

Episode 1: Stories and Their Bones

Cassandra Khaw

From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*

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The next performers were a strangeness of cumbersome satchels and cloying incense, beribboned spears and etched swords with blunted edges, headdresses that seemed like wildly decorated manes at first. Whenever they moved, they chimed, jangled, and occasionally rattled like a pouch full of bone dice. Narset studied them with interest as they made their preparations on what passed for a stage in the bustling tavern. The building, which was often the first or last stop for anyone coming from or venturing to the Salt Road, slouched on the lip of the fishing village surrounding Dirgur Lake Monastery. In years past, it'd been a much smaller establishment, operated by an elderly monk who'd forsworn her vows for a raucous triptych of husbands—a tea house with ambitions. But what was once a trickle of customers grew into an implacable deluge, and the proprietors were forced to expand. Narset suspected there'd be more renovation work soon; the night's clientele were already spilling into the jasmine-scented air outside. She made note to arrange for a formal meeting, if for no other reason than to collate what news the tavern's owners might have heard. Narset's status as the waymaster meant very few were willing to be upfront with her, and even fewer had the stomach to be anything but ingratiating.



Art by: Constantin Marin

The pair on stage touched their foreheads together, less people than a maelstrom of rainbow fabrics, faces now obscured by bestial masks: one red, one blue. *When did they put them on?* Narsset wondered. She sat just close enough to be able to hear the two giggling to one another in a halfway familiar dialect. It carried loan words from the Sultai, a smattering of profanities from the Abzan, and conjugations bizarre as their paraphernalia. Narsset wanted very badly to ask what province they hailed from and why their grammar was so elastic, if the idiosyncrasies in their speech were native to whichever home village they hailed from or accrued from a life in travel, or it was something peculiar to them and them alone. She'd heard apocrypha about how twins developed their own language and certainly, the two could pass for such: they had the same build, the same lopsided smirk, the same way of canting their heads, like two foxes sharing secrets.

After the show, Narsset told herself. It'd probably be an excruciating faux pas if she interrupted them in the middle of their performance. Although Narsset *was* the waymaster—the actual leader of the Jeskai now, really, to her periodic chagrin—so it seemed equally possible they'd see her attention as a boon. If only she knew *more* about them. That way, she would be able to better assess the consequences of approaching them. But to have that data, she'd actually need to speak to them. The problem was becoming recursive. Narsset—

“Friends!” trumpeted the shorter of the two—a woman if Narsset had to guess from the voice—with a flourish of a hand.

The noise in the tavern died to a rumble, patrons settling into whatever chair or stool they could scrounge from the crush of bodies. Those without seating leaned themselves against the walls. When

even the low murmuring had dulled to an actual silence, the performer spoke again in a bright, chirpy tone.

“We come to you tonight to entertain—”

Recognition jolted through Narset. No longer was the performer wearing her celadon mask. It’d vanished somehow without Narset’s notice. In its place was a far more familiar visage, rendered in paper mache and paint, a face Narset saw sometimes in her nightmares, beatific in its victory.

Ojutai.

“—and to educate!”

The other performer, now astride a pair of stilts, began to prowling in circles around their shorter companion, exhaling smoke until the stage was obscured by the gray, the first performer diluted to a hazy silhouette.

“To tell you of how the five clans were once enslaved, *chained* —”

From the murk came the sound of chains pulled and a great weight heaved over the floor, startling nervous laughter from the crowd.

“—to the whims of the dragonlords, and a hero—”

The performer lurched from the smoke and Narset had to swallow a cry of surprise. Gone was the Ojutai mask. Now, the performer, arms spread as if she could enfold the room in them, wore Narset’s face, or at least the version someone would engrave onto a death mask: saintly and serene, devoid of any real expression, flawless and empty.

“—gathered the leaders of the clans to save us all.”

“Excuse you,” came a woman’s pettish voice. The accent was Temur. “Narset had to be *persuaded* to help by the other rebellion leaders.”

