

Episode 5: Final Exam

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From set *Strixhaven: School of Mages*

The bellowing of the thing in the Snarl was like nothing Will had ever heard before. The roar reached down into his heart, promising every variety of violence and death. With each moment that passed, the creature dragged itself a little farther out of the vortex of power. Above Will and Rowan, a rafter plummeted to the floor, crashing with a phenomenal sound inches from their feet.



Awaken the Blood Avatar | Art by: Kekai Kotaki

“They thought I would never make anything of myself—that I didn’t belong here, with all of their high and mighty oracles.” Extus cackled. He whirled, gesturing wildly at the statues surrounding him. “But where are they now? Who will help you in your time of need?”

Extus’s laughter grew more crazed as the Blood Avatar’s axe hit one of the statues, splitting the likeness of a former oracle in half. The head and raised arms toppled over, shattering on the ground.

Will helped Rowan to her feet, their robes both soaked with the blood that filled the room—more blood than could have been shed in a hundred battles. “It’s going to destroy the school,” said Will, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Somehow, though, Rowan didn’t look scared. There was a focus to her eyes that he’d never seen in class, in the study hall, in their dorm. He understood something about his sister for the first time, then—that this is where her talents lay. Running into the storm.

“Not if we can help it,” she said, and he nodded.

Outside, all across the Strixhaven campus, that terrible roar echoed. It found Dean Uvilda sealing a pack of escaped Prismari students into a dimension that was to be used for emergencies only; she turned her head at the sound, shuddered, and picked up the pace on her spell. It found Plink and Auvernine, crawling through a dark tunnel of roots and soil while dragonfire overhead reduced everything on the surface to cinders. It found Lukka, even through the concentration it took from him to keep all the mage hunters fighting on several fronts. *So, it's done*, he thought.

Lukka grinned down to Mila. "Looks like Extus got what he wanted."

She didn't look at him, though, only stared up at the sky, eyes wide, fur standing on end. A moment later, she jumped under a collapsed awning. Lukka didn't see what she did—not until it would have been too late—but he trusted her enough to dive right after.

The dragonfire scoured the cobblestones where he had been standing a moment before, scorching the pathway black. The swath of mage hunters close by ignited almost instantly, screeching and hissing as they died. Flashes of searing pain flooded his mind all at once, and he severed the link before he could be overwhelmed.



Draconic Intervention | Art by: Johan Grenier

The mage hunters who had managed to evade the dragons' attack shuddered and twitched as their minds once more became their own. They clicked their many teeth together, spread out those glowing feelers, and turned on the nearest source of magical sustenance: Oriq agents. Fresh screams filled the air as the creatures pounced.

Lukka's eyes went wide as he took in the carnage. Mila took a step forward, but Lukka stopped her with a quick mental command.

This was no longer his fight.

Calling Mila to his side, Lukka turned and ran into the dark.

Will ducked away as more debris rained down around them. Just as another statue came crashing to the floor, he saw it: an opening in the chaos. He took a shaky breath and tried to remember the details of the iterated condensation spell. With an exertion of focus, he created a swirling vortex of razor-sharp ice shards and sent them zipping toward Extus, who was still standing before the Blood Avatar. The Oriq's arms were spread; he seemed to be aware of nothing besides his own victory.

Before the ice could reach him, a bolt of lightning cracked through the shards, detonating them and sending the lightning skittering off in random directions. Rowan had seen the opening, too. "Stay out of the way!" she yelled.

"We need to work together!" he shouted back. "All we need to do is—"

He was interrupted by a chunk of falling rubble, which clipped him on the shoulder and sent him sprawling.

"Will!" shouted Rowan, running toward him.

It was impossible to see if her brother was hurt—there was blood everywhere, covering the floor, their robes, splashing up to the walls and over the statues.

