

Saint Traft and the Flight of Nightmares

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From set *Eldritch Moon*

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When last we saw Thalia, Odric, and Grete, they had fled the evil lurking in the Lunarch Council, the governing body of the Church of Avacyn, and gathered in a remote chapel in Gavony's Nearheath. Thalia introduced her friends to the Order of Saint Traft, named after—and literally inspired by—an ancient saint known for battling demons. Thalia had allowed herself to become a vessel for the saint's geist, and armed with that sacred power, she had led a ragtag band of rebellious soldiers, cathars, and clergy in carrying on the church's mission despite the corruption at its heart.

But now the world is changed. How can the remnants of the Church of Avacyn carry on their mission when Avacyn is dead? And what power can sustain them as their world hangs on the brink of extinction?

"I hear so little news," Grete said, "and half of it is contradictory."

Thalia nodded, sighing. "Sometimes our scouts don't come back," she said, "and sometimes they're in no condition to make any report when they do." Something turned in her stomach at the thought of Halmig, who had rejoined the march yesterday morning...*changed*. She had been forced to kill him, or whatever he had become—more squirming thing than man. She could only guess what he had encountered on his scouting mission, and what had happened to the soldiers under his command.

"Is it true that Hanweir is destroyed?" Grete asked.

"The truth is far worse." Thalia ran her fingers through her mount's shining coat, pretending not to see Grete's arched eyebrow, and Grete didn't press the question.

They rode in silence for a little while, lost in their own thoughts. The last time an army had marched on Thraben, Thalia recalled, it had been a horde of ghouls and skaabs created by the Cecani siblings. Now she was part of the marching horde—if so few soldiers could be called a horde. They were as ragged and bedraggled as zombies, perhaps, worn down from the constant battles of the last few weeks. The world seemed to be swallowed up in madness. But as long as they drew breath, as long as they could cling to the merest shred of hope, they would fight.

Or most of them would. Odric had remained behind, his spirit broken after he turned against the Lunarch Council and freed Thalia from their prison. Thalia grieved for him, but she couldn't spend any of her faith trying to bolster his.

"I heard that Seeta and her inquisitors are continuing their work," Grete said after a time.

Thalia snorted. "Let her find us now," she said. After Thalia had confronted the Lunarch Council and fled Thraben with Odric and Grete, a zealous inquisitor named Seeta had led the hunt for them. Seeta's battle cry was "Purge the damned!" and she traveled at the head of a procession of rolling guillotines.

The ox-drawn instruments of execution had so far slowed her down enough that she hadn't located the Order of Saint Traft, and now the order had grown large enough that Thalia figured they had little to fear from whatever was left of the inquisition.

Grete shook her head. "They call themselves the Sinpurged now," she said. "They claim the transformation is the result of the sin being purged from their bodies."

Thalia's lip curled in disgust. "They're trying to make a virtue out of...that?"

Grete nodded, staring at the rough path ahead.

"How far we have fallen," Thalia said, half to herself.

"What is it, then?" Grete asked. "I mean, given that it's not a virtue. What's causing it?"

"If there's an answer to be found, Thraben is where we'll find it."

She wondered what would they find—in the city, in the cathedral. Her heart quickened and her stomach lurched more violently as she thought of Thraben, her home for so many years. What if it had become like Hanweir, people and village fused into a single entity? What if there was nothing left to save? What if Avacyn really was...



Hanweir, the Writhing Township | Art by Vincent Proce

A lone figure stood beside a horse on the pathway ahead. Thalia nodded at Grete, who spurred her horse and bolted forward. She leaned toward her own mount's head, and the gryff spread its wings and gracefully drifted into the air, soaring past Grete's charging horse and settling down beside Rem Karolus without even stirring the dust on the ground.

Rem had been another devout servant of the church, the Blade of the Inquisitors, but the madness of the angels had changed him. He had always been grim, carrying out his duties with somber efficiency. But he had renounced his title early on, turning his renowned blade against the true threat to Innistrad. "Slayer of Angels" they called him now, though he did not use the title himself. And though she hadn't talked with him about it, Thalia strongly suspected that his faith had died along with the first angel he had slain.

As Grete reined in her horse beside them, Rem cut two straps on the side of his saddle, and a long metal shaft fell to the dirt with a heavy thud. Even with its tip broken in a jagged line, Avacyn's spear was unmistakable.

"So it's true," Thalia whispered.

“Did you kill her?” Grete blurted.

Rem snorted. “You give me too much credit,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong; I’d’ve done it if I could. But it looks like someone beat me to it.”

Thalia’s heart was lead. She slid off the gryff’s back and fell to her knees beside the spear, as if dragged down by the weight in her chest. Her gryff nuzzled her face, its own face wet with—tears? Was the gryff mourning Avacyn as much as she was?

She shuffled forward and reached for the spear.

Rem half-shouted, “I wouldn’t do—”

A flare of holy light erupted where her hand touched the metal haft, and Thalia jerked her hand back as pain jolted through her entire arm.

“—that,” Rem finished flatly. “I went around in circles trying to get it slung on old Jedda here. Couldn’t touch it.”

Thalia ignored him. *Can you do this?* she asked the spirit she carried.

Her hand began to glow with soft white light as Saint Traft’s power shivered up and down her spine. She felt lighter. With or without Avacyn, the world was not yet lost.

