

Episode 7: Return

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Sarkhan Vol could feel the dragon's heart pulse beneath his ribs, its trembling, wet, red heat like an engine burning in him, burning *through* him: a life seized without permission was never one to stay dead. It screamed at him, the unfortunate beast he made a sacrifice to his own grief. Night and day, it wailed about what he had taken, what he had done, how he'd slit it open and eaten its heart raw. Sarkhan could not tell, of course, if it was a ghost or his guilt, because in the end, it did not matter.

He roared, and answers rippled through the cold gray sky. More dragons emerged from the clouds, and in their eyes, Sarkhan saw reverence. Sarkhan saw worship. Sarkhan saw their faith in his ability to lead them to prey unending, their trust he would ensure they never hungered again. Not that they could help it. They belonged to him. He knew this like he knew the fire smoldering in his belly. The ritual had done *something* to the dragonstorms, something to him, too: Sarkhan had expected his transformation, but not this control over the dragons themselves. But it was all right. He would not fail them. They were his, but Sarkhan was theirs, too, had always been theirs, and would always be theirs. He would do what was needed to ensure that Tarkir was ruled by dragons again.



Art by: Kai Carpenter

And the first thing he needed to do was destroy the temple.

How Sarkhan wished he'd paid more attention when he had met Elspeth and Narset. If he'd known then what he knew now, he would have gone to the temple and brought the entire wretched building down. Transformed, he could hear at last the power emanating from within the temple—the only thing on Tarkir to rival his own control of the dragons. But it was far from too late.

He was whole again, his body no longer a wreckage. When the temple was gone, Sarkhan could begin forgetting what he endured, the indignities of his frail human form. Even if he had nightmares the rest of his existence, so be it. He could live with the ghosts of his guilt for centuries if needed. Sarkhan would do it all again, destroy everything, burn the world to ash a thousand times over if it meant this moment, this perfect glory.

No one would ever take this power from him again.

The Omenpath gleamed like a star as the rest of the Meditation Realm burned away to that terrible nothing. Loot would not stop wailing. Narset could not tell if it was for the loss of Jace or because the little creature was frightened or even if it mattered. How much she wished then that she was one of those people to whom platitudes came easily. Narset badly wanted to tell Loot it would be all right, but she could not. She had no idea if it would be all right, if it ever could be again, because there was Bolas, laughing ecstatically, as his fetters came undone; Bolas rising into that emptiness as Ugin flung himself at his brother, trying to hold him in place, trying and failing; Bolas and Ugin winking out of

existence, eaten by the nothing, dead now, perhaps. Although, who knew? Narset had thought Bolas was dead and Ugin gone, but neither of these things proved true.

“Narset, *hurry* —” Elspeth’s voice, cutting through her horror of the future.

She felt mailed hands curl around her robes, lift her, carry her forward into the mouth of the Omenpath. Narset held Loot tight, a palm over the back of the creature’s furred head, pressed him so close to her she could feel the sobs rippling through his body. Crossing the threshold felt like she was stepping through a pool of silver, like plunging from the ocean into empty sky: it felt almost like planeswalking, like an old song with new words, but before she could process what was happening, they were on the other side: outside the temple, Elspeth in the air, Vraska somehow beside her, arms held out for Loot. Narset passed the child over in silence, disoriented still from everything that had happened. It was too much to process at once: too many stimuli, too many facts, too many divergent futures to consider. The air scorched her lungs. With Bolas free again, they would need to tell the Gatewatch, surely. *Was there a Gatewatch any longer?* The implications were dire. Except there, too, was the issue of the dragonstorms spreading across the Multiverse. *Would Ugin and Bolas being free mean that they would worsen or improve? Would their conflict change all of it?* Narset didn’t know what to worry about first. She understood that she had to focus on what was happening in the now. She could not afford to lose herself in ruminations. These problems had to be ordered by priority, dealt with in sequence. Entropy helped no one and nothing. But it was so much, too much, and the sky—

Narset needed air. She needed to see the sky. The ruins, illuminated even by the watery light of the Omenpath, felt claustrophobic, like a tomb. Narset needed to get out, and she needed to recenter, to find balance again in her tumultuous heart. Up the dark stairs she went, taking them two at a time until, suddenly, she stood on a platform. Above her, the sky was dark. Narset hesitated. *Had it been night when they arrived?* She could not recall. Their journey to the Meditation Realm and everything that had happened after had left Narset discombobulated.