She had almost reached him when the creature's enormous sword cleaved into the stone in front of her. It was close enough that she could see the rust on it, the pocked iron from battles fought eons ago. With a furious shout of her own, she pressed her hands up against it, running a charge up the sword like a lightning rod and into the thing's hand. The monster only pulled its sword free, throwing her backward.

Dragging herself back against the wall, Rowan's gaze swung between Extus, the creature he'd summoned, and Will, who now lay far too still on the ground. It was too much. Blinking against the tears welling in her eyes, Rowan felt a cold anger rising from somewhere inside her—rage, overwhelming the fear and the pain. She couldn't win, but she could hurt the one who did this.

But before she could send a bolt of lightning into the Oriq leader's back, her gaze shifted. The Snarl hung in the air, still brilliant, even in crimson. Still rippling with power.

Rowan took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out.

The building shook around him, the Blood Avatar of the old world roared with unmatched rage, and to Extus, all was finally right with the world. He turned slowly, taking in the sight of the Hall of Oracles crumbling. They had been fools to pass him over. It may have taken him years to prove it, but as another statue toppled to the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces, he told himself that the wait had been worth it.

His smile faltered as the Blood Avatar's voice broke, the furious roar suddenly cut short. Extus spun on his heels and froze. The creature was moving in jerks and fits, the red light of the Snarl flickering wildly behind it. He had seen this effect before, in his many failures. *It can't be.*

He had checked the calculations. This had to work—there was enough magical energy in one of Arcavios's Snarls to power any spell known to creation. *How could it not be enough?* Then he spotted it: a coil of ghostly vermillion drifting off the nexus, as if being drawn out. An errant tendril of power.

He followed it back, back to the young blond girl in the corner of the room, staring at him now with wide, hateful eyes. Lightning began to flash and crackle over the girl's hair and skin as the energy of the Snarl rushed into her.

Extus met her gaze, too shocked to move.

There was no way that some pitiful first-year would be the one to ruin all of his plans.

Was there?



Crackle with Power | Art by: Micah Epstein

Rowan struggled to breathe as the air around her sparked and hissed with energy. She felt the power rushing through her, power like she had never dreamed. It felt, in that moment, that she could do *anything*; mountains would crumble before her, cities burn, oceans boil. She opened her eyes and gasped as she took in the room through a red haze. Her gaze fell to Will, who still lay on the ground, motionless. A fresh wave of rage and grief flooded her as she turned to Extus.

The leader of the Oriq stood before the twitching Blood Avatar, watching her. Waiting.

Rowan let the energy of the Snarl course through her, setting every vein alive with power. She hardly noticed as her feet left the ground, wind swirling as if the air itself feared her. *And it should*, thought Rowan. *Everything should*. She took a deep breath, turning the air in her lungs to white-hot fire, then opened her mouth and screamed. The fire rushed toward Extus like a star, like a bolt from heaven. He held out a hand, muttered some words, but whatever he did wasn't enough; the spell crashed into him, sending him flying through the air, robes coiling with smoke. He smashed against the far wall and slid down, still and quiet.

Rowan turned her attention to the Blood Avatar next. The creature still jerked in place, furious that its rampage had been cut short. Inch by inch, one of its swords raised toward her, but it didn't matter. With the power at her fingertips, she could destroy it, and Extus along with it, and anyone who came after. Anyone who tried to hurt her, everyone who had hurt Will—they would *all* burn.

She drew on the power of the Snarl again, and it was like drinking fresh, clear water. Arcs of electricity singed her arms and face, sending jolts of pain through her body, but she didn't care. Why would she? She was the most powerful thing in the room, in the school, maybe the whole plane. She extended her hand toward the Blood Avatar, reaching for the familiar jolt of lightning, and a wave of agony suddenly ripped through her.

Her gasps were met with laughter. Through eyes squinting against the pain, she watched Extus somehow pull himself to his feet.

“Did you really think you were strong enough to hold all that power?” Extus sneered. “Did you think you were worthy?”

