
Episode 5: Night Closes 'Round

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Innistrad: Midnight Hunt*
29. 09. 2021

"Mind yourself in the woods, Arlinn," he says.

Her father's voice is strong and firm, but there's a bit of a creak to it—like an oak whose branches yawn under pressure. There he stands in his workshop—she can see it so clearly now—surrounded by the work of his own two hands. Holy symbols flood the walls like moths covering a lantern. He does not look up at her.

When she blinks, he is gone.

Years later, and after traveling the Multiverse, she's finally grown brave enough to go back home. Boulder and Streak know the weight of what she means to do. And, of course, if her human parents reject her, at least she has her pack. Their presence is constant, their loyalty hard-won. She offers them guidance, and they offer her belonging. There's strength in that.

So, she makes her way up the hill to the old forge.

But there isn't anything there. A husk meets her: blackened foundations jutting from the earth. A wall that she once scribbled on as a child.

The villagers don't recognize her, so they're leery of telling her what happened, but she finds out eventually. A fire. Must have been some accident with the forge. The whole house went up in flame. What a shame—can't be helped.

She blinks. Back to the present.



Duel for Dominance | Art by: Ryan Pancoast

Tovolar's before her. No matter how much his shape changes, his eyes stay the same: burning, quick, bright as brands. He bares his teeth. A smile, she thinks.

This isn't the first time. There was another years ago when they met in a semi-circle of their brethren. She tried and failed to kill him; he tried and failed to keep her. He wore the white stag's pelt. The fight ruined it she remembers, vaguely, tearing it from his shoulders in a fit of rage. She was angry then, too.

But not as angry as she is now.

Arlinn Kord's only thought is to wipe the smile from Tovolar's face.

Forward. Powerful legs send her flying through the air; her jaws are ready to clamp down on his throat. Instead, they meet a forearm raised just in time. Blood fills her mouth all the same—thick and rich with copper. Her nostrils flare even as Tovolar twists, using her momentum to send her to the ground.

But you cannot keep a hungry wolf down for long. The moment her back paws hit the earth, she's already back up, already lurching toward him again.

He spreads his arms wide. The scar across his chest carries to this form, too. When she blinks, there is no white in his fur, and the wound is bleeding red, red, red.

"Come home," he says.

Was that what he said then?

It doesn't matter.

A howl leaves her throat. She goes for him again, clawing at him, the muscles in her chest and arms straining.

He doesn't move. Claws rend fur and flesh, tearing him open anew, and still, he does not stop smiling. How?

There's no time to dwell; he's on her now, lunging at her waist. Her ribs groan, threatening to crack; he's not letting go anytime soon. She plants her feet deeper in the ground. If he wants to lift her, he's

going to have to give up a lot to do it; from here, she can rain blows on his back. Blood runs in rivers down his fur, each new wound driving her further into the pit of the wilderness.

Yet, just as he can't stop her, she can't stop him. Only three blows land before he hefts her overhead and drives her into a split tree trunk. Candles fly, sent tumbling by the impact; fire licks at the gashes the wood's now torn open.

He's a fool if he thinks this can hold her. No matter the chunk of wood buried in her shoulder. Arlinn plants her feet along one corner of the trunk and her shoulders along with the other. A grunt gives her enough power to break her way out. She tears the wood from her shoulder and plunges it straight into Tovolar's leg.

This, at last, succeeds in wiping the smile away. A great howl fills the festival ground—a howl that pierces through the chaos of the battle. When he clutches the wood in his enormous hand with a trembling grip; with some small satisfaction, the Beast of Arlinn Kord realizes she has pierced him all the way through.

Victory is short-lived. Teeth sink into her shoulders, weight pulling her down. There are too many things at once to keep track of. Down she goes—her head cracking against the discarded helmet of a dead guard. Her ears ring. For a moment she can hear nothing—not the screaming of the fleeing festivalgoers, not Adeline's shouted orders, not the roar of Chandra's flames.

And not the snarling of the wolves looming over her.

How familiar their faces! How often she's seen them in the middle of a hunt! There is Redtooth, living up to her name, hackles raised; there is Boulder at her feet; there is Streak with his jaws firmly locked on her already wounded shoulder. Muzzles she's so often seen at play now bear down on her with a predator's frightful presence.

And then Tovolar is over her again.