Then slowly, realization settled upon her like ash. The horizon was black with dragon wings. There were more of them than she’d ever seen before, so many that a part of her became resolutely convinced they hadn’t, in fact, escaped the Meditation Realm. That this was another illusion.

“What’s going on?” came Vraska’s voice.

Narset whirled around to see the woman emerging from the temple, trailed by Elspeth. Loot remained huddled in her arms, weeping softly.

“I don’t know,” said Narset, shaking her head. “This isn’t a dragonstorm. The meteorological conditions are wrong. Dragons rarely, if ever, congregate in such a manner. The only other explanation—”

The words burned to nothing in her mouth.

“Sarkhan,” said Elspeth, her face a death-mask. “He’s here.”

“Who cares about Sarkhan?” snarled Vraska. “What happened to *Jace*?”

“I wish Ajani had been exaggerating,” said Elspeth, oblivious to Vraska and beginning to draw her sword. “They’ll be upon us in seconds. I would say we should run, but they’ll outpace us quickly. I can hold them off—” Her eyes flicked to Vraska and the trembling Loot in her embrace. “Get the child to safety.”

“I’m gone already,” said Vraska, a camouflage spell twining around her and the child.

“You—” Elspeth began, turning back to Narset.

Narset shook her head. “You’re not facing him alone.”

“Keeping people safe is what I do,” said Elspeth, gently, irradiated from within by a pearly glow. Her eyes lit with gold. “It is my duty to stand vanguard against the dark, to protect those who cannot—”

“And I am the waymaster of the Jeskai,” said Narset with equal calm. “Tarkir is my home. I have fought the dragonlords to protect it, and I will fight Sarkhan Vol to continue keeping it safe.”

A smile darted across Elspeth’s features, fierce and sweet, utterly human in its grief.

“We don’t choose how our stories begin or end,” said Narset, blue light shimmering across her arms and chest. “We can only choose how we live them. A friend told me that.”

And, at this, Elspeth’s pale face softened for a moment with memory.

“Indeed,” said the archangel before she leapt into the air.

Some part of Elspeth looked upon the advancing flight of dragons, upon their gaping maws and their teeth and the terrible promise in their shining eyes, and was afraid. Even as the knowledge of that fear pressed into her like a claw sinking into skin, she understood it didn’t matter. The human version of her had stood before a god she loved and had then died to the god she once trusted. The human version of her had looked upon what Jace had intended and struck him, had taken the sylex in her hands as it began to detonate, had shifted into the Blind Eternities, and it’d hurt, gods, *it had hurt*. There’d been fear then, but fear had not stopped her from doing what was right. Even if she perished to Sarkhan Vol, even if this ended with her torn apart by this massacre of ripping fangs and rending talons, it would not be the first time she had died.

“*Sarkhan Vol!*” roared Elspeth through the cacophony of a hundred dragons bellowing a challenge in unison, her voice ringing with defiance, sword lofted, a single lonely light in the shifting darkness. “I told you the last time we fought that you would die if you came after us again.”

“Elspeth Tired,” came Sarkhan’s chuckling response. It was so strange to hear his voice emanating from the massive beast before her, amplified in reverberation but no different otherwise. “Yes. I remember you *threatening* me. I told you. All the Multiverse will become a place of dragons. I’d move aside before you’re eaten alive.”

In answer, the archangel lowered her raised sword so that the tip was pointed at Sarkhan.

“I am not afraid of you.”

When Sarkhan grinned, it was with a mouthful of fire.

“You *should* be.”

They were going to die here, Narset thought, watching as a slim emerald arrow of a dragon bore down on her, coming closer, closer, until she could almost see herself reflected in its eyes, the blue of her magic like candle-glow in the baleful copper of its eyes. *She and Elspeth, they were eventually going to die to this endless onslaught.* The only question was when. What surprised her was how little the thought of dying frightened her. Mostly, it filled her with worry: worry for her people, worry for Tarkir, worry for what would happen after they were gone. But as long as they were alive, as long as they were fighting, there was still time for the Abzan scouts to take note of what was happening, time for someone to do something before it was too late. Every second counted, even if it had to be purchased with pounds of their flesh and blood.