A Mardu engineer, if the menagerie of tools hanging from their belt was any indication, nodded in sullen agreement. “Yeah! All *she* did was uncover the Storm Ritual.”

Narset receded into her chair. She loved the tavern. Despite how packed it was and how odorous its clientele could sometimes be, it was one of the few places where Narset could go and enjoy anonymity—or at least, something cousin to such. She wasn’t naive enough to think she could elude complete notice, but if any of the patrons recognized her, they kept the knowledge to themselves. However, that might all change if the performance agitated the crowd into their native allegiances.

“Anyway, it was *Kotis* who was the real hero. None of the other rebellion leaders died and then returned to continue their duties,” grumbled a woman in the crowd. Her raiment told the world she was Sultai. The gleaming white jade of her jaw, gorgeously intaglioed, said she, too, had died and come back to perform whatever duties had survived her brief flirtation with death, and that those duties likely included working with her government on a high level. Narset could tell her clothes were made of the finest silks—clearly the woman was at least a stone’s throw from nobility.

“Only because the other rebellion leaders were too clever to be killed,” shot the Mardu engineer, who looked much younger to Narset on second inspection. Their face held a puppyish softness still, one at odds with their fierce grimace.

The mounting argument was interrupted by a sudden deafening roar. From behind the performer, a cataclysm of shapes clamored up through the smoke: snake-headed Silumgar, Atarka with her crown of antlers, spined Kolaghan, Dromoka shining like the sun, and of course, feathered Ojutai, beautiful

and merciless as winter. Someone in the crowd screamed, high and thin. Narset tensed. *Illusions*, she told herself. *Nothing more.*

But Narset's pulse still juddered in her veins.

"Once," intoned the performer, unmasked, hands steeping. Bare, her face was stark and almost unfinished like a shard of porcelain waiting for an artist's brush. "The dragonlords ruled. They and their broods hunted us."

The smoke began to move, spiraling, fletched now with a suggestion of wings and scales, the visages of those dragonlords distorting, fading into the murk. There was no sign of the other performer, although the taste of their magic slicked the air. Cries began to echo from the murk: voices begging for their lives.

"They *killed* us."

The voices were eaten by the sounds of gristle chewed and flesh peeled from bone, of organs gored from bellies, scooped clean until there was nothing left save for a rime of skin; a wet and noisome cacophony so vivid that Narset heard several people retching. She could almost smell it, that carrion reek.

"We were given a choice. To fall in line or to die."

Narset thought of Ojutai then. Once, she had been his favorite novelty, a human with no desire save for the acquisition of more knowledge. How he had loved her for that. The Great Teacher and his perfect student. And how she had adored him in return. Under his care, Narset had thrived, had found direction and structure both; for a few exquisite years, she suffered none of her usual restlessness. There'd been purpose.

Peace.

But that was Ojutai's gift, a ruthless ability for convincing the world his path, *his* vision, was not just the superior option, but the only option—even if it did mean the loss of the Ghostfire warriors and sacrifice of the Jeskai cultural identity. Unlike the other dragonlords, the Great Teacher had no need to coerce worship, to frighten them into serving. They'd donned their collars willingly and laid themselves at his talons, all in hopes that in death, they'd earn what they were taught to covet: rebirth in the image of their oppressor. The Temur woman was not wrong. Narset *had* needed convincing. Even now, a wretched part of her regretted her involvement. In saving Tarkir, Narset lost her dragon.

"And for centuries, that was what we did."

"That's what the other clans did," said the Mardu engineer, arms folding. They were human, which was a surprise to Narset, and sleekly built. To her knowledge, these roles in the Mardu were often taken by much larger species. "Our clan did not kneel. We had a truce with Kolaghan and her brood."

"A truce that served to do nothing but starve your people. Do you know how I died?" said the Sultai noble, the light rendering her eyes opalescent and strange. "Because a boy from your clan ran me through with his knife. I was a trader on my way home to my wife and children. I'd found him on the Salt Road, almost dead of hunger. I fed him. But it wasn't enough. He wanted everything. He killed me for two days' worth of rice."

