

Episode 5: Recursion

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*
12. 03. 2025

The problem with the new khan of the Abzan , Ajani thought, wasn't the fact that she was a soldier at heart, but that she had no illusions about this. As a result, Felothar often spent ages deliberating on matters with the help of her Council of Houses; each of the house representatives' opinions were given equal weight and consideration. It made her beloved among her people, but it also made it so that every decision was mired in hours of intense discussion.



Art by: Constantin Marin

And they simply did not have the time.

“Felothar, please. I understand that there is protocol to be followed, but, just this once, could you not make an exception?” said Ajani. He could not bear to look at Elspeth, his last words to her still echoing in his memories.

You do not need to be alive to join Phyrexia.

He had tried to kill her.

Worse, still, he had *wanted* to kill her. He had craved her death, had longed to offer her corpse to Elesh Norn like he was nothing better than a hunting cat, greedy for his owner's approval.

"An exception for what, Ajani?" said Felothar, eyes gliding from his face to Elspeth, who stood to Ajani's right. For all of her seeming naivety, the Abzan khan missed little. One of her eyebrows crooked upward, a question in its arc. *Is everything alright with the two of you?*

He ignored the tacit question for the blatant one. "An exception to needing consensus before you allow for the release of my—"

Ajani hesitated.

"Colleagues?" supplied Narset hopefully.

"Colleagues," Ajani said. "I promise I will return them to you when the crisis is averted for any judgment you wish to render. But right now, they need to go on their way to see if there is a way to quell the dragonstorms."

"I suppose you are right, Ajani. Fine. You three are free to go. At least until this resolves. As for us, we need to begin the evacuation processes. Arashin's fortifications will take at least a day to be raised. Before that, we'll need to gather food—"

"Prepare weapons, too," growled the old woman from House Emesh, eyes fierce. "I'm sure the walls will hold, but just in case, I wish to ensure that we have a more active line of defense."

"*Bones* break. Our walls do not," said House Gudal's appointed leader in a tart voice. "If you're willing to trust in our aqueducts, you should trust—"

"Actually, I'm not sure I do trust—"

"It won't be enough."

The room fell silent.

"Oh?" said Felothar, head cocked as she looked over to Narset.

"Every day, the dragonstorms create more wild dragons," said Narset, swallowing, eyes fluttering shut as she took a deep breath before speaking again. "If Sarkhan can control them, he'll bring them all to your door. We need to stop the storms. Otherwise, not even the great city of Arashin will be able to stand against his might. It won't be dozens battering themselves against your walls. It won't even be hundreds. It will be *thousands* of dragons."

"How dare you question our khan," growled the djinni from House Zanhari, unfolding to her full height. Ajani recalled again how old the House of Grit was and wondered how many battles the djinni, her face white with scars, had fought in.

"I do not mean disrespect. I hold the Abzan and its khan in the highest esteem. Because of this, I will not lie to your people. Arashin will not hold against this onslaught should Sarkhan continue to grow his army."

"And how do you know he is growing his army? I know the Jeskai are capable of much trickery. But I wasn't aware you've developed a gift for omniscience."

"I have," said Ajani.

"What? Developed a gift for omniscience?" said the djinni, who clearly resented the whole situation.

"I've seen the dragons," said Ajani, refusing to rise to the bait.

"One eyewitness is hardly sufficient."

"Well, I saw them, too," purred an amused, familiar voice from behind Ajani. He turned to see Nur striding through the doors, languid as always. Her smile was incandescent. "Beyza, how are your fathers? Have you reached out to them recently? They tell me they miss their little desert kitten."

The djinni named Beyza made a strangled noise. "Nur, this is not the time."

"Nor is it the time to be arguing relentlessly. The Jeskai waymaster is right," Her expression smoothed into one Ajani had rarely seen on her: fear. "We've never had our defenses tested to such an extent. We probably don't want to see what'd happen if they fail. My scouts report there are already hundreds of dragons in Sarkhan's army. As much as I love the great and beautiful city of Arashin, it was still built by mortal hands."

"So, what?" said House Emesh's white-haired, stone-eyed representative. "You want us to send our armies out with the waymaster on a wild chase and leave our people to fend for themselves? Even if what they're saying is right, there are still things to be done. We must gather supplies. We must move the vulnerable to their shelters."

"House Emesh is correct, I'm afraid," drawled Felothar. "You do what you think you must, but we will focus on the same."