She tries to stand. Dizziness sends her reeling back, followed shortly by her shoulder threatening to tear. Nausea stops up her throat.

His mouth's moving. She can't hear what he's saying—the ringing in her ears sounds too much like church bells.

What a strange church this is, with screams for hymns and battlefield filth for incense.

She closes her eyes.

The Grand Cathedral in Thraben. Worrin behind a desk. *Innistrad was born in darkness, and to the darkness it longs to return. It is for that reason we must each tend to our own light.*

He was the one who recommended her for the Archmagi.

What would he make of her now? Did his geist know when he saw her?

The ringing dies down. Tovolar's talking—she can hear him as if from another room—but more than that, she can hear her wolves. That low growl they usually directed toward their next meal.

But it isn't quite that growl, is it?

She opens her eyes again.

There he is, pulling the hunk of wood from his leg. Blood drips onto her muzzle.

“Home “

This isn't home.

She tries to sit up again, tries to headbutt him, but Boulder's teeth clamp down and he pushes her back.

"Don't have to fight," he says.

Angel's mercy, she wants to vomit. Her tongue's lead in her muzzle. Hard enough to understand wolf-speech without a head injury.

"Join the hunt," he says. "This is who you are. Don't you understand? You don't have to hide anymore."

Now he's extending a paw to her. Everything in her wants to slap it away. All it does is show her he *can* control himself but chooses not to. That's how he manages to talk in this shape.

"The Church hates this part of you," he says. "But I don't. The pack doesn't."

And it is then—perhaps by divine providence—that Arlinn realizes something.

Patience isn't with her packmates.

Arlinn swallows back bile. If she tries yes, she can smell that Patience is close by. The scent is faint compared to the blood and sweat at the forefront, but it's there. Her eyes are still spinning, but if she tries, she can focus and—

There. In the dying light of day, Patience is waiting for her. She sits away from the others, just out of reach of Arlinn's right hand, but the moment they lock eyes, Patience starts loping toward her.

Tovolar's insistent. "Tell me you're coming home. Right now. Tell me you're coming home, and I'll let you go."

Soft fur against her palm. Her stomach settles, just for an instant.

"Arlinn. Please. We want you with us. You *belong* with us."

She closes her eyes again. There: the cathedral's stained glass.

Light shifts. A clearing in the woods, and the four wolves within it.

She walks forward, into the light, and they surround her.

Arlinn opens her eyes. Now she understands: he isn't going to let up until she says what he wants to hear.

"I'm home," she says. Even these two words come out slurred, even this is a great effort, but she manages.

It isn't a lie.

The woods are home, the wolves are home, the Church is home, all of it is.

Even as he helps her up, even as he hugs her tight—this, too, is home. To a young Arlinn freshly changed, this simple gesture once meant the world. And it does still, now, to know that there is yet this much gentleness in him.

But the ferocity, the mercilessness—they have overtaken him. Whatever kindness he shows now cannot wipe away what he's done today. The Tovolar who looked after her has grown into the Tovolar who attacks innocents, and she has grown away from him.

Yet she knows, too, that he hasn't grown away from her.

Dizzy and bleeding as she is, she won't have much time or opportunity to get a better angle than this. It's underhanded. Some might even say it isn't right.

But if it stops this attack, then there's nothing more right in all of Innistrad.

