stack near the wall.

He fled.

The book was still there, still safe. But how long would it be so? No, whether Thranegeld wanted to take it or not, he *had* to give it to him. He would tell him what had happened. Together, they would figure out what to do.

He walked back from the stables with the oilcloth-wrapped book clutched to his chest. He kept his head down, trying to look inconspicuous. Enough students were still out, laughing and talking, that he probably didn’t seem too out of place. Still, he felt like a target was on his back.

As soon as he was inside, he made a beeline for Docent Thranegeld’s chambers. He rushed in without knocking. Thranegeld was at his desk but with his chair turned around, facing the window. “Sir,” he said, “sir! They’re dead, all of them! The book’s not safe, we have to “

He trailed off. Thranegeld had not turned at the sound of his words. He hadn’t even moved.

“Sir?” he said.

Ulf’s throat felt tight. He moved forward, slowly, and stepped behind the desk. He took another step, and then another, until he was directly behind his teacher, and then he reached out and shook his shoulder.

For an instant nothing happened, and then the dwarf tilted and slid from the chair and onto the floor. When he turned him face up, Ulf saw his face was bone white, etched with terror. Whatever had happened to him, it had not been an easy death.

Where can I go? he wondered. And then he told himself, *Just have to keep moving while I think it through.* Who could he trust? He had to talk to someone, had to figure out what to do quickly. If he didn’t, he’d soon be dead as well.

He made his way to a bathroom and locked himself in. He stayed there breathing deeply trying to calm down. Eventually his hands stopped shaking. He tucked the book into the pocket of his robe, where it would be out of sight.

He could take the book and run, but where would he go? Who could he take it to? Another academy? Or should he stay here and give it to the archmage? What if he went to the archmage’s quarters and found him dead, too?

No, better just to leave while he still could.

Then again, if he left, wouldn’t he be blamed for the murders?

He didn't know what to do, didn't know at all. He needed someone to talk to, another person to help him sort it out.

"What is it, my rustic scholar?" asked Brotten, and then he looked closer at Ulf. His face creased with concern. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"He's dead," said Ulf. "They all are."

"Who's dead? Slow down, stable boy. Stop speaking nonsense."

Ulf explained in bits and pieces what had happened. Slowly Brotten managed to put it together.

"I don't know what to do," Ulf finished.

Brotten nodded. He paced about his study, thinking. "My best advice," he finally said slowly, "would be to get rid of the book. That's obviously what they're after."

"But why? Why do they want it? And who are *they*?"

"Let's hope you never have to learn the answers to those questions," said Brotten. "You're young and untrained, and hardly in a position to protect the book." And then, as if he had just thought of it, "It would be safest, perhaps, if you were to leave the book with me."

Almost by reflex Ulf began to reach for the pocket of his robe. He was so used to listening to his do-cents, to obeying them, that it was hard not to. But halfway there, his hand stopped. He hesitated.

"Do you have the book with you?" prompted Brotten, "or will you have to lead me to it?" And for just an instant Ulf saw naked desire in Brotten's face.

"I," said Ulf, "I've got to " and he began backing slowly toward the door.

Before he reached it, a transformation began. Brotten's face lost all expression, a bloody line suddenly tracing its way from the center of his forehead down through his chin. With a wet sound his face split and slopped to either side over his shoulders like a mantle, revealing a bundle of cables in place of a neck and a skull of acid-etched metal. His eyes were green, possessed of an unearthly light. A *Phyrexian*, Ulf realized with horror. He had gone to exactly the wrong person. He had walked straight into evil's maw.

Brotten stood there, a mix of blood and black oil beaded on his skull. He almost casually tore the loose flesh that had been his face away and let it fall to the floor. His voice, when he spoke, was different now, cruel, mechanical, every shred of human warmth bled out of it.

"Give me the book," he snarled. "Now!"

Ulf leaped back. He managed, on his way out, to slam the door behind him, the latch just catching as Brotten sprang forward. He heard the man's howl of irritation as he thumped against the closed door.

Ulf scurried like a rat down the hallway. A moment later, the door exploded as Brotten burst through without bothering to open it.

"Give up now, boy!" he called after Ulf. "If you do, perhaps I'll let you live!"

Ulf sped around the corner, zigzagging between a pair of startled students. A moment later, he heard them gasp in horror. He turned and saw one attempt to hurl a bolt of energy at the creature that had been Brotten. It struck him in the chest, leaving a gaping hole in the flesh that revealed a network of antenna-like wires writhing beneath. One of them whipped out in a flash and darted deep into the student's eye and out the back of his skull. The other student, screaming, tried to run, but Brotten was quickly upon her, blades suddenly flicking from his fingers.