"Felothar—" said Ajani.

"I have spoken. You will be provisioned with whatever you might need. Let my quartermasters know. Now," Felothar continued, tone brooking no argument, "I'm afraid you'll have to leave us. Everything else we must discuss is a matter for the Abzan, and the Abzan alone."

After a short wait, the three were led down to the Abzan's quartermaster, an older, heavily whiskered man who sighed prodigiously when he was told to part with whatever the trio might desire from the armory. When they'd acquired what they needed, the three were then led to one of Arashin's many guest quarters and left there to stare awkwardly at one another, much to Ajani's dismay.

"I can leave the two of you alone for a time if you wish to catch up," said Narset after just about thirty seconds of excruciating silence.

"There really isn't any need," said Ajani, fighting to keep his voice level.

"You're welcome to stay, Narset. I wouldn't have you leave just because I want to speak with Ajani," said Elspeth graciously before turning to him again. "You look—"

For all intents and purposes, it was still Elspeth. It was still Ajani's old friend. The creature that stood in front of him had the same face, the same voice, the same eyes—at least if he ignored the candle-flame glow in the heart of each pupil. He should be glad to see her, happier still to see that Elspeth did not resent him for what happened. Her eyes raked down his front. Ajani tensed for what she'd say, aware that his uncompletion hadn't undone everything he suffered.

Elspeth's ember-lit gaze softened. "You look yourself again."

He flinched.

"You know I've always preferred the cruel truth to the gentle lie. I am—" Ajani hesitated. *What was the point?* Neither Elspeth nor Narset need be subject to his self-flagellations. He couldn't stomach the idea of them attempting to give him clemency.

Ajani straightened to his full height, voice becoming clipped and formal.

"I am—I want to apologize for what I'd—for trying—"

"Ajani, I understand. It wasn't you—"

"You understand wrong," said Ajani. "It was me. I recall my desire. I recall my eagerness to please the praetor. I—I was in ecstasy then. All I wanted to do was serve Phyrexia. I was not forced. I was not compelled. I did it willingly."

Narset stared at him without expression. "I do not know if that is technically true. Completion endows its victims with zealotry. Do you think Tamiyo would have willingly joined Phyrexia? That she wanted what happened—"

She cleared her throat.

"Sorry."

Ajani stared at Narset. Some treacherous part of him was glad for this, was glad to be in the company of people who'd known him before he was unmade into the wreck of a creature he'd become and who persisted in being kind to him even though he deserved none of it: it made him think perhaps there could be a future, one where he wasn't drowning in guilt.

"Nonetheless, if I were stronger—"

"It's not about strength," said Narset. "There's no resisting phyresis."

"Melira was strong enough."

"Melira's abilities were one of a kind among her people," said Narset.

Elspeth strode forward, looking like a blessing, like forgiveness. Her eyes burned with so much compassion it felt like the sun warm on his fur. For a moment, he was young again. For a moment, he was whole. If Ajani asked, Elspeth would absolve him. He knew this like he knew there was a heart shivering under the roof of his ribs. It would be that easy. "Melira would not have wanted you to waste her gift. She would have wanted you to live. Not to stay buried in the past. Besides, they took you before you knew what the threat truly was."

How badly Ajani wanted to be forgiven.

"You don't understand, Elspeth."

"I understand plenty," said the archangel, a hand outstretched. Her face thawed from its perfection; her expression grew earnest, *hopeful*. "More now than I ever have, perhaps. I've seen the Blind Eternities. I know how much the mortal heart longs to undo the past, to bring back what has been lost. But time only ever moves forward. The best thing we can do with tragedy is honor its lessons and carry them through the years. You were forgiven before our fight even began."

"You've turned into such a philosopher," said Ajani, unable to stop a smile from creeping to his face. His voice softened.

"You were always there for me when I struggled with such things, Ajani. Let me be there for you," said Elspeth, setting a hand atop his massive paw.

“Come with us,” said Narset. “If you feel like you must rebalance the scales by doing some kind of good before you can be forgiven, come and help us stop the dragonstorms.”

Had Narset simply told Ajani to come with them, had she omitted everything else, had she made it a demand instead of a request couched in a perfectly reasonable and frustratingly accurate observation of his inner turmoil, he might have said yes, might have allowed himself to forget how he had failed existence itself. He flinched at her words, dropping his gaze and taking a graceful step back.