Rowan ignored the Oriq. In truth, she could barely hear him—all of her was focused on controlling the power that raged within her now. The air around her hissed and twisted like a nest of vipers.

“I have trained in the arcane arts my entire life,” muttered Extus. “You’re nothing but a child. An arrogant fool. And now, a moth to the flame.”

The tendril of power she’d drawn from the Snarl rippled again, and Rowan’s vision blared white with agony. All the strength abruptly left her limbs and she flopped limply out of the air, landing with a *thud* on the bloody stone floor.

Extus laughed. “Your ambition is admirable. But I’ve come too far to be stopped by the likes of you.” He turned away, not even bothering to finish the job, and picked up the heavy tome he had been carrying before.

Time stretched around Rowan; she felt cracked open, hollow, emptied out. The Snarl’s power still rippled through her, making her limbs dance and jerk as she lay there. Her consciousness seemed to hover just outside her body—near her brother, who was crawling toward her, dragging himself across the bloody floor. Will was alive.

“Rowan,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Get up.”

She tried to remember how to speak, but only managed to let out a bit of air.

“Please,” he said, reaching out to touch her. He jerked his hand away as an errant spark rose from her skin. “You have to get up.”

Rowan coughed and opened her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Rowan. Just get up.” Will crawled closer, putting one of her arms over his neck. He winced as sparks jumped and bit at him but didn’t let go. “We’re going to be okay.”

“I’m sorry about the fight. At the Mage Tower match. And at Bow’s End. I’m really sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Will said. With a grunt, he dragged her to her feet and started toward the door. Behind her brother, Rowan saw the Oriq leader hold up a heavy blood-stained tome and begin to chant.

Together, they hobbled toward the doors, only for Will to slow to a stop. He turned to her sharply. “It’s like a mascot.”

“What are you talking about?” Rowan’s frown deepened.

But Will shook his head as he looked at Rowan. “It’s like a mascot! We just have to—intercept it.”

“Like in Mage Tower?” Maybe the Snarl was still scrambling her brain, but she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Like in Mage Tower,” Will said. “Just trust me on this.”

Rowan started to respond, but the words fell away as Garruk’s face flashed in her mind. She hadn’t been able to see what Will could, back then. And it was Will who had finally found a way to free Garruk and win him over as an ally. Will, her Will—her quiet, brainy, peevish brother. He was right so often. Maybe he was right this time as well.

“Rowan?”

Grimacing at the fresh stabs of pain, Rowan pulled at the last sparks of magic within her. “Yeah. Okay. Show me what all that studying can do.”

Will grinned and turned toward Extus and the Blood Avatar, red light swirling around his hands. It wasn’t ice magic he was working—she knew that much, at least—but the air around him dropped a few degrees anyway. The red light shaped itself between his hands into a thrumming circle of power, and with one last effort, he released the spell.

Suddenly, a red halo of light snapped into place around the Blood Avatar’s helmed head.



Culmination of Studies | Art by: Bryan Sola

“It may be big,” said Will through clenched teeth, hands shaking with the effort. “But it’s a summoned creature. Which means with this spell, we can control it!”

But the creature didn’t seem very controlled. It bellowed again, forcing Rowan’s hands to her ears. Below the Blood Avatar, Extus contorted his hands into claws, his own magic coming off him in wisps like black mist. The red halo around the Blood Avatar’s head seemed to flicker in and out. It was Will against Extus, Rowan realized. Each one poured their power into the spell, and Will was losing. But her brother wasn’t alone.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up, surprised. “Rowan, what are you—?”

“You concentrate on the spell. Get all the particulars right. I’ll do the rest.”

Maybe their magic was too different now to meld seamlessly together, as it used to. But if Will had gotten more precise, more controlled—well, she had gotten a whole lot stronger. Rowan poured the last of her magical energy into her brother, sparks jumping and skipping across her hand as her power flowed into him. He gasped, but only for a second. Then, Extus let out a strangled cry, and the red halo snapped into place around the creature, fully formed.