And then Ulf was around a corner again. From a distance, he heard the student's high-pitched scream and then, abruptly, it cut off. He cut through a classroom and out its back door, then climbed the stairs quickly, two steps at a time. At the top, he held his breath and waited, but almost immediately heard heavy footsteps. Brotten must somehow be tracking him—or perhaps Ulf simply hadn't been as crafty as he had believed. He rushed down the hall and toward an oblivious student, a second-year he vaguely knew.

"Run!" shouted Ulf, but the student just stood there, frozen. *She'll be killed*, thought Ulf, but as he rushed past, he realized that the student was weeping black tears. Oil.

The student threw herself at him. Ulf desperately dodged and continued running.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help!"

The student with the oily tears was gaining, and Brotten was close behind. Ulf felt the student's hand grasp his robe, and he turned long enough to lash out. She tripped and went down. Ulf dodged left and then right, put on a little burst of speed and then turned right again only to realize the hallway terminated in a dead end.

He tried to turn back, but it was too late. She was blocking his way. A moment later, Brotten arrived as well.

"Stable boy," said Brotten as Ulf slowly backed away. Was there a way out? His mind raced as he tried to figure out what he could possibly do.

"I'll give you a choice," said Brotten. "I'm a kind man, even if, technically, I am more than a man." He stepped forward. "Either you can give up the book and die a clean, simple death, or you can refuse and be torn painfully apart." He took another step. "Either way, you die. But the second death, I guarantee, will be decidedly more painful."

"Take another step and I'll destroy the book," said Ulf.

Brotten smiled, though on his metal face the smile looked like a rictus of pain. "Perhaps that's precisely what we intend to do with it ourselves." Brotten took another step. "Give me the book."

"No," said Ulf. He closed his eyes and waited for the end to come.

But the end did not come. Instead, with a crash, the wall beside him burst apart. Dust and smoke filled the air, and through it appeared a hulking creature, humanoid but not human. He had the skin and scales of a lizard and the appearance of a dinosaur. A viashino. "Run!" he said to Ulf. "Find him! I'll hold them back as long as I can."

"Find who?" asked Ulf.

But the viashino had turned away. Glaring at Brotten, he hissed and sprang forward. The student stepped between him and Brotten, and with a bellow, the viashino batted her away.



Art by: Joshua Raphael

“No!” screamed Brotten to the student. “Keep with the book! Don’t lose the fool!”

Injured, leaking oil from one side now, the student struggled to her feet. “Run!” the viashino shouted again, and this time Ulf did.

It was better, he decided, to hide, and to hide in the place he knew best: the library. He wound his way through the stacks, passing a startled librarian, and rushed into the older, more poorly illuminated section. He slowed, began to walk quietly. Could he hide in the side room where he’d found the book? Too risky: he might have mentioned it to Brotten. Somewhere else, then.

And then he remembered the lower shelf that had been emptied of books on Corondor. He strode quickly there. Was there room enough to squeeze in? Yes, if he pushed some books down, moved a few elsewhere. He was small: there was just enough space for him to crawl in. He would be invisible to anybody not on hands and knees. Maybe that would be enough.

He lay there waiting, trying to breathe softly. How would he know when it was safe to come out? Surely by now others had noticed the disruption and were hurrying to defend the school from the Phyrexians.

Unless, thought Ulf, *they’re all Phyrexians*.

No, he couldn’t think like that. That was paranoid. He had to trust there was someone still human out there.

He heard a noise in the stacks, an aisle or two away. He fell silent. Was he visible at all? No, he was okay. Nobody walking by would see him. He would be safe.

The footsteps receded for a moment and then returned, slowly growing stronger. They were in his aisle now. He held his breath. The noise grew louder and louder and then he saw a set of legs pass a few inches before his face and continue on.

He quietly exhaled, relaxed.

And then he heard the footsteps stop.

A moment later the student's oil-stained face was right there, staring at him. Matted now through her hair were the strands of cables that had forced their way out of her skin.

"Give me the book," the girl hissed.

The girl started to reach out and then, suddenly, reared up, her face vanishing. Another pair of legs was there. The student cried out. Her head fell to the floor and bounced, no longer attached. A few seconds later, her body followed, collapsing in a mass of flesh and wire.

Ulf gaped.

Quickly he scrambled out. Standing over the body of the student was a grizzled man. He had long brown hair streaked through with gray, his wrists wrapped in leather cuffs. He was strong, hulking even, and carried in one hand a sword that was meant for two. A swirling and fiery energy enwrapped the blade, from which dripped the oil once hidden inside the student's flesh. It sizzled on the strange metal. The man turned toward him, and Ulf saw on his right cheek just below his eye the Mark of the Elder Druid—that rare mark of distinction that Ulf thought he would never see. He had read about in researching Corondor, knew it was given only to a chosen few. But the only person he knew of with such a mark who looked like this and who carried a sword such as this hadn't been seen for many years. It couldn't be

"Thank you," Ulf managed.