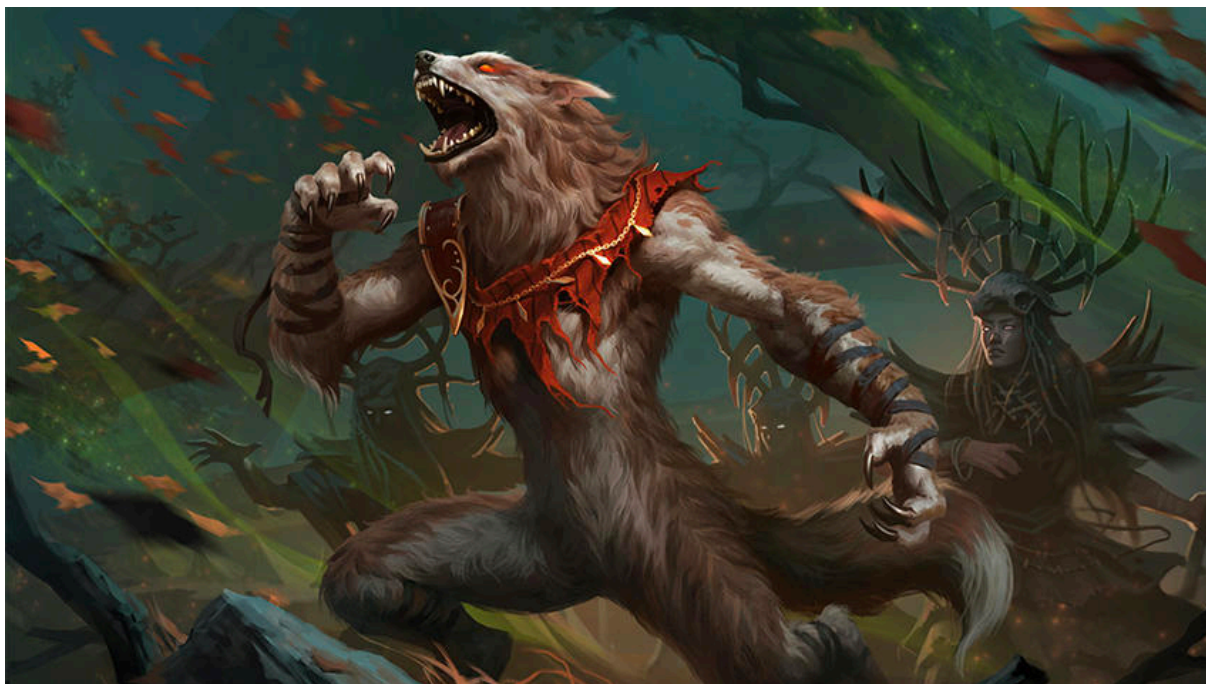
She drives her claws deep into his sternum.

Tovolar lurches over. Realization is slow to dawn; he holds her, if anything, closer.

"Innistrad is home, Tovolar," she says. "And as long as I can breathe, I'm going to protect it."

A gasp is her only answer—his grasp turns malicious as his claws dig into her already wounded shoulder.

She stands, her hand still buried in him. "Call off the attack."



Defend the Celestus | Art by: Andrey Kuzinskiy

How strange to see his eyes dimming in this way. He's hardy enough to live, she's almost certain, and likely will once the shamans get a look at him—but she has never once seen him staggered this way. Not even the first time they fought in the clearing. It isn't simply that she's hurt him physically. Something inside him is broken, something she can't feel from here.

"You lied," he rasps.

"Call it off," she repeats.

He presses his eyes shut. She wonders what he sees. Is it the girl he found in the woods that day, or is it something else—something that drove him to this level of unimaginable cruelty?

Whatever it is, it brings him to his senses. In a choked gurgle, he says, "Fine."

She sets him down, withdraws her hand, makes sure he's sitting up. The others will eat him alive if they catch him doubled over.

He looks at her again, and she shakes her head.

The howl goes up soon after that, a call for retreat only the wolves understand.

He does not ask her to follow.

Like ants crawling over a body, but in reverse: the wolves leaving the bleached-bone remains of the Harvesttide Massacre.

The name's already been born. From the lips of the cathars who now stand bruised and battered, from the witches who sort through the bodies in search of those who need their help, the word has already been formed: *massacre*.

Arlinn cannot look on it for long. Too much like The Travails. Worse, in a way, with all the childish decorations now strewn about like the storm refuse. Carved pumpkins crushed beneath the bodies of the dead; cider pouring freely into puddles of blood; careful stalls broken in two by their keeper's bodies.

Less than an hour ago, this was a place of hope.

What is it now?

Arlinn swallows. She wants to help. Her place is with the witches and the cathars, tending to the fallen, but if Katilda doesn't complete her ritual, then there won't be anyone to tend to. The crushed effigies around her are a grim reminder of that.

Innistrad endures.

She has to march on.

While the witches and the remaining guards tend to the wounded, the Candleguides keep smiling their strange smiles, pointing the way for the dead.

And there are so many dead.

Katilda's festival was a rousing success in the worst possible way. To see such a throng of bodies laid out at once is unthinkable to Arlinn. Her parents would never believe it. They never would have attended, would have turned up their noses and muttered that safety lay in isolation. Then, as now, she knows what they really meant—that safety and fear were one and the same.

They're wrong.