In the air, Elspeth and Sarkhan rose higher and higher. The archangel moved like a comet, striking Sarkhan from every angle, but she was so small. Elspeth was scarcely more than an ember, a bright spark against Sarkhan's titanic frame. Any second now, her focus would lapse, and her adversary would strike her down, and Narset would have to see Elspeth fall. But she couldn't think about that. Not now. Not with the dragons trying to tear at the temple. Like hawks, they dove at the ruins, concaving the roofs, shattering the walls, pulling the building apart, the ancient stone coming apart like the bones of a small animal. It made no sense to Narset even as the dragon opened its mouth, the damp heat of its throat stinking of something bitter.

This one breathes poison, thought Narset, even as a second thought echoed through her: *All this destruction was pointless. The Meditation Realm had dissolved. Unless they were trying to destroy the Omenpath—*

Or reach it.



Art by: Joshua Raphael

Despite all this, Narset grinned as she vaulted up, reaching out with her magic as the creature's breath filled the air, gathering it with her hands, moving it up, guiding the momentum of the dragon's flight so it crashed shoulder first into the stone. Landing, she did the same with a black dragon next, only this one she redirected into the path of a thing like a crane if it was the size of a house, its back frilled with red spines. There was a strange peace in the desperation: this, at least, was without vagaries. She was *absolutely* going to die, but not yet, not now, not while Elspeth stood against Sarkhan like a sparrow before a storm, and in the calm of that knowledge, that certainty of her death deferred, Narset found what she had lost: her center, the deep and impenetrable quiet she'd known in Ojutai's company

when there was only the work of learning, of listening, of trusting in her body and her magic. Then, suddenly, it was the easiest thing in the world.

Narset spun in a maelstrom of dragons, dodging one, sending another away, back up into the storm to its squawking surprise. She side-stepped a flurry of gnashing teeth; it felt like the dragon wasn't even trying, was too large to have any dexterity, and Narset found herself laughing in delight. This wouldn't last. Her concentration would break. Narset would fall. But not just yet.

When Ajani looked at his past, he saw a graveyard full of the people his anger and his pride had interred. *How many times had he allowed one or another to take precedence over doing what was right and needful?* Looking back, Ajani suspected this was the true reason as to why he felt so guilty about the time he spent collared by Elesh Norn, why he couldn't forgive himself for the actions he'd taken while under Phyrexia's control. It wasn't that he did not recognize he lacked agency then; it was that a part of him had been relieved to have the world so simplified, all his doubts and second-guessing hammered away so all that remained was the steel of purpose. As the world blurred past below, Ajani could acknowledge there'd be a sense of safety in his subjugation, in being sure.

How he had hated himself for that.

But Ajani could not change any of what happened. *Leave the past with the dead*, Elspeth had told him. *You don't have to stay there with them.* He'd told her then that he had no choice. He could admit now that there'd been a sense of safety in that, too, in being buried with his grief. Easier than the work of moving forward.

Safer.

"I think I see Narset. She's— *What a warrior*, Ajani. I take back much of what I've said about the Jeskai. They are quite capable of impressing. She's holding them off. Look, she—no, no, I don't know if she sees that one. I don't know if we're going to get there in time!" bellowed Felothar over the wind howling around them, a rare panic in her voice. Gone were the raiment of her office. She was once again in her soldier's regalia, holding the dragon's reins with practiced ease.

Ajani looked down at the tableau below and saw precisely what Felothar meant. Narset stood alone atop a platform of stone, beset by dragons from all sides. She wasn't at the right angle to see the sludge-oil horror eeling up the steps, its glistening frame fading from sight. Even on dragonback, there was no way they'd be able to intercept the ambush in time. Ajani was going to watch as another of his friends died.

Or he could choose to do *something*.

He almost laughed at the simplicity of the revelation, the easy truth of it: he really could just choose to do something. So long as he had days above ground, he would continue to have that power. He merely needed to claim it: to live, to take the chances he'd been too afraid to reach for, to trust he would not simply fall—and if that he did, he could rise again. Life was for the living. Now, Ajani only needed to do what he'd always done: take a leap of faith.

"Hold on, Ajani. I'm going to bring us down—*What are you doing?*"

So, he does.

