
Episode 2: Shake Off Slumber

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From set *Lorwyn Eclipsed*

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Sanar was the first to turn and bolt. Not out of cowardice: out of self-preservation. The darkness flowing from the strange creature had swallowed and extinguished his little globe of light, blanketing the glowing lichen and obliterating their comforting dimness. He couldn't see anything. All the spells he knew that might be helpful in this situation were destructive ones, and if he cast them, someone would get hurt. Running was the only sensible choice.

Kirol was close behind. As a vampire, their eyes were better adapted to seeing in the dark than most, but they needed *some* light; they could make out the vague shapes of their companions, and of the great beast lumbering toward them, moving slowly in the confines of the chamber. They weren't sure whether the beast could fit through the tunnel, but something about the way it moved made them think it probably could, that it was like a cat or a ferret, with flexible ribs that would compress to let it go free. So Kirol ran and hoped the others would be smart enough to do the same.

Abigale couldn't hear the screaming, but she could see the beast. Her dark-adapted eyes were even keener than Kirol's, and she knew precisely where the danger was. She scrambled to grab Tam's arm, then stumbled as Tam jerked herself away, resisting the attempt to help. Abigale turned to flee, unwilling to save her classmate at the cost of herself. The tunnel was too narrow to let her spread her wings, and so, as in the forest, she ran, feathers puffed out and crest standing erect. It was a natural physiological response, meant to make her look larger, but what it did in this instance was scare Sanar so badly when she came charging out of the dolmen gate that he screamed and bolted for the nearest standing stones.

Abigale barely noticed. As soon as she emerged into the opening, she took to the air, driving herself high into the suddenly midnight sky, away from the gate that loomed below her. Once she was higher than she judged the creature's reach to be, she turned, scanning for the others.

Sanar wasn't hard to find, hidden behind the standing stones and peeking anxiously back at the gate. Kirol was more difficult: they had managed to put some distance between themselves and the gate, standing stock-still next to a twisted ash tree with branches woven together like spiral basketry.

Still, there was no sign of Tam.

Abigale swooped lower, wings silent in the sudden night, then recoiled as the head of the beast emerged through the dolmen gate, the moon at its crown growing brighter as soon as it was in the open air. The beast came and kept on coming, step after ponderous step, until the whole of its vastness was free.

It was majestic. It was terrifying. Abigale had the distinct feeling that she shouldn't even be looking at it—that she hadn't earned the right.

And there, staggering out of the gate in its wake, was Tam. The beast continued to plod inexorably away from the dolmen gate, and once she was sure it wasn't turning back, Abigale swooped down and landed next to her classmate, signing a quick query.

Are you all right?

“I’m fine,” said Tam. “Where are the others?”

Abigale beckoned for her to follow as she turned and ran to where Sanar was hidden, and then to Kirol by the tree. All four of them clustered there, under that impossible midnight sky, as the beast from the cave lumbered onward, dragging darkness with it. The darkness wasn’t its wake; the darkness was its herald and attendant, both racing ahead and following behind, cloaking everything around it in transformative night.

Kirol scanned the fields around them, looking for any escape from this sudden, swallowing dark, and in the distance, they spotted a glimmering dapple of what looked like sunlight. “This way!” they shouted and ran. This time, their companions listened, and the four students ran for the remains of the day as hard and as fast as they had ever run for anything.

When they got there, the daylight proved to be a patch barely large enough to contain Tam and Sanar. The sky above it was an unblemished blue, as perfectly sunlit as any day had ever been.

This is impossible, signed Abigale. *Night and day don’t behave like this.*

“Maybe not on Arcavios,” said Tam. “Here, it seems the rules are different.”

A larger streak of daylight beckoned, and the students ran again, fleeing the impossible darkness for the presumptive safety of the light. None of them could have explained exactly *why* they thought the light would be safer; it was only that the darkness had come from a roaring, infuriated beast, while the light had already been present when they arrived. They were seeking safety in the familiar.

This patch of daylight was large enough to contain them all, and they clustered together, looking anxiously around. The great moon-headed beast was gone, but the impossible night lingered, edges still shifting and spreading, like ink dripped onto blotter paper.



Art by: Mark Poole

Tam stiffened, pointing toward a tall standing stone in the daylight distance. A stout humanoid in archer's leathers crouched there, waving frantically for them to join her. Kirol and Abigale exchanged a glance, then nodded and took off toward her, Sanar and Tam close behind.

Every path to the woman took them through patches of darkness, and she winced when she saw them step into shadow, only to relax when they emerged. It was like she expected something to *happen* when they went into the dark. That, more than anything, told them they were right to have started running—there was something dangerous about this out-of-time night. Sanar glanced back once and yelped as he saw the dark flowing into the patches of sunlight they'd left behind, wiping their tracks away.