Everyone keeping to themselves, thinking about themselves, that's how Innistrad got here. Vampires climbing toward eternity on the backs of the mortal; werewolves hunting the people they should be protecting. Division caused this. Had the wolves realized the importance of keeping day and night in balance, they could have *protected* the festival instead.

But that thought's a painful one.

She bounds ahead. There will be time to mourn later, time to eulogize the dead and explain to their families what went wrong. For any of this to mean something, the ritual must be completed.

Those gathered beneath the Celestus must know that it's worth something.

Her body aches, her forepaws and shoulders screaming with every long step, but she charges ahead all the same—the only wolf heading toward the Celestus. Tune out the crying, tune out the screams—just run.

But there's one voice it's impossible to ever fully tune out.

"Arlinn!"

Chandra's calling out. Adeline's white horse comes up on Arlinn's right, galloping for his life toward the Celestus. A couple of hours ago, she would have hated being outrun by a *horse*, of all things, but now all she feels is relief.

Because Chandra's holding out a hand. "You're in bad shape, come with us!" she shouts. "Teferi's gone ahead with a couple of the others, we have to catch up!"

Reaching out, staying together.

It's the only way to go.

Shifting to her human form, Arlinn takes Chandra's hand.

Chanting meets them first. Arlinn can't make out the words, but the sounds have the shape of towering oaks and old rivers. A glow runs up the arms of the Celestus, and she thinks to herself, slumped against Adeline, that they look like her father's tongs, fresh from the fire.



Raze the Effigy | Art by: Cristi Balanescu

It brings a giddy smile to her face. But maybe that's the blood loss, too.

"Chandra, doesn't it look like "

"Looks like they're almost done, yeah," she answers. No point in correcting her. Arlinn looks ahead.

Chandra's right: whatever they're up to, it must be nearing completion. Hard to make out the details given the thick crowd gathered around the central platform, but that's more cause for joy than it is for worry.

Straight into the crowd they go. Adeline's armor and Chandra's flame serve as symbols of their station; gout of fire say both to keep away and that the fight is not yet done. Dizzy as she is, Arlinn can only partially make out the faces of those around her—but the hope in their eyes shines through.

And all of them are mouthing along to the chant.

What a strange cadence it has, lilting and rising, defiant and eerie. Elongated syllables creep in through her ears and dance there, pulling her thoughts along with them. If this is magic, then it is old magic indeed. It's settling into her veins now.

Closer and closer to the central platform. They can see it now, see the masks of the Dawnhart Coven moving this way and that. Five on the edge of the platform drum in time to the chanting; five between them lead a jarring dance. In the center, two: Katilda, her mask shading much of her face, the Moon-silver Key held in her hands like something sacred and pure; Kaya, standing at the ready, searching the horizon for them.

When Kaya catches sight of them, she starts waving her arms and gesturing them over.

The wooden bridge opens before them. Chandra's first off the horse and quick to help Adeline down. The two of them try to support Arlinn on the way down. With a cathar on one side and a pyromancer on the other, there isn't much room for Arlinn to sway. All the better.

One step. Another. The wood gives beneath them, creaks, and that too is part of the eerie song of the forest—the chant that lives now in their lungs.

One step, another. What would the angels think of this? What would the Church think? This is nothing like a hymn, nothing like a prayer; it's something different, but just as real. How is it that the words spring so readily to her lips when she's never heard them before? Have they been etched on her bones all this time?

One step, another. The witches are gathered before them. All at once, they turn to Chandra, Adeline, and Arlinn. Eyes meet beneath bent boughs and bones. Silver swirls within the irises of the witches—yes, this is old magic indeed.

At once, the witches speak in their collected voices: "*Arlinn Kord.*"

She swallows.

Chandra and Adeline share a glance over her shoulders. Together, they help her to the altar. Before her is a golden bowl, fit for sunlight and honey, surrounded by dried herbs and old bones.

The eyes of Innistrad are upon her.

"I've come," she answers. It feels like the right thing to say.

"Child of Blood and Fang. You stand on the line of Dawn, where Night and Day meet. You will lend us your strength."

I haven't been a child for quite some time, she almost says, but you can't interrupt old rituals. Katilda must have known more about her than she thought. "What do you need?"

She addresses it to Katilda, for though the whole gathered crowd now speaks as one she can be sure it's Katilda pulling the strings. Everything smells of her.

"Will you spill your blood for the day? Will your fangs protect those who live in fear?"