There was a hint of sadness in the man's expression. "She was an innocent. She probably didn't even know what they'd implanted in her."

"Who are you?" asked Ulf.

"What?" said the man. And then he came out of his reverie and became gruff and ready. "I'm your rescuer," he said. He wiped his sword clean on the dead girl's robes and sheathed it. And then he roughly grabbed hold of Ulf.

"Hey, what are you doing?" said Ulf.

"Shut up and hold still," said the man. Rapidly, he ran his hands through Ulf's hair, patting down his shoulders, his sides, his arms, his legs. When he let go, he was holding what looked like a small metallic burr in his hand.

"I thought so," said the man. He dropped the burr to the ground and crushed it. "Tracker. They'll have a hard time finding you now." Grabbing Ulf by the arm, he propelled him forward.

"Get moving," he said. "We need to get out of here before it's too late."

The man led him slowly through the stacks. "You have it, right?" he whispered.

"Have what?"

"The book. Why do you think we're here?"

Was it smart to admit he had it? Shouldn't he be cautious? "I know where it is. Do you want it?"

"Want it? No, you keep it. I need to have my hands free," he said, and drew his sword. It looked terribly sharp. A student near the reference desk gave a yelp and sped away. "Besides," said the man. "They'll target whoever has the book. So, what say we let you hold on to it?"

"Um, thanks?" said Ulf.

Nobody was at the reference desk. Nearing the library door, the man waved to Ulf to stay back. He lay down on his belly and peered under the crack.

"Five sets of feet," he whispered when he got back up. "Waiting for us."

"What do we do?" asked Ulf.

"What do you think?" said the man. "We kill them."

"I don't know how to kill anybody," whispered Ulf.

The man looked him up and down. "Of course you don't," he said. "Don't worry: you'll learn."

III

The Phyrexian sleeper agents waited, cables and metalwork sprouting from their bodies. One of them, an elf student, asked the one who had been his docent "Are you sure he's in there?"

"That's where he was when the tracker stopped working," she said.

"Do we really need to wait for Silas?" said another.

But nobody moved.

"Is there another way out of the library?" asked the elf.

"No," said the former docent. "I'm sure of it. They're trapped."

That was when the wall to one side of them exploded. Flames were everywhere, the whole corridor ignited, and three of the five were knocked off their feet. The other two rushed to the hole, weapons drawn. A moment later they fell back, dead, stabbed, and lay smoking.

Moaning, the remaining three got to their feet.

"I don't think we should look in the hole," the elf said.

"Let's wait," agreed the docent.

"Yes, let's," said a deep voice behind them. They spun around to find a man, his blade pulsing with flame, behind them. They fumbled for their weapons, but the man's spell was already cast, and the whole corridor ignited. For a moment, they thrashed around on fire, screaming, and then they fell still.

"Come on!" shouted the man. He headed down the other corridor. The fire behind them, Ulf saw, was out of control, beginning to spread.

"Shouldn't we try to put it out?" Ulf asked.

The man shook his head. "We need a good distraction."

They hurried along the halls, dodging into classrooms at any sign of someone approaching. Once, through a half-opened door, Ulf saw a creature that never could have been human, its body oddly gapped and rearranged. It was so tall its head scraped the ceiling. It made Ulf nauseous. The man waited until it passed, then rattled the door handle from the inside. In the corridor outside, they heard the creature stop, grunt. When it returned to open the door, the man cut its arm off, then stabbed the blade deep into its core and twisted. It collapsed in a shower of sparks and smoke.

They came across a stretch of broken and scorched hallway, the remnants of a battle. There, amid everything, lay the viashino who had saved Ulf. He was dead, his belly slit open. The man stood solemnly over him. "You fought honorably, old friend," he murmured, "I promise you it will not be in vain."

The entrance hall was in sight at last. *We're almost safe*, Ulf thought. He started toward it, but the man grabbed his arm, stopped him.

"No," he growled, "Too easy. Something's wrong."

Instead, he opened a nearby classroom door and entered. He returned a moment later carrying a desk. One-handed, he tossed it into the space near the exit.

As soon as it touched the ground, it was sliced through with a dozen blades, reduced to flinders. A few stray blades ricocheted off the walls and came their way. As Ulf cowered, the man batted them easily aside with his sword.

"Told you," he said.

"So how do we get out?" asked Ulf, rising again.