For a sliver of a moment, Narset thought that Elspeth had fallen, and her heart crashed at the sight of that white blaze in the storm-eaten sky, but then she realized what she saw wasn't the white of feathers

but fur, and the light knifing through the air wasn't the death of a celestial being but an axe raised high over Ajani's head, a sun that Narset couldn't see reflecting off its steel. There was no time to wonder if she was hallucinating. A second after the revelation of Ajani's descent, a creature knitted itself from the air, dripping ichor and smoke, barely real save for white teeth. It snapped its jaws forward, would have caught Narset between them if not for a sudden slackening of its muscles, the light dying in its eyes even as its head tumbled onto the stone floor. Ajani stood atop the creature's now exposed neck, a peculiar black fluid dribbling from the beheaded corpse.

"How did you—Ajani, I can't believe you came to find us," Narset's joy at the sight of him faltered. "But you need to go. Go now. The three of us won't be enough."

"It isn't just the three of us."

And, as he spoke, the dragons of the Abzan clan rose from the storm and descended upon Sarkhan's flock.

Sarkhan almost caught her that time. Elspeth could feel where his claws had dragged through the feathers of her wing as she wheeled out of reach. The archangel adjusted her grip on the pommel of her sword. Sarkhan looked languid, even pleased, like a cat with a broken-winged sparrow that hadn't yet learned it was already dead.

But it didn't matter.

Her function here wasn't to win. Elspeth was here to buy time.

She drew a breath that she did not completely need and marveled at the realization she was tired. Elspeth thought she'd forgotten what it was like to hurt, to ache, to feel human and impossibly frail.

"Drop your sword, and I will make this painless for you, Elspeth."

The archangel bared her teeth at Sarkhan, lunged, aware in some distant fashion that this was her last stand. If her soul found itself in the Blind Eternities again, Elspeth could only hope that Serra would look kindly on her, and that she would not be too disappointed in the fact Elspeth had not survived long enough to make proper use of her gifts.

I will at least take his eye with me, Elspeth decided. *That should give Narset and the rest an advantage. Maybe even allow them to survive.*

Elspeth hefted her sword, almost as if in salute, inhaling as she did. The storm in her own mind quieted. She stared into the magma depths of Sarkhan's throat and thought of the sylex again, how it'd burned, how she had fractured as it detonated, splintering into nothingness. Elspeth pulled her wings close to her back, plummeting through the sky like a stone, and was surprised at the relief she felt when Sarkhan opened his mouth wide, ready to swallow her whole.

Then—

"Sarkhan Vol, my friend, listen to me. Please."

Ajani once heard a story about how crows, particularly during breeding season, would come together to harry any hawks in the vicinity of their nests. It didn't matter that, one on one, there was no recourse for the crow except to escape the larger predator. Together, they had the advantage. Whatever magic had transformed Sarkhan had also affected the wild dragons: they were larger, stronger than any Ajani had seen. But the Abzan dragons and their riders fought like a single beast, they fought like

this was nothing they hadn't seen before and nothing they hadn't defeated. After all, they had access to centuries of military knowledge, passed on by the clan's ancestors. For that reason, they might win.



Art by: Darren Tan

Though only if the number of wild dragons stopped increasing. They were multiplying at a speed he'd never seen before, congealing out of the clouds before their eyes. And those faces—they seemed less dragons than things that had crawled out of nightmares.

"We need to stop Sarkhan," said Ajani. "He's the one calling to them. If we can convince him—"

Narset looked over at him. The dragon on which she was astride was bigger than most of Jeskai's clan dragons, a stockier beast than what Narset was used to, but it seemed untroubled by her awkward command of it. Felothar had led the creature down to Narset herself, beaming with pride. "Our finest little friend. You'll love the experience. Not to disparage Jeskai dragons, but ours are certainly steadier," she'd said cheerily, vaulting back onto the back of her own before Narset could think up a retort.

"I think we may be past the time for conversation," said Narset.

"I wouldn't be here if Elspeth and you weren't willing to speak to me."

"That's different."