“I cannot,” said Ajani in a voice carefully bled of emotion.

“Ajani—”

“I can’t.” Despite his best efforts, his voice frayed, broke. “I’m sorry. I-I can’t.”

And he was gone before Elspeth or Narset could say another word, striding down the long hallway into a jeweled gloom, the light prisms through a thousand lanterns hung like bodies from the ceiling.

The air in the stormplains rippled and moaned like a thing near death, like an animal being eaten alive. Elspeth stared across the vast plains, mesmerized. She could *see* the dragonstorms warping the very air and earth, how the soil bristled with scales and the sky filled with the suggestion of teeth; she imagined the planes seething with these storms. Dragons, like locusts, eating everything in sight. An eternity of them, turning the worlds into a feast. Elspeth had thought herself removed—she refused to think of how her heart broke as Ajani turned away—from human emotion but she shuddered nonetheless at the thought of the dragonstorms overtaking everything.



Art by: Leon Tukker

“We’re looking for a kind of nexus,” said Narset, gesturing expansively. Her brow puckered with the effort of description. “Something like a coil of clouds and a bright light radiating from within them. Perhaps that is where the dragons emerge from.”

“Like a throat letting out a song.”

Narset gave her a look. Since their encounter with Ajani, it’d seemed like Narset had wanted to interrogate Elspeth about her feelings, but, to her relief, the Jeskai monk made no move to actually do so. She wouldn’t have known how to unpick the tangle of not-quite-emotions it’d stirred.

“That would be an adequate metaphor,” said Narset.

The dragonstorms continued to rage as they stood at the border. Elspeth could half-hear the prayers of the Abzan scouts lingering close by. As Narset and she spoke, the air began to clot, thickening until a single knife of light cut through the clouds.

“There,” said Narset tensely.

Before Elspeth could ask if the human woman was certain she wanted to continue this journey with her, Narset stepped into the storm and Elspeth followed. Instantly, her throat felt parched. Her mouth stung with the taste of burned ozone. Something screamed in the maelstrom, a triumphant roar. Elspeth saw more than a suggestion of scales; she saw draconic bodies contorting into existence, wings still damp from some mysterious afterbirth being shaken dry.

“Head toward the light,” bellowed Narset from somewhere in the chaos.

Elspeth nodded, unsure if her friend—colleague? That was what Narset had called her—could see her do so, but it seemed pointless to waste breath on a reply with this cacophony of dragons coming into existence. A blue light spread from the human woman to her like oil-fire licking over Elspeth’s pale skin; it wasn’t a spell of camouflage, but it was close enough. The archangel’s own repertoire of magic didn’t include subterfuge. Still, she muttered under her breath, allowing her own power to mingle with Narset’s, enhancing it.

The two walked that way for a time, and the light in the distance grew, sending incandescent cracks through reality. Elspeth could not tell if they traveled for hours or days, or if it’d only been minutes since they entered the stormplains. Time compressed into the now and nothing else. But then, all at once, the chaos blinked to silence, leaving them stranded at the foot of what appeared to be a massive temple. The edifice had been gorgeous once, a show of deep faith; it was riddled with colonnades, and its walls bore signs that they’d been dressed in intricate murals once, the details lost now to the centuries. No telling what or whom they worshipped here long ago, but it must have been massive.

“The voice wasn’t lying. There is a temple in the heart of the storms,” said Narset in an awed tone.

“Do you recognize any of this architecture?” said Elspeth, surprised at how loud her voice seemed outside the dragonstorms.

“No,” whispered Narset, voice hoarse. “I should, but I do not. I have read all of the Great Teacher’s texts. I have studied the histories of Tarkir. Yet none of this is familiar, and I don’t know how.”

“Perhaps this predates the knowledge you had access to.”

Narset seemed pole-axed by the prospect, but, quickly enough, that stunned look faded away, leaving in its wake a feverish excitement.

“If that is true,” she said. “This means this is something that doesn’t exist even in Ojutai’s archives. I cannot believe it. I must make a record of this.”

Elspeth took point in their explorations of the temple as Narset lost herself in the study of the building's many abandoned rooms, producing a journal that the archangel was convinced hadn't been packed before to take notes of the ruin. They made three circuits of the temple, discovering each time there were more passages than they thought. It was during that third orbit that they discovered a route down to an enormous subterranean antechamber and a portal within.