The man shrugged. "Rune's discharged. It's fine now." He looked at Ulf. "Can't you feel it?" When Ulf shook his head, the man narrowed his eyes. "You really don't have much magical ability, do you? Are you sure you belong in a magic program at a Tolarian academy?"

"I I'm a good researcher." He watched the man's hand come around to rest on his sword's pommel.

"If you're one of those damned sleeper agents, I'll personally make sure you're cut into more bits than that desk was. Tell me the truth. Why are you really here?"

"I think they wanted someone to clean out the stables."

The man relaxed. "Makes sense. Last thing most mages want is to get their hands dirty."

They made their way through the door into the vestibule, only to find someone awaiting them.

"Silas Brotten," the man said. "I can't say I'm surprised. Take the book, but let the boy go."

"Jared Carthalion," said Brotten, and with a shock, Ulf realized he had been right. "Can it be? I don't care about the book *or* the boy now that you're here. You were always the prize, Carthalion. And now I don't need any help finding you."

Jared cast Ulf a quick glance, and Ulf saw something different in it this time, a measure of curiosity.

"You can't have the boy and you can't have me," Jared said. And he drew his sword.



Art by: Manuel Castañón

Ulf watched Jared's sword flash, watched too Brotten's shoulders bristle as sudden internal armor thrust to the surface. Brotten touched his chest, and a long curved barbed slice of metal suddenly jutted out. He closed his hand over it and wrenched it free. It continued to unfold and articulate to become a barbed, ornate sword.

They fought back and forth, Jared the superior fighter, but Brotten just able to hold his own and, because of his machine components, not grow tired. They circled one another warily, and then closed, Carthalion uttering a fierce battle cry as he rushed forward, driving Brotten back toward the wall. He almost had him there, was forcing his advantage, when Ulf saw something strange: Brotten's thigh had begun to split open.

"His leg!" Ulf called, and Jared had enough presence of mind to leap back just as a circular metal blade spun out of the leg, traveling at immense speed. It sliced the edge of Jared's thigh: had he not leaped back, it would have cut him in half. Jared pressed his hand to the wound to staunch the blood, and suddenly Brotten was pressing his advantage, forcing him back.

Ulf kept expecting to see Jared go down, but the man fought on. It would be wiser, he knew, to flee, but he had helped save Jared once. If he left, who would save him the next time?

Another flurry of attacks and counterattacks made clear that even with blood coursing down his thigh, Jared was still the more skillful. Brotten cursed and brought his blade down hard, an attack Jared blocked by bringing his up with just as much force. Brotten's blade shattered, and Jared drove his sword past the guard of the broken blade and into Brotten's chest.

Stumbling, coughing oil, Brotten collapsed face down.

Still breathing hard, Jared rolled him over with his boot and bent down over him.

"Why did Sheoldred send you here?" Jared said.

Brotten just gave a bubbling laugh.

"Who are the other agents at the school? Who else has already been compleated?"

"Why would I tell you that?" mumbled Brotten.

“Does it go all the way to the archmage? Is he himself corrupted?”

“He’s as human as you, Carthalion. There are plenty of reasons to choose the winning side.”

Brotten reached toward Jared, but Jared idly batted his hand away. “Dihada knows that, too,” said Brotten. “She’s waiting for you, Jared. Return to her.”

And then he grinned, showing oil-soaked artificial teeth, and died.

At last, Ulf approached, staring at the remnants of the being who had tried to destroy him. He looked now like little more than a broken machine. Jared had torn a strip from Brotten’s clothing, was using it to bind his thigh. The blood had already begun to soak through.

“Where are we going?” Ulf asked.

“We are not going anywhere,” said Jared. He sounded tired. “You will take the book to safety. Bring it to Corondor. There are still good people there. I’ll meet you there.” He gestured behind him. “My work is back inside. I need to save those who are still human and kill those who aren’t.” He looked at Ulf. “Stay away from main roads and show this book to nobody.”

For a moment, they stood staring at one another, and then Ulf nodded. “Thank you,” he said. Jared answered with a simple nod back. Then he turned and limped back into the now ruined academy.

Ulf took a deep breath. And then he stepped through the gates and out into the world.

IV

Deep within the Lat-Nam academy, behind the locked doors of his quarters, the archmage gave a malicious smile. He shivered all over and slowly, he began to change, his stout body growing thinner, stretching, rearranging, until it had become the body of a gray-skinned woman. Or, at least, the body of a woman on top. Below, tentacles curled and contorted, writhing along the floor.

“Yes,” she said. “How *lucky* you found the book, Jared. Once you’ve played the hero here yet again, Corondor will be waiting for you.”



Art by: Nestor Ossandon Leal