Her eyes dart from one witch to another, to Teferi and Kaya, to Chandra and Adeline. No one seems to understand what exactly any of this means.

"I will," she answers. Of that, she's sure.



Secrets of the Key | Art by: Alix Branwyn

“Anoint the Sungold Lock.”

Blood and fang, was it? Dizzy still, leaning on the altar for support, Arlinn touches the aching wound on her shoulder. This she then smears on the inside of the bowl—its surface surprisingly warm to the touch. Next, she takes one of the herbs and bites into it. A bitter taste fills her mouth, a welcome reprieve from the taste of metal. This she sets down atop the small smear of red.

The bowl begins to hum.

So, too, does the Celestus. Great gears groan as they spring once more to life; up above, the shadows shift as the arms strain against the rust and roots that bind them. Ground shifts beneath her, but she keeps her hands on the altar. A good thing, too, or she would have fallen.

Kaya sets the Moonsilver Key down when Katilda gestures for it.

“The coven offers root and soul.”

She picks up a gnarled root the size of Arlinn’s arm, a thing likely as old as Innistrad itself. Sometimes you know age when you see it. Before Arlinn can get to wondering where it came from, Katilda flicks the tip with her finger. All at once, it fades to ash. This Katilda smears on the inside of the bowl, directly opposite Arlinn’s blood.

That root’s accounted for. But what of a soul? Arlinn doesn’t like the sound of that.

She’s about to ask when Katilda links eyes with her. The aura coming off her—there will be no questions here, no interruptions. The ritual must continue.

And it is Katilda’s eyes that give her away: a silver glow comes over them, then streams out. Her mouth lolls open and there too is a stream of silver—and these combine, pouring into the bowl.

The other witches loop their arms through Katilda’s to support her as her body starts to go limp. Fear mounts in Arlinn’s chest. This isn’t permanent, is it? Her eyes dart from the witches to Kaya. She mouths, *Is this all right?*

But she doesn't ever get the answer.

Because Kaya's looking up at something else, and a shadow looms large over the altar.

Something smells like death.

It happens quicker than a human eye can follow but conveniently just fast enough for Arlinn: a streak of red and gold like lightning down from the sky; Katilda swallowed up in its impossible color. Within that streak: Olivia Voldaren. There's no mistaking it; she would never *want* anyone to mistake her. The hand outstretched toward the Moonsilver Key is emblazoned with the Voldaren sigil, as is the rest of her armor.

And there's no way they can let her get the key.

Arlinn dives for it, clutching it close to her stomach as she hits the ground. The sizzle of her skin is a small price to pay for keeping it safe. By then, Olivia's taken to the sky above them. Katilda's body hangs limp in her arms. Olivia sneers down on them, her shoulders rising and falling with the bray of her awful laugh.

"Seems we're at an impasse," she says. "I've got your witch; you've got my key."

Arlinn gets up on her knees, the key still held tight. Something about it feels different now—cooler. "Neither of those are yours."

"On the contrary," Olivia answers. "That key is *very much* mine. I need it terribly, you see. What I *don't* need is a shriveled old witch."

Kaya's at Arlinn's side in an instant. She's glad of the company, even if the news Kaya brings sends a chill down Arlinn's spine. "There's something going on with Katilda's soul. During the ritual, I saw it leave her, and then "

"And then?" Arlinn says.

Kaya frowns. "Olivia showed up. Hard to see what happened after."

Chandra's next, hands twitching, eyes fixed on the floating vampire. "We blast her, right?"

"Can't do that. Might hit Katilda," Kaya answers.

Up above, Olivia lets out a theatrical sigh. With all the flair of an extremely bored widow, she rakes her claws across Katilda's chest. Blood sprays onto the cowering witches, the hypnotized crowd. "It's a very simple proposition. I'm getting bored of waiting for an answer. Either you give me that key and I get to planning my festivities or you keep *dithering* and your friend dies."

Arlinn scowls. "What if we complete the ritual?"

"Do we have time for that? Do we know how to do that?" Kaya whispers.

Time. Her mind goes to Teferi, around here somewhere, but even if she could find him, he couldn't buy them enough. Slowing down the sun's no small task—she wouldn't be surprised if he was out of commission for a couple of days.

There's got to be another answer.

Her eyes land on two of the other witches. "The ritual?" she barks.