"Nonetheless, I have to try," said Ajani, urging his dragon forward, out of hearing range of whatever Narset's riposte might be. He knew she was right. It *was* different. Sarkhan had found him after Ajani's spark had awoken, and he'd been kind then, in his own rough sort of way. Sarkhan had saved him from the dragon Karrthus though there hadn't been any need to do so, the two of them strangers then. He'd been kind, too. Sarkhan had been the one to tell the newly minted Planeswalker that rage and

grief both had their place, that they needed to be used correctly. There was compassion in Sarkhan. Ajani *knew* this.

It must still be there.

Then several things happened at once:

Ajani, bellowing: “*Sarkhan Vol, my friend, listen to me. Please.*”

A comet. No. *Elspeth*? Hurtling down toward Sarkhan, down toward his mouth, down between his teeth, was a bright blaze of golden light.

And Sarkhan, bringing his teeth *down*.

“This *isn’t* you, Sarkhan.” Ajani fought to keep the panic from his voice. He couldn’t take his eyes away from the tableau, from the sight of Elspeth clasped in Sarkhan’s jaws, a mailed hand pushed up into the roof of the dragon’s mouth, keeping him from closing it fully.

At Ajani’s words, the dragon hesitated.

“This isn’t you,” said Ajani, softer this time, arms spread. “Please. I *know* you. This isn’t who you are.”

“I remember you,” rumbled Sarkhan awkwardly.

“And I remember who you were. I remember you as a man of honor,” said Ajani. “You—”

“You used the Stormnexus Ritual, didn’t you?” said Narset, out of the blue, her furious voice carrying despite its relative quiet. “Someone gave it to you. Was it Taigam? You must have fed the ritual a terrible sacrifice to corrupt it so. *What did you do, Sarkhan?* What did you cut out of yourself to corrupt the spell? We offered it our lives. Whose life did you give?”

Something flickered in Sarkhan’s expression. It took Ajani a moment to register what it was: *shame*. Taking advantage of the moment, Elspeth pushed herself out of his mouth and began to tumble down, down through the air, halfheartedly beating her wings in an attempt to stabilize.

“You, with your comforts and your easy life, do not think you can pass judgment over me,” growled Sarkhan.

“It’s not—” Ajani shook his head, watching Elspeth’s clumsy descent. He turned to Narset. “I know Sarkhan. There is a good man inside him. More than that, he is someone who has been used before. He will not allow it to happen again.”

“We know very different men, then,” said Narset with a terrible emptiness in her voice. “The Sarkhan I know would destroy all the planes for a delusion.”

“A delusion?” said Sarkhan, voice low and velvet. Whatever humanity Ajani had managed to coax out of him had been scoured away now by the dark fire burning where his heart should be. “No, no, no. Far from it. I want to bathe the Multiverse in fire for what it has done to me. It stripped me of all that I was and all that I loved. Now that I have it back, I will ensure it is never taken away again. I will destroy everything as many times as necessary. Beginning with *her*.”

Sarkhan turned and, with more speed than Ajani imagined a creature of his size capable, launched himself for Elspeth.

Ajani urged his mount forward. If he was fast enough, he would be able to catch her. He needed to hurry. He *needed* to be faster. He wasn’t going to lose her again. Ajani would not see Elspeth die one more time.

Narset looked upon her friends—yes, she could call them that now—and knew at once what was at risk. She'd lost enough loved ones already. She wouldn't lose anymore. With a gesture, Narset sent her magic out, cocooning Ajani and Elspeth, willing one faster and the other safer.

All stories, all lives, no matter their length nor their luminosity, ended in one place. Even gods died. Even worlds ended. What mattered was what came in between and what each life left behind.

Ajani caught her.

He flung both arms around the archangel, burying her against his chest as his dragon nimbly torqued out and away from Sarkhan's mouth, narrowly avoiding the gout of flame that filled the space they'd just occupied.

He caught her. Elspeth was safe, glowing like a star in his arms. She was safe, she was alive, expression absolutely mystified. She was *alive*.

With what sounded like either a laugh or a sob, Elspeth said, "Come to make up for my deaths in the past?"

"No," said Ajani, axe at the ready, his grin fierce. "To fight with you in the present."

Narset would have liked for Shiko to be by her side, or to see Felothar's spirit dragon in the fray, but better they were elsewhere. If she and the Abzan khan died, at least there'd be someone to protect their people. The Abzan dragons fought like their hearts had already burst, ferocious enough to drive the wild dragons back, and, for a moment, Narset allowed herself hope.