She reached for the spear again, and this time her hand closed firmly around the haft. She got to her feet and lifted the spear over her head, and its head shone like the sun under the overcast sky. Rem’s mouth hung open, and Thalia tried not to grin at him.

“Grete, will you take the standard off my saddle, please?” Thalia said.

Grete dismounted and approached the gryff—nervous at first, but as soon as she was close enough to touch it, Thalia saw the fear melt away. Gryffs were calming.



Dawn Gryff | Art by Christine Choi

Grete deftly removed the long spear that held the banner of Saint Traft over Thalia’s head as she rode, and Thalia put Avacyn’s spear in its place.

“We ride under this banner now,” she said.

Rem was still flabbergasted. “How did you—?”

“You should ride with me more often, Rem. You’ll see a great deal that surprises you.”

“And things to give you hope,” Grete added.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Rem said. But he was looking at the spear, still shining in the dim sunlight, and something gleamed in his eyes, even if it was not hope.

Thalia climbed back into her saddle, turned the gryff toward the approaching army, and nudged it back into the air. She flew over the whole ragtag host, making sure that everyone had a chance to see Avacyn’s spear. Some cheers rose up—the shouts of soldiers acknowledging their leader—but as they realized what they were seeing, and what it meant, the cheers turned to cries of despair.

She guided the gryff down in the midst of them. Calling again to the spirit she carried, she lifted the spear with both hands, hoisting it above her head. It was too heavy for her to wield, but it was a powerful symbol.

“Avacyn is gone!” she shouted. Groans of despair, shouts of disbelief rose around her. “Her church is corrupt beyond redemption. And nameless horrors crawl and squirm across our land.”

She paused a moment, her heart aching. The grief she saw on the faces all around her mirrored her own. Everyone here had lost family, dear friends, and homes, and they were on the brink of losing their hope. The weight of the spear made her shoulder muscles burn.

“But we remain!” she shouted. “We who have fought these horrors, we who have stood against the evil and madness in the church, we who have clung to faith in defiance of despair—we remain! And if no archangel will light our path through this darkness, we must be our own light. If no wards will hold the terrors at bay, then our swords must do it. If we can find no faith in Avacyn, we must have faith in the ideals that Avacyn upheld, before her madness.”

As she spoke, she saw cathars drop to their knees, tears streaming freely down battle-hardened faces, eyes raised to the heavens or faces pressed to the ground. Each of them, she thought, would deal with their grief in their own way, in their own time. She ached for them, on top of her own grief—a burden far heavier than the spear she strained to keep aloft.

Remembering what she had said to Odric months before, she said all that she knew that could lift their hearts from their grief. “Before all this, the soft light of the moon held back the terrors of the night. Before all this, the bonds between us drove out the fear that tried to break us apart. Before all this, we aspired to be more than merely human—we aspired to holiness, to a perfection shown to us by the angels.

“And so we will again. Dear friends, we remain! And this is what we fight for. For the memory of Avacyn, of the light and goodness that have fled from the world, we fight! For Innistrad and all its people, we march!”

They cheered through their tears; they stood from the ground and raised their faces to the clouded sky and lifted their swords and spears high. Thalia touched the gryff’s head and it rose above them, circling one more time above the soldiers, Thalia’s tiny army. Then she landed again at their head, next to Grete, and they marched: to Thraben, to make one desperate, glorious last stand against the nightmare that had seized the world.

The spires and battlements of Thraben towered high above the mouth of the River Kirch, just as it tumbled over the jagged cliffs and into the sea. The gently rolling heath that made up most of Gavony meant that under a clear sky, the Bright City could be seen from many miles away. But Thalia couldn't remember the last time she had seen a clear sky, so by the time the mist and rain parted and exposed the city to their view, they were within an hour's march.

But the way ahead of them was crowded with horrors, and it would be no easy march to Thraben. They were masses of latticed flesh and knobbed tentacles, distorted features and malformed bodies—things that once were farm animals, wild beasts, or the more ordinary sort of monsters. Some were unrecognizable as ever having been a natural creature at all. And many, all too many, had once been human, with varying degrees of anything that could be called a face remaining amid the monstrous features.

By comparison, the hideous skaabs that Geraff Cecani had sent to Thraben—amalgamations of human and animal parts arranged according to his twisted imagination—seemed sane and normal. At least a clear intelligence had formed them—a mind with an abhorrent aesthetic and utterly lacking in any moral compass, but a mind nonetheless. These things could only have been imagined by an utterly alien consciousness, some mad god dreaming in the restless sleep of eternities.

They were converging on Thraben, too, shambling on boneless legs or writhing tentacles or pulling themselves along the ground with what used to be hands. Some flapped clumsily through the air on membranous wings, and some simply drifted on the wind, as though gravity were just one more natural law they could blithely ignore.

At first, the horrors seemed more interested in making their own way toward Thraben than they did in stopping Thalia and her cathars. She ordered the soldiers to conserve their strength, fighting only if they were attacked. As nauseating as it was to leave the wriggling monsters alive, she felt sure her soldiers would need their full strength once they reached the city.

But then she strayed too close to a shambling thing the size of a large horse, and it wheeled on her. It had once been a horse, she guessed—no, a horse *and rider*, now fused together in a hideous mass of flesh. Something like six legs supported the thing, and interwoven cords of magenta flesh covered its sides, fusing what had once been rider and steed together. Jagged teeth jutted from various jaw-like structures beneath a ratty mane, and an orange glow beneath a three-cornered hat must once have been the face of the rider. A halberd was almost swallowed up in the tangle of tentacles.