“You brats!” cried Extus. “How *dare* you—”

He was cut off as one of the massive hands of the Blood Avatar closed around him with an awful crunching sound. After that, Extus was silent.

“It worked!” shouted Will. “Rowan, it worked!”

Rowan was swaying in place, though. She was finding it difficult to stay standing; the whole room seemed to be spinning. She was tapped out, utterly emptied of power. It all seemed to happen in slow motion—the red halo flickered out of existence. The Blood Avatar roared furiously as one hand was pulled back into the Snarl, his gore-drenched body stretching and bulging unnaturally, the summoning coming to a violent end. With one more terrifying bellow, he swung that massive iron sword. Will’s eyes went wide, and Rowan was too weak to stop him from shoving her out of the way.

The sword crashed into the ground with terrifying force, sending a shudder through the chamber. With a sound like thunder, the Blood Avatar was wrenched back into the Snarl, the sword dragging back across the stone—and on the other side was her brother, lying limp and stunned. Rowan’s joy at her brother *alive*, not mashed to paste or cleaved in two, suddenly lurched and drained away in shock: below the knee, his right leg was gone.

As if the presence of that monstrosity had been the last thing holding the chamber together, everything began to fall apart. Rafters swung to the floor like clubs, the stone ceiling they’d held up crashing to the ground in jagged blocks. The floor beneath them shook and pitched wildly as Rowan tried to reach her brother. She was so close—could see his glassy, distant eyes—when the floor collapsed altogether. Rowan and Will tumbled and pitched forward, falling through space, until suddenly a light, gentle touch caught them. Rowan spun around wildly; somehow, a cloud of mist seemed to be holding them both aloft.

“There,” said Will weakly, pointing up to the doorway of the room. Rowan looked toward the source of the magic, where Deans Nassari and Lisette stood at the destroyed entrance. Brows furrowed in concentration, they sent gouts of magic through the air, blasting away falling rocks and debris. The mist carried them up, up toward Dean Lisette’s outstretched hand. Rowan reached for it, holding Will wrapped in her other arm, but couldn’t quite reach it—until a vine snaked out of Lisette’s sleeve, cinching tightly around Rowan’s wrist.

Grunting, she hauled them both up into the doorway. All four of them managed to fall out of the doorway just as the room collapsed altogether, filling with a cloud of stone and dust and rubble.

“We did it,” muttered Will. “We did it, Ro.” His eyes fluttered closed. He looked terribly pale.

“Hold still,” said Lisette, crouching over him. “You’re in shock.”

“Will he be okay?” asked Rowan.

The dean didn’t seem to be listening. She bit off a chunk of some sort of root, spitting it into a small shell and pressing it with her thumb. Almost at once it started to glow a strange green color.

“He’ll live,” said Nassari, putting a hand on Rowan’s shoulder. “After what you two have been through, you should be grateful.”

What they had been through. Rowan looked back, through the wall of debris now filling the doors to the Hall of Oracles. There was no sign of the Snarl’s glow, but she could swear that she still felt it calling out to her.

Five weeks later, as the bell tolled across campus to signal the end of first period, Will almost felt as if things were going back to normal. He was getting used to navigating the halls of the school a bit more slowly between his cane and the latticework of ice and steel that now extended down from just under his cloth-wrapped kneecap. He had refused the offers from Dean Lisette of a living wood replacement. His leg was never coming back, and this felt more like a part of him. It was good practice; all day, a part

of his mind had to be focused on shaping and refreezing it around the metal frame. A good distraction, too, from the pins and needles that still seemed to crawl over his stump.

Word of his and Rowan's fight against Extus and the Blood Avatar had spread throughout the campus, and suddenly, Will was getting a lot more attention. The other students pressed against the wall as he passed, their whispers and stares following him. It almost reminded him of home—he often found himself missing the anonymity of his early days at the school.