But they shake their heads. "It had to be her," answers one. "The spell's too old for us—"

"*Boring!*" shouts Olivia. She raises her hand for another blow—

There just isn't enough time. Not enough to consider everything, not enough to find another way through all of this, not enough to brute force it.

Innistrad must survive.

Arlinn hurls the key with her good arm.

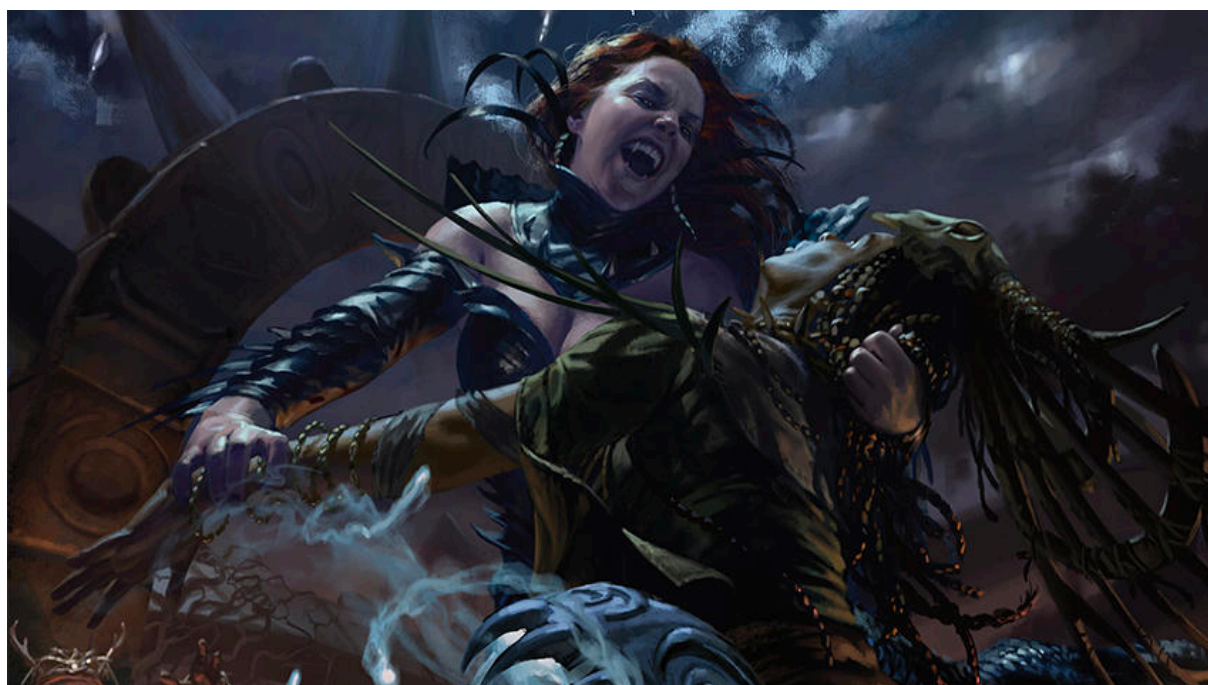
Olivia's eyes light up. Again, it happens quickly—she snatches the key from the air with her free hand. Studying it only stokes the fires of her glee, even as smoke rises from her fingertips.

"Drop Katilda!" Arlinn shouts.

Glee turns to disgust. "That's no way to treat a soon-to-be bride," she says.

"A deal's a deal," says Kaya. Arlinn's a little surprised to hear her, surprised that she's the one who understands, but she'll take the help. "Hand her over."

"Fine," answers Olivia. "Catch."



Olivia's Midnight Ambush | Art by: Chris Rallis

In the times to come, Arlinn will think about this moment and what she could have done differently. If she had moved a little faster, would it have been so bad? If she had acted sooner, if she had chosen something else—what would have happened?

For it is one thing to fall from a great height and it is another entirely when a vampire throws you. Katilda's body hurtles toward the altar at an astonishing speed.

It's all Arlinn can do to break her fall—to throw herself between them—but even that can only do so much. Bones crack as she crashes against Arlinn, and Arlinn crashes against the altar.

By the time the world stops spinning, the vampire is gone. Flown away from the looks of it—a distant speck of black against the already dark sky.

The key is gone with her.

The Celestus has gone silent.

It is night on Innistrad.

It will be night from here to eternity.