She rasped the next words. "Tell me it was worth it. Tell me this was what the Mardu prayed for, what they *envisioned* when they agreed to this truce. Tell me the knowledge your people have been driven to such desperation doesn't shame you, and I'll never speak of it again."

"I'm sorry," came the flinching immediate answer. "There was no valor in what happened to you."

“Try as they did, the dragonlords could not extinguish our spirit,” growled the performer, seemingly oblivious to the endless interruptions, and the smoke became moted with pinpoints of light, like torches in the dark. “The embers of rebellion were always there. Soon, they became a blaze that could not be quenched.”

At the word *blaze*, the smoke erupted into a heatless inferno.

“Heroes emerged from the ranks of—”

As though on cue, the second performer stepped out of the flames to a scatter of confused applause, the illuminated faces of the audience halfway between awe and a burgeoning terror. He came to stand beside his companion, the fire throwing deep shadows over their lean faces, silhouetted such that they barely looked human.

“—the Temur—”

Both performers raised their right hands in unison and brought them down over their respective faces, like an axe brought down on the throat of a nightmare. By the time their hands had resettled at their sides, they were masked again, this time in the images of Eshki Dragonclaw and Alniul, the Twice Whisperer: the one who rose to lead the Temur rebellion and the one who foretold her victory.

“The Mardu,” said the female performer and between one blink and the next, she went from wearing Eshki’s likeliness to bearing Zurgo Stormrender’s face.

“The Abzan,” said his opposite as she prowled forward. With a twitch of her shoulders and a sharp tilt of her head, hand flashing over her face, she went from looking like Zurgo Stormrender to donning Felothar’s own proud visage.

“The Sultai,” said her companion in a clear light tenor, his voice unmuffled despite the fact he now wore a flawless recreation of Kotis’s visage.

Narset was beginning to understand how the pair were accomplishing their mask changes. It had something to do with the intricate headdresses the two wore: massive structures of white fur and black velvet, copper embroidery and emerald curlicues, and trailing feathers of improbable size. Clearly, the masks were housed inside them, but what Narset couldn’t yet intuit was how the female performer had cycled through her masks, because that seemed much harder to do.

“And the Jeskai,” said his partner.

Narset winced. It thrilled her to witness such a masterful show, but she would be happy to live out the rest of her life without ever again seeing her face used as a prop.

“*Together*,” said the woman wearing Narset’s countenance, her voice shading to slyness, the emphasis deliberate, an acknowledgment of the earlier heckling. “They sought to bring an end to the dragonlords’ reign. Together, they fought for Tarkir’s freedom.”

And the crowd roared so loud it caught her off guard. Tables were pounded, the floor stamped by a thunder of booted feet. Narset resisted clamping her hands over her ears; it was too much and too loud. She could *feel the noise in her bones*. Panic rippled through Narset. Before, the tavern had only felt cramped but now, it was like there was no distance between her and every other patron, and if she didn’t leave now, she never would; she would be trapped forever in this crush of voices.

She touched the fingers on each of her hands to their corresponding thumbs, counting under her breath. When Narset had reached twenty, she took to tallying the feathers on each of the performer’s headdresses (eighteen; seven natural, the rest clearly artifice) and the tools (fourteen in total) dangling from the Mardu engineer’s belts. Then she numbered the tavern’s clientele by age, clan, presumed

gender, and any other category she could think of. After a few moments, the panic eased its grip, enough that Narset could breathe again.

“They *fought* so their people would no longer be made into prey,” bellowed the performer, and as she spoke, the air echoed with the din of battle. Her voice grew in volume to an inhuman, booming thunder. Blue light wreathed her like a flame. “So their traditions would be protected, their pasts undevoured, their lives their own and only their own. Although they stood against the dragonlords themselves, they did not falter.”