It That Rides as One | Art by Daarken

Before she could even turn her mount to face the creature, as if she had entered some sort of mad tilting contest, it reared up on three hind legs and slammed a hoof into her shoulder, knocking her from the saddle. Her gryff lifted into the air with a flutter of ruffled feathers, and Thalia took advantage of the horse-creature's momentary distraction to find her feet and settle into a fighting stance.

As it drew near, her blade flashed out and cut two long gashes across what should have been the horse's neck. Brownish *something* dripped from the wounds—not blood; it writhed and squirmed like worms wriggling beneath an overturned rock. And the creature didn't seem to notice.

A hoof at the end of something that was not a leg lashed out at her. She batted it aside, cutting into the flesh just above the hoof, which this time brought a seepage of yellowish pus. But as she parried to one side, a tentacle—perhaps one of the rider's arms, before—slapped her from the other side. The side of her face stung...and then it didn't. Her skin went numb and cold where the fleshy mass had struck her.

She staggered backward two steps, shifting her sword to her other hand as the numbness spread down her neck to her shoulder. The thing followed her and reared up to strike her again, but then her gryff swooped down and drove its beak through the core of the creature's fleshy mass. A howling ululation rose from several mouths yawning open in its body.

She sank her blade deep into the thing—right above a foot still resting in a stirrup, she realized with a jolt of revulsion—and the volume of its cry increased. Several other cathars had come to her aid, and they swung heavier swords and axes until the horror lay twitching at their feet.

And Dennias, who a year ago had been a naive trainee at the Elgaud Grounds, knelt on the ground clutching his head as though he were trying to keep something inside from bursting out. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream and his wide eyes stared at nothing. His friend Mathan fell to one knee beside him, putting an arm around his shoulder and murmuring empty words meant to comfort. Thalia turned away.

Then Mathan screamed.

Thalia whirled around and saw Mathan scrambling back, his face white as a gryff. Dennias hadn't moved, but long tendrils, like magenta ribbons, protruded from between the fingers of one hand. Protruded from out of his ear.

His face went pale, and he looked like he was going to vomit. Shaking her head sadly, Thalia took a few steps toward him. She knew what was coming.

He doubled over as if to empty his stomach, but more of the tendrils came out of his mouth instead. Something large squirmed beneath his armor at his sides, too.

He was lost.

Her blade took his life quickly—far more quickly than the horse and rider had fallen, and certainly more quickly than this corruption would squeeze the life from him. She took on the burden of his death so no one else had to; she would let someone else claim the nobler role of comforting his friend.

Gryffs were calming. As she climbed back into her saddle, her pulse slowed and she managed a deep, shuddering breath. She couldn't look at the spear.

Thraben was drawing them all, now.

Thalia's mind was clear and her eyes focused on the spires of the High City, but she still felt the pull. The soldiers who marched beside and behind her kept their eyes on Avacyn's spear, pointing heavenward from her saddle, but they felt it too, she knew. Townsfolk carrying pickaxes and pitchforks joined their throng, as if they knew that this was their last opportunity to fight for the fate of the world.

And the shambling, shuddering, squirming things all around them knew nothing but the pull. Some were still mostly human, townsfolk and villagers clad in the robes of the coastal cults, sporting crab claws or suckered tentacles or froglike mouths. Some had clearly been human before, or animals, though no longer. Some were so far gone she couldn't begin to describe them. But Thraben was drawing them all.

No, not all. A troop of knights on armored horses rode across the heath, toward Thalia and her forces, not toward the city. A company of soldiers marched behind them.

"Grete, Rem," she said, snapping them out of their trancelike states. She pointed. Rem nodded grimly, while Grete's brow furrowed.

"More enemies?" Grete asked.

"The Sinpurged, maybe," Rem said.

"Don't call them that," Thalia snapped. "But I don't think it's Seeta's crew."

"Who, then?" Grete asked.

"I'll find out." Thalia didn't even have time to nudge her mount before it lifted off the ground, as if it knew her thoughts.

As she winged toward the approaching knights, a figure near the front of the wedge rose into the air as well—just one human figure, no flying mount carrying it aloft.

As her gryff winged nearer, Thalia could make out a mane of flame-red hair, black armor—and a long black skirt that seemed completely unsuited for battle. The figure had pale skin, almost white, and carried an absurdly large blade made lighter by hollowing it out so the gray sky was visible through it.

Not human, then. A vampire.

The vampire held both hands up to signal a parley, though she still held the blade—and no wonder, since Thalia couldn't imagine what a sheath for that thing might look like. Thalia returned the gesture, her own slim blade sheathed at her side. And they slowly hovered toward each other until they were close enough to speak.

It was ludicrous, in a way, yet deathly serious. Thalia sat astride a gryff whose wings flapped ever so slightly to keep it aloft, face to face with a vampire suspended in the air by her own magic. And they were going to *talk*.

"We have common cause, human," the vampire called. "I'm Olivia Voldaren, lady of Lurenbraum and progenitor of the Voldaren line."



Olivia, Mobilized for War | Art by Eric Deschamps

Thalia was struck speechless for a moment. Floating in the air a stone's throw away from her was one of the most powerful vampires in Innistrad, rumored to be an eccentric recluse known for hosting extravagant parties at which she rarely made more than a brief appearance. And she was decked out in full battle array, the picture of elegant aristocracy mobilized for war.