At last, he reached his dorm room. The door swung open as he reached for the knob, and Rowan jerked to a stop, almost crashing into him. She stepped back to let Will inside.

Will cleared his throat. "How are you feeling?"

Rowan shrugged. "Not quite back to full strength, but better. You?"

Will tapped his finger on the handle of his cane. Briefly, the runes Quint had helped him put into place—basic ones, for stability and strength, as opposed to the more elaborate variety his friend had pushed for—flared briefly to life, running all the way down to the spread-foot at the base. "I'm adjusting," he said, smiling.

"How's the pain?"

"A little better every day." Though the phantom aches, seemingly coming from muscles that were no longer there, still struck him as eerie.

"I wonder what they'll say about this back home. Can you imagine?"

"Not really. But maybe we should visit when the semester is over."

"Why wait? We could just go now."

"We still have classes."

"We took down a Blood Avatar," Rowan said. "What more could they teach us here?"

"We took down a Blood Avatar with a spell that we learned here," Will countered. "And we still don't know why our spells aren't syncing up. Or why we can only planeswalk together. There's a lot more that they could teach us."

Rowan rolled her eyes and grinned. "Fine. I guess it would be nice to not have to drag you along for the rest of my life. Now if you'll excuse me "

"Yeah, yeah," said Will. "Say hello to Plink and Auvernine for me."

She slipped by, then paused in the hallway and turned to him. It struck Will, then, how much thinner she looked; how the hollow of her cheeks seemed so much darker than before, like something vital had been sucked clean out of his sister. But the smile she gave him was warm and true. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah," he said. "I love you, too."

As she hurried off, Will shut the door behind him and sat down on his bed. He was tired. It had been a long time since he had gotten a good night's sleep. Another semester here? Another year? Who knew what else the future held? He closed his eyes and extended his magical senses, tracking the beads of moisture forming on his icy prosthetic. *First principle—thermodynamic redirection. Find the heat, and redistribute. . .*

Kasmina's owl flew away from the window and soared over Strixhaven. The damage from the attack was all but erased; cobbles replaced, hedges regrown. The only sign it had even happened was the Hall of Oracles, which was still a ruin, and the small monument that now sat on the landing of the Biblioplex, a stone statue that changed faces every hour. Below it was an inscription: *Lore is never lost at Strixhaven. They will not be forgotten.* This place had survived worse before. It would survive worse in the future, Kasmina had no doubt.

The owl found her at the edge of the campus. She looked out at the wilderness beyond, her mind flowing into the bird that had followed Lukka. The bonder had been wandering the land with Mila and a few of the remaining Oriq, no doubt scheming even as they scrounged for food and shelter.

But he was no longer worth watching. It was Rowan—or, perhaps, both twins—who now required her attention.

Liliana finished getting dressed in her office. It had taken days for her to get back to Strixhaven from what had turned out to be a forest near the edge of the continent, but she'd made it, and after the deans had admitted that they should have heeded her warnings, they had invited her to remain a professor at the university indefinitely—without any more damnable faculty meetings, too.

She'd agreed, but with one small caveat.

Now, as she looked at herself in the mirror and adjusted her uniform, she found it hard to believe. Exams. Students. No more demons, no more dark plots, no more death. Her gaze shifted to her desk where her research journals lay open. "It seems this is where we finally part, old friend."

Liliana closed the journals and put them on the shelf along the wall. All considered, he would have been proud. The thought made her smile despite herself.

When she finally made it to her first class, Liliana took a moment to collect herself before heading inside. Students hurried to their seats at her arrival, the sounds of shuffling paper and idle chatter dying away as they turned to her.

Liliana came to a stop at the desk at the front of the room. "Welcome to your introductory necromantic arts course, students," she said, voice ringing out in the lecture hall. "My name is Professor Liliana Vess."