"Keep going, keep going, keep going!" he babbled, speeding up.

In a matter of seconds, they were sharing the small patch of sunlight with the strange woman, who looked at them, nodded, and said, "Follow me," in a tone that left no room for argument or negotiation. She turned and ran. They followed.

She led them between several standing stones and into the fringe of a tall ash forest. The trees were tall and straight, with the increasingly familiar spirals etched into their bark. Kirol took a moment to get a closer look and blinked as they saw that the spirals weren't carved or etched; they appeared to have grown naturally with the tree. They took a step back from the tree, feeling uneasy. The last time they'd seen patterns appearing spontaneously in nature, it had been an immediate precursor to the Phyrexian invasion.

But this strange woman didn't seem bothered by the spirals. Indeed, there were spiral patterns etched into the leather of her tunic, and her hair was plaited in a three-strand braid, echoing the spirals without replicating them. Wherever they were, this was apparently normal here.

"What *was* that?" asked Sanar, looking to Tam for answers.

"I don't know," said Tam. She looked up, verifying that the sky above them was still bright with daylight, dominated by the high brightness of the sun. "I've never ... I don't know."

"If we're playing questions, I've one," said the stranger. Her accent was as unfamiliar as everything else about her. "Who are you, and where did you come from?"

It was a fair question. It just wasn't one they had the vocabulary to answer. Abigale finally stepped forward, following her poet's instincts, and signed, *We're students at a grand academy in a place very far away from here. We slipped and fell, and we wound up in your meadow. We don't mean any harm, but we don't know where we are, and we don't know how we're going to get back.*

The stranger winced. "I'm sure you mean well, but please stay out of my head. You're not part of the thoughtweft. You're not meant to be there."

Abigale looked stricken, then nodded, not even signing her apologies.

The stranger sighed. "I can see you mean no harm, pretty bird. Forgive an old hero her frailties. As to the passage, it's been happening since the inneal ionnsaigh cracked the shell of the world. People tumble down tunnels and fetch up here in Lorwyn, if they're lucky, or the other side of the division, in Shadowmoor, if they're not."

Kirol frowned. "Inneal ionnsaigh ..." they said, mentally comparing the words to some of the older archaeological texts they'd read. "The metal invasion?" they finally guessed.

The woman nodded. "That's what the boggarts call it."

"Who are you?" asked Tam.



Art by: Zoltan Boros

“My name is Brigid Baeli, hero of Kinsbaile, and I’m pleased to welcome you to Lorwyn. You’re a lucky lot. Most who run afoul of Isilu don’t make it back to the daylight side of the world any time soon.”

“Isilu?” asked Tam. “Was that the great beast we saw, the one with the moon on its head?”

“If there are any other night elementals roving about, we’re going to have problems bigger than a single hero can solve,” said Brigid. “Yes, that was Isilu. It’s supposed to be sleeping right now, not stomping through Lorwyn and seeding Shadowmoor in our territories.”

“Is Shadowmoor what you call the nighttime?” Tam gestured to the stark divide between the daylight where they stood and the still-spreading night not far away. There was no transition between the two, just a cut as sharp as a painter’s brushstroke, with day on one side and night on the other.

“No—oh, you’re not from around here at all, are you?” Brigid shook her head. “I’ll explain more once we’re away from this place. I didn’t change in the Great Aurora, and I don’t care to now.”

“Why were you here?” asked Sanar, not to be left out of the questioning.

“I mentioned you weren’t the first strangers to come tumbling into Lorwyn. Well, we’re still trying to figure out exactly how that happens—no one’s ever caught your sort arriving, or departing, for that matter. There have always been rumors, but they were rare before, and now it seems like you can’t turn around without hearing that some crew on the Wanderwine has taken on a stranger, or some pretty, pretty fool has been captured by the elves and carted back to Lys Alana for questioning. So, when I heard rumor of a strange light in the sky, I thought to myself, ‘Why, Brigid, that might be where the strangers are coming from,’ and came out to see whether I might be right. And here I am, and here you are, and there it is.”

She gestured to the sky. The students followed her motion and sighed almost in unison as they saw the triangular outline of the Omenpath that had delivered them to Lorwyn in the first place. It was still there, faint and distant and wreathed in daylight.

For the moment. The spreading darkness continued to swallow that part of the sky, and even as they watched, it washed over the iridescent triangle, seemingly wiping it away.

No! signed Abigale, a hard, involuntary gesture of negation, and threw herself into the air, wings flapping hard as she rose toward where the Omenpath had been. The others watched and saw the moment when she confirmed that it was gone, when her posture changed, hope fading. Slowly, she drifted back down to the ground, landing beside the others.