With a deep breath, Thalia found her voice. "Greetings, Lady Voldaren. I'm Thalia, Heir of Saint Traft."

"*Really*? I met him once, you know. I must say, you do him credit, sitting there on your gryff with the spear of Avacyn at your side."

It was subtle, Olivia's reminder that she was far more ancient than Thalia could comprehend. A gentle warning, mixed with a note of what almost sounded like respect.

"What's this about, vampire? I'm not going to stand by while my soldiers become another one of your legendary Voldaren feasts."

"Relax, darling." She laughed, a musical sound that only made the situation seem more absurd. "As I said before, we have common cause. I think we're all here for the same purpose: to save the world. Since your precious angel is clearly in no position to do so."

Thalia bit back a harsh response. If the vampires were here to help, she could not turn them back. Yes, if any of them survived the march on Thraben, no doubt the vampires would turn on them then, hungry from the exertion of battle. But that was a purely theoretical problem, compared to the grim reality of the monsters shuffling toward the High City while they spoke.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll save the world together. You with your army, I with mine. I can’t ask my soldiers to fight alongside vampires, but we’ll fight the same foes.”

Olivia had drifted closer as they spoke, and now she swooped close enough to extend a hand. On Thalia’s right, with the gryff between her and Avacyn’s spear.

“No vampire bite or blade will draw human blood until this fight is through, Heir of Saint Traft. Are we in agreement?”

Not quite believing she was doing it, Thalia reached out and took the vampire’s hand.

“No human blade will harm your kind. We agree.”

Olivia dipped in the air and lowered her face to their clasped hands. She drew a deep breath of air through her nose—*sniffing?*—and then met Thalia’s eyes. Her fangs showed clearly through her smile.

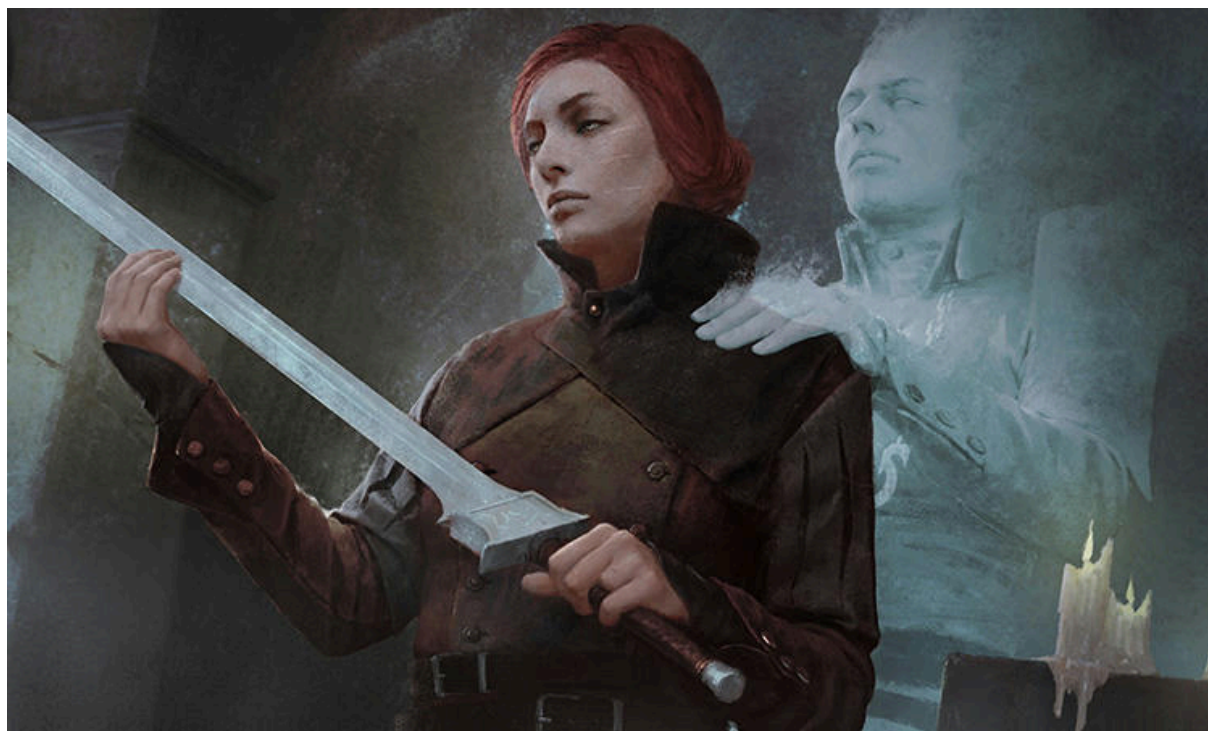
“Delicious,” she said. One final warning, then she turned and drifted back down toward her vampire army.

Thalia shuddered and returned to her soldiers, trying to figure out what she would say to them.

Thalia rode for a time with her eyes closed, trusting her gryff to lead the way and alert her to danger. She withdrew into herself and communed with the geist who shared her body, and she remembered:

It was after she confronted Odric in the cathedral that she first met the saint, the geist. With nowhere to go, she rode out into the heath, off the crossways, until she stumbled on an overgrown path. Something drew her along its winding course, until she discovered an ancient chapel near the foothills that made their way up to the Geier Reach of Stensia.