"An Omenpath. But not like one I've ever seen before," said Elspeth. It had the same coruscating light she recognized, as well as a vaguely triangular shape, but this one was ragged at the edges. The Omenpath resembled a wound gouged into reality, like something had bitten down and torn a hole through Tarkir itself. "It seems—"

"Ancient," Narset breathed. "The voice said that those who seek will find a way. I did not expect it to be so literal."

"It said that, here, the truth awaits," said Elspeth, more warily.

"Nothing to do but step through, then," said Narset, unfrightened, striding forward to the Omenpath and then through, her silhouette blurring into light.

Elspeth followed her. She felt her belly heave, and the world seemed to invert; it was a vertiginous sensation, like and unlike walking between planes or flinging herself into the cold waters of a winter sea. The archangel could barely see, her vision silvered. Then she felt a hand close around hers: Narset.

"What do you see?"

Elspeth blinked the mercury from her eyes, looking across the horizon.

"I see—"

Endless water that seemed to sheet into the sky, water like glass pooling under mountains that seemed painted into a featureless heaven; wild configurations of rock that spiraled up like horns or half-dreams of buildings too strange to exist in reality. It was peaceful and it was quiet, an oil painting of a realm too beautiful to be real. Unease wicked through her. She described it all to Narset, who nodded, jotting notes between each sentence.

"There is something hiding here," Elspeth shook her head. "Hiding? No. This place is meant to contain something. It's—it feels alive, somehow, too."

"The Meditation Realm. I've been here before. I just did not expect to ever return. I think the voice called us here. But—"

"But what?"

Narset shook her head. "I feel something within here. Someone. I have suspicions of whom it might be, but it's impossible. Let's explore more before I make any hasty claims."

Elspeth rose into the air, making an orbit around Narset. It finally dawned on her what she'd found so unsettling: this place lacked dimensionality; it was more an idea than anything concrete, the landscape bending away as she looked at it, warping. It was a trick, an illusion, but for what reason?

"What do *you* see?" said Elspeth after a moment, landing again, the peculiarity of Narset's question finally sinking into her.

"Something," said Narset. "Very different than you do, I think."

Each time Narset blinked, the world broke and rebuilt itself, shattering into a thousand flights of stairs, steps corkscrewing over one another in a manner that filled the back of Narset's right eye with a dull red ache. There was no logic to the shifting architecture, no rationality with which anchor oneself. As Narset stared into that infinity of roads, they fractalized, and she had an uncanny sense that some of these paths were curving through the past to arrive into the present she now occupied, that dull red ache expanding into a feathery tremble of pain through her sinuses.

"I see stairs going nowhere and roads that climb to nothing," said Narset.

"It feels like this place is toying with us."

"If it is, it is not for malicious reasons," said Narset, shaking her head. Her eyes were beginning to water. It hurt somehow to even *think* about the sight before her. What wasn't a stairwell or stone path resembled polished mirror panels, reflecting what could have been the sky or the glass-bright waters of a perfect sea. A sun seemed to swim through the brilliance. "You were right. It does feel like this place is alive somehow. Aware on some level. It wants—I think everything we're seeing is meant—"

"To be a distraction," said Elspeth.

"I am glad we share an opinion on this," said Narset with visible relief. "I was beginning to worry it was just me."

"But why call us to it if it's trying to conceal something. Surely, that would be counterproductive."

"Perhaps, there are several forces in play here," said Narset. "One that wishes to encourage the dragonstorms, and one that desires to halt them."

"Is that possible?"

"Possible, yes. Probable, no." Narset paused, recalling some of the philosophers and teachers that had been in Ojutai's employ. When she was younger, she'd found listening to them excruciating. Narset had been sure they were simply there to flatter the elder dragon, and their vagueness was to prevent any risk of him taking offense. Now, she was less sure. Perhaps, some things could only be couched in maybes. "Sorry, I suspect that wasn't the answer you wanted."

"No," said Elspeth, flexing her wings. "If your theory is correct, at least one thing in this place wants us to be here. Let us find it. We can decide what to do after."

Narset nodded. It was as good a plan as any.

And, so, they continued to walk: Narset along the labyrinth of stairs, Elspeth through that expanse of endless water, reality stuttering as they moved. From time to time, Narset thought she could almost see the realm as Elspeth described it. Other times, she thought she saw something else: a consuming iridescence, power unimaginable. She thought she heard a voice beckoning, calling her closer, and then a second one weeping, whispering a name over and over and over, promising it would do better, that it would fix everything.