Her counterpart crooked his fingers, and the light cohered into a floating diorama, circling the air above her head like a halo. Though azure-tinted and faintly transparent, it was recognizably the Crucible of the Spirit Dragon where Narset and her allies had gathered to change the fate of their world.

“Narset,” said the performer. “Along with wise Alniul had discovered an ancient spell, one perhaps as old as the Multiverse itself.”

“The Stormnexus Ritual.”

Memory overtook Narset’s excruciating awareness of the crowd. *It’d been a gamble; they had no idea what the ritual would do. If the situation hadn’t been quite so dire, if she’d been alone and without Alniul’s unflinching conviction, if the dragons weren’t closing in, furious that mere meat would attempt an uprising, Narset might have simply returned the decrepit scroll holding the ritual to its case and thought no more of it. But they were desperate, and the Stormnexus Ritual promised to invoke the essence of Tarkir itself. If it had failed—*

Narset buried the rest of the thought.

“There at the Crucible, the leaders of the rebellion cast the spell and a massive dragonstorm formed, one larger than any Tarkir had seen—”

Distantly, Narset wondered if the performers took feedback: the superlatives, while clearly there to create drama, felt unnecessary.

“—and, from it, emerged—”

The illusions cracked like ice, jagged striations wending up and through the image of the Crucible, splintering. Shards drifted away and as Narset watched, they lost their shape, gaining others.

“—the spirit dragons.”



Art by: Liiga Smilshkalne

As illusionary versions of the spirit dragons—miniaturized to fit the tavern, almost adorable—flew overhead, Narset thought about how they were the embodiments of not just their respective clan's greatest hopes, but the traits that would save them. She watched as the few Abzan in attendance, faces haunted by memory, bowed to the simulacra of Betor, recalling the stories of how Dromoka had demanded the Abzan repudiate their honored dead. The dragonlord had branded their ancestral worship unnatural, and she'd made them choose between their pasts and the survival of their present. Betor, brilliant as the desert sun, existed in defiance of those edicts, the lost spirits of the Abzan brought together into a singular form.

Looking to the Sultai woman, Narset saw the shine of tears in the latter's eyes. Teval, fair and ruthlessly impartial, must have been a relief after centuries of living under Silumgar's rule. For years, the Sultai had to invent new rites and new festivals, hoping it'd distract their oppressor from his boredom and endless paranoia, and stave off their obliteration a little longer.

It was the same with the Mardu and the Temur. Kolaghan had divided them, and Neriv now was bringing them together, espousing the strength of the collective. Atarka ate her way through the whisperers of the Temur, reducing the clan to a hunting pack. They were reduced to tools, their humanity stripped from them. Their only purpose was to feed Atarka and her brood and according to rumor, she and her spawn had a taste for the Temur in particular. But Ureni, zealous Ureni, *they* wouldn't let anything happen to the Temur. Not now, not *ever*.

For that reason, Narset knew she should love Shiko, the spirit dragon whom she'd called from the ritual, whom she'd ridden into battle against the dragonlords, whose essence she'd shaped with her own beliefs, her veneration of the truth, and even her secret desire for a more decisive personality.

But she didn't. Not really. Not like how she'd loved Ojutai, who had only ever been good to her. She respected Shiko. She trusted the spirit dragon. If Narset were to die, she knew Shiko would continue to provide excellent counsel to whoever succeeded her. Her clan was safe now and would remain safe under Shiko's care. But she didn't love Shiko, no, not with those wings of hers, like so many scrolls unfurling through the air, a reminder of Narset's role in ending the world she knew.

"The leaders of their rebellion leapt onto their dragons—"

"Wait," came the Temur's voice again. "How did they know which was their dragon?"

"I thought," said the young Mardu, a little tremulously. "The dragons chose the leaders they wanted to be tied to."

"Really? *I* was taught that the spirit dragons required a piece of the clan leaders' souls in order to—" began an old Abzan man who'd been silent up till this point.