A painting inside caught her eye. It showed Traft, she knew now, or his geist, standing behind a red-haired woman who held a sword in her four-fingered left hand. His hand was on her shoulder.



Invocation of Saint Traft | Art by Igor Kieryluk

That woman was the first Heir of Saint Traft, who as a girl had been captured and tormented by demonic cultists in order to lure the saint to his doom. The cultists had cut off her finger and sent it to Traft to ensure his cooperation in their wicked scheme. After the saint's death, he had kept a special watch over her as she grew into a great warrior and a slayer of demons in her own right. And as the angels had favored Traft, so too they had smiled upon her and fought by her side.

As Thalia gazed at the painting in that lonely chapel, the hazy form of the saint's geist shown in the painting seemed to move. His serene face turned toward her, his eyes met hers, and then his hand reached out toward her. Without hesitation, she took it, and it felt as solid as flesh and bone—but cold, so cold. Fear seized her, and she fell to her knees, looking away from those blank eyes, but he kept hold of her hand and stepped closer, as though he were coming out of the painting. He knelt to the ground in front of her, and his other hand gently lifted her chin.

"Will you take me in?" he whispered.

She nodded, he smiled, and her fear was gone. She took a deep breath and he filled her nose and mouth and lungs, cold fire burning her from the inside, and she threw her head back as he coursed through her veins, every inch of her aflame.

That cold flame had not left her in the months since. Most of the time, it was a sort of knot at the back of her skull, from time to time sending shivers up and down her spine and into her head, as the geist reminded her of his presence—in warning, often, or in anger. Sometimes, like when she had gripped Avacyn's spear, his fire coursed through her again, and it was no longer she who moved, but the geist that moved her.

He had carried her this far, she knew. He had stood with her when she confronted Jerren and the Lunarch Council. He had helped her gather these other cathars, so-called heretics, to fight the evils that beset the church from without and within. He would not desert her as she led them into Thraben. Somehow, he reassured her of that much, at least. But she could sense some hesitation, even from him.

Would his help be enough? He couldn't promise her that. But it was all the hope she had.

The gryff shivered beneath her, and she opened her eyes, looking around for whatever had disturbed it. The walls of Thraben were close now. The vampire army, which had slowly grown closer as they approached the High City, was close on their left flank now. It was no longer possible to evade the shambling horrors; they were all converging on the city, and fighting was spreading throughout the front of her column of soldiers.

But her soldiers were feeling the weight of it. She could see the wildness in their eyes, the desperation born of a growing conviction that the world's end was drawing near, that they were marching to an apocalyptic last battle.



Fiend Binder | Art by David Gaillet

She lifted her gryff to circle over the front lines, shouting words of encouragement to the desperate and despairing. But it was more than desperation, she realized. As awful as it was—fighting twisted monsters that had once been ordinary flesh, some of them once human—that wasn't the only thing pushing them toward the precipice of despair. There was something else, something she experienced as a sort of pressure on her mind. Forcing her mind to form strange thoughts, strange urges, strange perceptions. In the corners of her vision, monsters looked human and soldiers looked like monsters. The sky seemed to writhe with blue and mauve tentacles churning the clouds. The ground buckled beneath her, her gryff turned inside out, Avacyn's spear bent down to point itself at her chest—

No.

It echoed like a bell in her mind, a word of power spoken by the spirit of a long-dead saint. Her thoughts cleared, her perceptions returned to normal. Clarity.

But the soldiers below her lacked Traft's protection, and she could see the madness taking root in them as they stared around themselves in fear.

They're not ready, Traft whispered in her mind.

"It doesn't matter," she said aloud. "We have to do it now."

It will hurt them.

“This madness will kill them, or they’ll kill each other. It’s time.”

Do it, then.

His fire coursed through her again, and she seized Avacyn’s spear as she circled once more over the front lines.

“Cathars of Saint Traft!” she shouted. “The madness that has seized our world is pressing in around us. You feel it, I know. You’re questioning your thoughts, doubting your eyes and ears. Listen to me!”

For some of them, she realized now, it was too late. She saw cathars writhing on the ground, clutching their heads or curled into fetal balls. Damn it, she had waited too long. But there were still cathars she could save.

“You know the Geist of Saint Traft lives within me,” she called, and as she said it, the Geist made a nimbus of blue-white light shine around her. “Once he was Beloved of Angels, and the blessed ones shielded him as Avacyn’s church once shielded us. But Avacyn is no more, her angels are lost to madness, and only the dead remain.”

It was Traft who called them, and they answered his summons. Up from the ground, swooping down from the roiling sky, soaring toward them from the High City, came hundreds of glowing white forms. Out from the mausoleums and the Blessed Grafs, no longer bound by sacred wards whose magic had failed with Avacyn’s demise, the spirits of the dead came to the aid of the living. Some rode on spectral steeds, some carried ghostly spears and swords, some were aged and battle-hardened, and some were little children.



Drogskol Cavalry | Art by Igor Kieryluk

“Behold the spirits of the faithful who have come before us,” Thalia shouted. Or perhaps it was Traft shouting with her voice. “Welcome them. Honor the sacrifices they have made so that we could fight today. Open yourselves to them, and let them shield you!”

And she watched her soldiers—the desperate, bedraggled, blessed cathars of the Order of Saint Traft—catch fire. Some of them, catching her meaning at once, spread their arms wide and embraced the

geists that swept in and filled them. Thalia could see the holy ecstasy seize them, and the others quickly caught on. There were geists enough for her whole ragged army, and another army left over to march beside the living.