Then all at once:

"*Jace*."

Jace Beleren stood on a rime of white sand, dressed in his usual regalia, his chestnut hair tangled over a face that seemed older and more tired than Narset remembered. Tucked under one arm, its eyes halfway shut, was a furred creature of a species Narset had never seen before.

“Well. This is a strange place for a reunion,” said Jace. He didn’t exactly look happy to see them.

“The last I saw you, you were—” Elspeth’s voice died as she spoke.

“Run through by your sword, yes,” said Jace. A faint edge of bitterness to his voice. “I imagine you thought I was dead.”

“I thought—I’d hoped—”

“You hoped what?”

“That you were at peace,” said Elspeth throatily. *No wonder she’d been so willing to forgive Ajani*, thought Narset. The leonin Planeswalker wasn’t the only one to have raised arms against an old friend. “You were completed when I saw you last.”

Jace nodded. “I was on my way to that, yes. But I am not anymore.”

“How?”

“Would you believe me if I said sheer force of will?”

“I would,” said Narset, excited despite herself. “You’re a gifted telepath who specializes in mind magic. I could see you compartmentalizing yourself, keeping the effects of phyresis contained until you could revert your condition.”

Jace opened his mouth. For once, the mind mage seemed unsure what to say. “A surprisingly astute—”

“What do you mean *surprising*? It’s rather obvious.”

“—observation. That is more or less what I did.”

“Fascinating! How did you ultimately reject it? Did your body isolate the effects of phyresis as well, or did your mind weaken the glistening oil? My theory—”

“You know your stuff,” said Jace, the suspicion on his face briefly melting to what seemed like genuine pleasure. He enjoyed talking about this—about theories, about last-ditch brilliant ideas. Narset did, too.

“If you can walk me through the process, we might be able to develop a system that might permit others of a similar power level—”

“What are you doing here?” came Elspeth’s voice, neutral again, carefully empty of emotion.

Often Narset had lamented her inability to read social cues the way most could. It wasn’t that she wasn’t aware of the changes in tone and facial expression, it was that she struggled to prescribe the correct meaning to them. Elspeth was a unique challenge for Narset, in large part because of her often blank mien. She knew the hollowness of Elspeth’s voice signaled *something*, but the lack of accompanying expression left Narset uncertain as to what that might be. All she knew was that it was direly important.

“Well, it’s a long story,” said Jace.

“We have time,” said Elspeth curtly.

His guarded demeanor gave way to a look of pain. “The specifics aren’t important. You just have to know I’m here to fix my mistakes.”

Something about the way he said that made the hair on the back of Narset’s neck rise.

“Who is that?” Elspeth asked.

“His name is Loot,” said Jace warily, glancing down at the creature where it nestled in his arms, crooning like a kitten. It yawned, exposing small white teeth. Its eyes never opened; it only continued to drowse. Jace scratched the creature behind a golden-furred ear.

“He seems awfully young to be out on adventures like this,” said Narset softly.

Jace’s expression softened infinitesimally. “He is young. And very old, too.”

“I’ve never seen a creature like him,” said Narset.

“More wonders are in the Multiverse than you and I will ever see,” said Jace.

“It seems strange, then,” said Elspeth. “That you’d bring something so precious to such a precarious place.”

“Believe me, I’d have kept him home if I could. But without Loot, I’d have never found my way here. His mind ...” His voice gentled. “His mind is like nothing I’ve seen before. It contains all of the Multiverse, every Omenpath that exists, each plane as it exists and as it is born and as it dies. He is a map of *everything*. Loot is remarkable. I could spend centuries in his mind, putting his knowledge to paper, and, still, it wouldn’t be enough.”

Narset realized then that Loot was cocooned in the faintest patina of blueish light.

“Did he agree to be kept in this state?” asked Narset.

“He consented the very first time when we released him from the vault. That was how I learned of the knowledge he held inside himself.”

“But did he agree to *this*?” Narset persisted.

She heard the clink of Elspeth resting the weight of her hand on the pommel of her sword, felt the archangel tense beside her. “You didn’t answer me, Jace. What are you doing here?”

The other Planeswalker said nothing, only smiled a thin, strange smile, his eyes clouding with a bright blue light.

“What have you done, Jace?” Narset whispered.

“What I needed to.”