"That's not what I—" said a pretty Jeskai monk, who Narset almost recognized.

"Jeskai propaganda. The pivotal battle was obviously led by—"

"My father was present so he'd—"

"You're *wrong*."

"Actually—"

"Mama, I wanna see the show. Make them stop—"

Full-throated arguments shook loose across the tavern, as the patrons gleefully took to defending their own apocrypha. Narset glanced at the stage where the performers stood looking somewhat nonplussed, phantom dragons winging listlessly overhead. The illusionist gave his partner what Narset decided was a philosophical shrug and was answered with a rolling of deep amber eyes.

"Told you we should have done a folktale," Narset heard him mumble.

"Well, I wanted to be educational—"

And that devolved into yet another heated quarrel, adding to the ceaseless noise.

"The dragons," said Narset, deciding enough was finally enough. "Were unformed in the beginning."

Her voice carried enough to startle those closest to her to an awed silence and as those patrons quieted, others followed suit. She heard her name whispered, passed through the tavern like a promise of freedom, and Narset mourned the loss of the tavern as a place she could go and be treated as any other traveler. Everyone would be on watch for her after this.

"Five glowing figures emerged from the dragonstorm. Five with the silhouettes of dragons but no features. They were simply power made incarnate, waiting to be called into being," said Narset, feeling again how Shiko formed under her, how it had dug tether hooks into her thoughts, seeking a path to follow. "I was the first to leap onto one. Then the others followed, and we became bound to our spirit dragons, just as they became bound to us."

Narset forced herself to stare forward, focusing on nothing. The tavern was entirely silent now, and there was a bottomless quality to the attentive quiet that filled Narset with a sudden irrational dread: it felt like an open maw, a waiting mouth, one that would swallow her whole if she let it.

"Together, we rode into battle, ultimately driving the dragonlords into the storm."

"As we said," said the female performer rather hopefully. "*Heroes* —"

“But the worst was to come,” said Narset.

The performers released a paired sigh. Narset realized that had been their last attempt at keeping the show on track, and she was only slightly sorry to have derailed it with her first-hand knowledge of the events they were dramatizing; decent rendition or not, Narset did loathe that mask of her face. The two sat themselves cross-legged on the stage, joining the crowd in its rapt interest in Narset, the illusionary dragons dissipating.

“Though the dragonlords were vanquished, the dragonstorms remained. And they’ve gotten worse.”



Art by: Andrew Mar

A low murmur slithered through the tavern.

“They’ve become strong enough to reshape the very land. There are places now where no one can go, let alone live. To say nothing of the wild dragons that have spawned. These new dragons are intractable beasts. I’ve heard reports—”

Narset might have continued with her litany of observed horrors, the list of reports that she had received and cataloged over the months, each more dire than the last. Might have even told them about the guilt weighing on her, the lingering fear that they’d exchanged one evil for a worse one, if not for the doors of the tavern slamming open. A figure stood silhouetted by lantern lights, its arms flung open. Whoever it was, they’d been running hard. Their body shook with panting breaths.

“Waymaster!” bellowed the new arrival. “Waymaster? Where *are* you?”

No, she’d never be able to come back here again.

Pity.

“Here,” said Narset, raising an arm reluctantly.

The figure, quickly revealed as a soft-faced man with a prodigious mustache as he stumbled through the tavern.

“Something—*someone* has arrived. She seeks an audience, Waymaster. She—”

“Who are you talking about?”

“A woman,” he panted, prostrating himself before her. Narset winced at his genuflections; she didn’t like the thought he might be afraid of her. “I think at least she’s a woman. I don’t—”

“Calm down, please. Everything shall be fine,” said Narset, stooping to collect him from the floor, hands set supportively atop his shoulders.

“She has *wings* , my khan. And glowing eyes. I’ve never seen—”

“Her name is Elspeth,” said Narset very softly. “And if she has come seeking me on Tarkir, something terrible must have happened.”