As the fire roared to life inside them, they surged back into battle, and piteous shrieks rose up from the front lines as they hacked and stabbed their way through the monstrous horrors ahead.

There are some who cannot invite the spirits in, Traft said, directing her eyes to the soldiers who were still clutching their heads or curled into balls.

She could save them. She could direct the spirits to possess them against their will, drive out the madness, clear their minds. Her stomach knotted with compassion and grief.

“No,” she said. “I can’t make that choice for them. The others will help them, as they are able.”

She directed her gryff to the ground again, alighting between Grete and Rem Karolus. She could see the white fire blazing in Grete’s eyes, but Rem was stony-faced and grim.

“No geist for you, Rem?”

The grizzled soldier shook his head. “Like putting a leech on your neck to keep the vampires away,” he said.

She started to protest, nervous about what might happen if he lost his senses in the midst of battle—to him, and to the soldiers around him. Again, though, she could not force the choice. And if any soldier here could keep his head in all this madness through sheer force of stubborn will, it was Rem Karolus, Blade of the Inquisitors and Slayer of Angels.

Their march became one interminable battle, every step forward contested by some new horror. The twisted monstrosities—even the ones that still looked mostly human—fought like Somberwald boars, snarling and thrashing despite dozens of wounds before they finally fell to the ground and stopped their loathsome twitching. But the holy geists made Thalia’s soldiers almost as fierce, and she saw grievously injured soldiers get calmly back to their feet as the geists within them closed their wounds and restored their strength.

She barely noticed when they passed through the Outer Wall, marking their entrance into Thraben. Just a passing thought—*the end is near*—flitted through her mind before she stabbed a creature that had once been a werewolf and then whirled to cut through a weirdly jointed tentacle that was groping toward her.

They were fighting shoulder to shoulder with vampires now, making their way through the streets of the city. The vampires made terrifying allies, showing the same frenzied delight in killing warped and corrupted humans that they did when the humans were pure and whole. Each remnant of a human face Thalia saw in a monster falling beneath her blade added to the burden on her shoulders, but to the vampires these creatures were just more prey. She even saw a few vampires pause to feed before continuing to press ahead. Fighting down a wave of nausea, she forced herself to look away.

A great open plaza stretched out before Thraben Cathedral, a place where in happier times great throngs of people would gather to hear the Lunarch give an address on holy days. Throngs were gathered there now—throngs of gibbering, squirming, eldritch *things*, locked in battle with what remnants of the High City’s soldiery and the cathedral’s guards remained. Thalia nudged her gryff upward and circled the plaza to take stock of the battle.

Desperate citizens swung shovels and scythes, trying to hold back gangs of twisted cultists. Valiant cathars charged in a tight wedge to break the ranks of faceless monsters, only to find themselves en-

gulfed on all sides. A small pack of werewolves, led by two white-furred beasts, tore into the ranks of their utterly corrupted kin. A hulking skaab stood over the corpse of a wretched scholar, defending its creator with its last shred of strength. Death—so much death.



Extricator of Sin | Art by Craig J Spearing

Circling back toward the advancing soldiers she had left behind, she saw a group of heavily armored soldiers wearing the heron masks of the Lunarch Inquisition. Their deformities protruded from under their hoods and robes, and they were encircling a group of terrified townsfolk. Thalia saw a few of the citizens fall to their knees, begging for mercy from the church that was supposed to protect them. And then she recognized Seeta, leader of the so-called Sinpurged. Sword in hand and anger blazing in her chest, she swooped down toward the blasphemous cathar.

Then she saw a jagged blade burst out from Seeta's chest, and the chief of the Sinplagued slumped to her knees. Behind her, Thalia saw the pale face of Olivia Voldaren smirking at her.

"Fine," she muttered, and she nudged her gryff upward again, scanning the chaos for Rem Karolus or Grete.

Why does that bother you so much? Traft's voice whispered in her mind. *Your enemy is slain, but you wanted to do it yourself?*

"I'm no saint," she said aloud.

Faces turned upward toward her, and she saw terror in the eyes of her own soldiers. Finally she spotted Rem, white-faced and wide-eyed. His sword clattered on the cobblestones and he pointed up—behind her.

She turned the gryff and saw the source of the terror. Drifting in the air in front of the cathedral was a huge abomination formed of twisted flesh, writhing tentacles...and feathered wings.



Brisela, Voice of Nightmares | Art by Clint Cearley

The monstrous angel's two heads uttered a discordant wail that stabbed her ears and upended her equilibrium, and she had to clutch the pommel of her saddle to keep her seat. Below her, twisted monsters surged forward as uncorrupted humans clutched their ears or staggered back under a renewed assault. The angel-thing swept one of its thick lower tentacles through the throng in the square, sending humans and horrors alike scattering or crushing them to the ground.

If anyone was going to face this nightmare, Thalia realized, it had to be her. Her gryff's wings made it possible, which was more than anyone on the ground could say. She steadied herself in the saddle, adjusted her grip on her sword, and rose to the angel's eye level, above the broken roof of the cathedral.

Despite the creature's enormous size, its heads were no larger than Thalia's own, and some hint of their angelic features remained, including a tangled mat of reddish hair.