Then one of them was torn apart by two of its foes like so much parchment, its rider swallowed in a gulp. Another of the Abzan's dragons plummeted through the skies, its wings devoured by acid. Then another, another, falling like stones. Narset's optimism died with them. But they hadn't been fighting to win. They were only here to buy time. They might have had a chance if they'd been able to kill Sarkhan or drive him away, but Sarkhan seemed impervious to their efforts.



Art by: Camille Alquier

Six. Eight. Twelve dead. The number of casualties was increasing, and the wild dragons were beginning to notice their advantage, their manner shifting. No longer did they seem wary of Narset's allies. No, there was pleasure now in how they fought, a playfulness that had the hairs on Narset's nape prickling.

"His eyes," said Elspeth, wheeling between Ajani and Narset after the three saved a young dragonrider from a wild dragon that was more mouth than torso or limbs. "If each of us goes for one of his eyes, we might be able to blind him—"

Unspoken, the idea there'd be a sacrifice in exchange.

"It's better than nothing," said Ajani. "I'll take lead."

"I can do it," said Narset. "I can see the patterns of his movements better than the both of you."

The two exchanged looks and then curt nods.

"You go. We'll follow."

Had she left the Jeskai with enough instruction on how to preserve their current state of government? Narset hoped so. It might be complicated, those first few months, but they'd survive her passing. Assuming Tarkir did. Assuming the Multiverse was still here—Narset pushed those thoughts aside. The dragonstorm was still producing more monstrosities, each one a stranger sight than the last. Bigger, too. They'd swallow the sky soon, and the land, and everything else their teeth could reach. And they would, Narset realized as Sarkhan howled a challenge once again. Each and every one of their heads turned to regard him. The ritual—it'd bound them to Sarkhan somehow. He had absolute control. Something had to be done *now*, or it'd be too late.

Focus. Ojutai's voice, like a memory of winter.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to, by the way," said Narset after a moment, patting her mount on the side of his throat. "You can escape."

In answer, the dragon snorted, "I'll never hear the end of it from the ancestors when I see them."

So that was that.

"Ready?" said Narset.

"Yes." said Elspeth.

"Completely," said Ajani.

And she—

Enough.

Ugin's voice reverberated through the air, less sound than sensation, a seismic force undulating through their bones. Though she was not the target of that directive, Narset still flinched. The wild dragons simply fled, shrieking their terror even as the air cracked like so much glass, fracturing as the spirit dragon entered Tarkir. He looked bloodied and exhausted, defeat in the bent lines of his body. Under any other circumstances, Narset would have felt nothing but the urge to offer worship to Ugin. But the sight of him like this terrified her.

Where was Bolas?

"No," roared Sarkhan, winging closer. If rage alone was enough to kill, Ugin's heart would have stopped in his massive chest. "You tormented me enough! You will not—"

Enough, repeated Ugin, turning slowly to face the other dragon. There was a solidity to Ugin that Sarkhan somehow lacked, a tangibility that made it appear as though the former was in perfect focus and everything else was a diffused image.

"I will not bow to you!" howled Sarkhan, inhaling deep, before he released a torrent of fire.

The flames that washed over Ugin might as well have been cold water. The spirit dragon regarded Sarkhan with a sadness that Narset couldn't fully decipher, a regret that had her wanting to hide her face, filled then with a shame she knew was not hers to carry. Ugin parted his great maw. The ghostfire pouring out had neither color nor heat, but Sarkhan screamed as it enveloped him. Narset could only watch as he thrashed in the air, unable to escape the fire, his scales burning to pink muscle, to black char. With a howl, Sarkhan dove through the storm, and then, it was done.

It was over.

The dragonstorms behave like whelps when I'm not there to keep them in line, said Ugin with a tired chuckle. *I was remiss in my disciplining.*

"Master Ugin," began Narset, voice choked. "I—"

And I have been remiss in the keeping of my brother. Nicol Bolas, I am afraid, is free.

In the beginning, there was nothing, and into that nothing fell a single drop of water, and another, and another, until there was a pool floating above the nothing, a faultless lamina of silver. Had there been anyone there to look, they would have seen a reflection gather, a shape moving under the water as if

it were a window to a world equally without feature, and a shape coming into view. A silhouette of a blue cloak coming into focus.