"Abomination!" she shouted, swallowing her fear and dread. She wanted to issue some kind of formal challenge, but words fled from her reach and she finally just swooped in to attack.

One of the angel-thing's impossibly long arms lashed out to bat her aside, but the gryff bobbed beneath it and Thalia slashed at it as she flew past. The two heads opened their mouths to wail again—one

mouth just a gaping cavity in the creature's neck—but the sound was cut short as Thalia drove her sword into something like a shoulder where at least three arms converged on the creature's left side. At the same time, her gryff's beak tore at the knotted flesh on the side of one of those monstrous heads.

In response, the angel brought its other arm up and slashed a half-dozen finger-claws down her side and across her gryff's flank, sending them both hurtling down toward the cathedral steps. The gryff tried desperately to right itself as it careened downward, but one wing was clearly broken, and it managed only to put itself between Thalia and the hard stone steps.

Thalia's entire body ached, and her leg was pinned beneath the gryff at an awkward angle, sending jolts of agony up her side at the slightest movement. Her head was spinning. She lay it down on the stone and stared up at her doom.

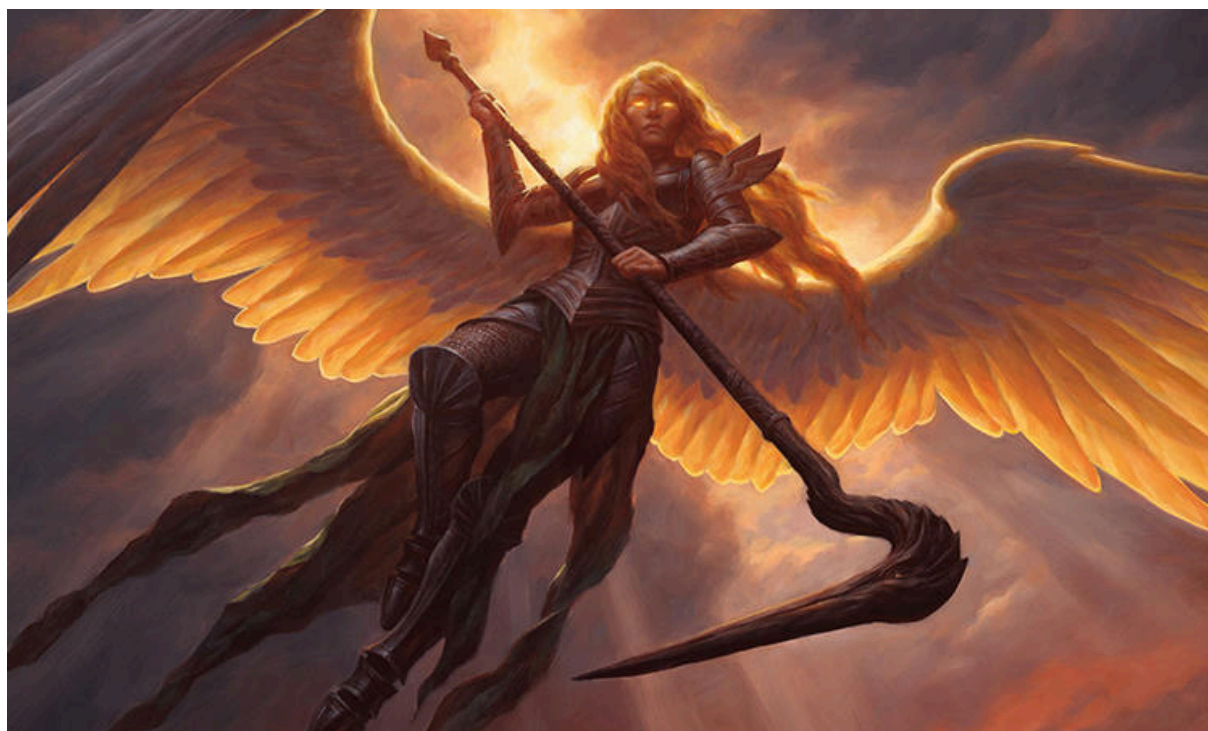
It seemed fitting, somehow, that her end should come at the hands of an angel, an embodiment of everything she had given her life to serve. The angel's corruption seemed to mirror all the ways her life had gone wrong in recent months. The fused angels drifted down toward her, intent on finishing the work they had begun.

But before Thalia could lift a hand to defend herself, something bright interposed itself between her and the angel-thing.

"HELLO, MY SISTER," the angel-thing said in a horrific double voice that echoed with the resonance of untold eternities.

"You are no longer my sisters," a pure, clear voice responded. Thalia saw a figure in the midst of the light, an angel holding a scythe that's head was styled like a heron.

"Sigarda," she whispered. The archangel of the Host of Herons had never turned against humanity, even at the height of Avacyn's madness. Even now, she stood against her—*sisters*? That meant the fused angel-thing contained Bruna and Gisela, the archangels of the other two hosts. Despair settled into Thalia's gut like stone.



Sigarda, Heron's Grace | Art by Chris Rahn

“YOU SHOULD HAVE ANSWERED WHEN WE CALLED.”

“So I could be part of this ‘great work’?” Sigarda replied.

Sigarda was buying time for her to recover, Thalia realized. With all her remaining strength, she pushed the dead gryff off her leg, sending a nauseating wave of agony through her.

“YES. THE GREAT WORK NEARS ITS COMPLETION.”

The angel-thing reached both of its enormous claws toward Sigarda, and four smaller hands close to its chest reached out as well, reminding Thalia strangely of a baby reaching for her mother.

“Your work here is finished, sisters,” Sigarda said. “You have become what we were meant to destroy.”

Thalia could feel Traft working within her, easing the pain, closing wounds, and even mending bone. If Sigarda kept her sisters at bay just a bit longer, Thalia would be ready to fight again. She looked around for her sword.

It was gone. The blow that smashed her and the gryff to the ground could have sent her weapon halfway across the plaza. How could she fight this thing with no damned sword?

“YOU CAN’T HURT US NOW, SISTER,” the angel-thing said.

Sigarda raised her scythe, which caught an errant beam of moonlight and seemed to glow.

“I must,” she said, and she swept the scythe in a huge, deadly arc across her sisters’ arms and chest.

But one of those huge, strangely bifurcated arms snatched Sigarda out of the air. Thalia gasped in horror as the big hand carried the angel’s struggling form to the strange, glowing maw at the angel-thing’s chest, where the four smaller arms embraced Sigarda. Long tendrils of flesh wriggled out and coiled around Sigarda’s arms, tying her in place.

“No, no, no,” Thalia said. She couldn’t stand idly by and watch the last sane angel get absorbed into that monstrosity. She cast her eyes around for anything that would serve as a weapon.

“WE WILL BE TOGETHER AGAIN,” the fused angels said.

Traft directed Thalia’s gaze to Avacyn’s spear.

“It’s too heavy,” she said.

Not for us both, the saint’s geist replied.

“Fine.” She stepped around her fallen steed and bent down to pick up the spear. A chill spread down her spine as Traft’s power coursed through her once more, protecting her from the spear’s magic. And she shuddered in an instant of ecstasy as glowing, translucent wings spread out from her back, the blessing of some unseen angel.

I was Beloved of Angels, once, Traft reminded her.

The broken spear seemed almost to glow in the light of the torches and small fires scattered around the plaza. She grasped it in both hands and lifted it skyward.

As lightly as her gryff, her angelic wings lifted her into the air. Traft had been right, of course—with his strength aiding hers, the spear felt as light as her slender blade in her hands. Up she soared, to where the angel-thing held Sigarda, who was now barely visible beneath a layer of fibrous flesh.

When it saw Avacyn’s spear shining in Thalia’s hands, Bruna-Gisela uttered another piercing wail. As one of those monstrous claws swung at her, Thalia blocked it with the haft of the spear, then forced the jagged, broken blade down to bite into that sickening blue flesh. The wail changed tone, from grief

to physical pain, and Thalia jabbed with the spear, hitting the same shoulder she had pierced with her sword.

The other claw came arcing toward her, and Thalia turned the spear to drive it deep into the flesh of what should have been a palm. She twisted and leveraged the blade to tear at the wound, cutting through the web of flesh and bone that formed the impossible limb.

Sigarda seemed to be regaining strength as her fused sisters weakened, struggling against the tendrils that held her in place. Thalia sliced at the angel-thing's chest, loosening Sigarda's bonds, then plunged the blade through the tangle of ribs and sinew into the red glow in the abdomen. She felt the blow in her own gut as she stabbed at the blasphemous angel.

Lashing out in reflexive agony, the angel-thing smashed Thalia with its less-wounded claw, sending her careening down toward the ground again. But this time her angelic wings brought her around in a swooping arc and up to the angel's back, where she drove Avacyn's spear through feathered wings and buried it deep into the spine and whatever organs filled the twisted thing's abdomen. Again, agony jolted through her own chest.

But the angel's awful wail ceased.

It twitched and writhed. Its monstrous claws flailed about, trying to reach behind it. Wings buffeted the air, and the tangled mass of tentacles that had been the angels' legs grasped at nothing.

Sigarda burst out of her sisters' chest smeared with blood and ichor, like an abhorrent birth, and crashed to the ground in the plaza below.

Thalia clung to the spear, riding it like an untamed steed as the angel-thing thrashed about in its death throes.

"Sister," the angel-thing croaked.

And it followed Sigarda to the hard stone of the plaza below, curling like a dead spider on the ground. Thalia rolled off its back and fell to the ground beside it, staring upward into darkness.

Sigarda's hand lifted Thalia to her feet, and her pain fled and her vision cleared. The blessed angel, the last archangel, smiled at her.

Victory—the word flitted through her mind, and she returned the angel's smile.

Then Sigarda's face grew solemn again, and she shook her head as though aware of Thalia's fleeting thought.

Thalia turned to survey the scene. The battle still raged, but a glance suggested that the tide had turned, that humans and vampires and werewolves fighting in an improbable alliance were driving back the gibbering horde of madness.

Then her gaze rose to the sky.

The thing in the air was impossibly huge. It looked vaguely like the fused angels, Bruna-Gisela. Its dome-shaped body was supported by a mass of strange tentacles, and a reddish light glowed at its core.

But there was no remnant of any natural life, let alone the beauty and majesty of an angel, in the form of this creature. Its existence defied the natural order of things, violated physical laws, and blasphemed against the sacred nature of life. Its presence was an invitation to madness, pressing into Thalia's mind like a dull knife despite the saint's warding.

As it approached, a tidal wave of corrupted monstrosities crested before it, smashing into the plaza and turning the tide once more toward annihilation.



Thalia, Heretic Cathar | Art by Magali Villeneuve