Tam turned to Brigid. “It seems we may be here for a while,” she said politely. “Do you know a place where we could go?”

Expression thoughtful, Brigid nodded. “I think I do, yes,” she said. “Come with me.”

Sunlight and moonlight slanted through the loose weave of the tree canopy, throwing splashes of bright gold and cool silver on the lush ground, night and day falling within inches of each other, no auroras to divide them in this hidden glen. The grass was so green it could have shamed emeralds, but it paled in comparison to the incredible profusion and array of wildflowers. Every color of the rainbow was represented, as well as white flowers the size of an elf’s palm and tiny black blossoms shaped like a child’s drawing of a falling star. Their centers were darker still, the color of the space between stars, and they smelled as sweet as blistered honey drizzled straight onto an open fire. Those that grew in moonlight rather than endless sun glowed like stars in their patchy darkness, and the result was a third light joining the celestial two, a faerie-light that could be found nowhere else.

The trees, which stood straight and tall under their burden of climbing vines and trumpet-shaped flowers, grew densely right up to the edge of the glen, which was divided down the middle by a sweetly chuckling brook that ran over stones polished round by time and the weight of water. And none of these, not walls of wood or water or impossibly intermixed night and day, made up the glen’s true security. That title belonged to the briar hedge that surrounded the patch of forest, tied into self-contained knots so close and sharp that even a sword would have been hard-pressed to sever one strand from the next. Their thorns were long and wickedly sharp, gently curving into hooks that could grab and sink into flesh if anyone got too close. The hedge didn’t move under casual observation, but there was a constant soft noise from its depths, as of eels slithering endlessly one over the other, aware, alert, and ravenous.

At the brook’s source, high in the glen, a single massive flower rose toward the sky, crowning a thick green column made from a dozen stems, each easily as large around as a kithkin’s thigh, braided together in a spiraling pattern that must have been stronger than stone or steel, because the blossom it supported was vast beyond dreaming.

Its petals were silver, gold, ivory, recreating the three kinds of light. They formed a scalloped cup, their tips reaching higher than the tops of the trees. Where the stamen and pistil should have been, there was a palace, timelessly elegant in its simplicity, built from bricks of molded bramble instead of stone, but large as any palace had ever been. It had ramparts and towers, even a courtyard large enough to host jousts or outdoor feasts. It was impossible, and in its impossibility, it was infinitely magical, a monument to every capability of the faerie court. Patches of night and day dappled the walls and grounds, beautiful in their chaos.



Art by: Yohann Schepacz

This was Glen Elendra, the stronghold of the faerie queen, once protectorate of Great Mother Oona, now home and holding of Queen Maralen of the fae. Faeries danced through the interlaced branches and flitted through the palace halls, light glinting off their carapaces until they shone like jewels. Much like the wildflowers, they came in every possible color, and their silhouettes cut an endless kaleidoscope of shapes and angles as they flew. They flew to keep themselves in either shadow or sun, not allowing the transition between the two to distract them from their tasks.

At the briar wall, the faerie that had slipped through an Omenpath to Arcavios and lured a group of students into another world squeezed through a gap between the thorns. The gap was narrow—too narrow for anything larger than a faerie—and this was a large example of its kind. Once through, the faerie shook itself to straighten out its tattered wings, then stepped into the nearest patch of light with all the eagerness and enthusiasm of a thief being led to the gallows.

The transformation that had accompanied its passage into Shadowmoor ran across it in reverse, pulling the gleaming green from its exoskeleton, smoothing the tatters in its wings, and generally softening the shape of it. In a matter of seconds, a small blue Lorwyn faerie stood where the green faerie had been, and it looked at itself with measurable disappointment before stepping off the branch and flying off toward the palace, wings buzzing frantically.

Once it reached Glen Elendra proper, it vanished into the clouds of faeries thronging the halls, no more or less eye-catching than any of the rest of them. Some were sweeping the halls; others were in the kitchen, feeding bits of fallen briar into the fire and mixing batter for the afternoon's cakes. The palace was sized for use by elves but populated almost entirely by faeries who were scarcely taller than an adult human's hand. It was a contradiction that ran all through the place, worked into every wall and doorframe.

The little blue faerie flew through the palace to the solarium where swarms of faeries tended the queen's flowers, removing bruised or blemished petals to encourage new growth. It paused there to claim a sprig of foxglove, then flew onward, deeper into the warren of the halls, until it reached a rarity: a closed door.

A circular opening had been cut into the door itself, forming a rising sun shape at the very top. The little faerie flew through it without pausing, into the chamber of the queen.

The room was large and circular, with walls softened by tapestries of living moss, ferns, and small flowers whose roots thrived on being exposed to the air. At the center of the room was a large bed shaped like the castle in miniature, with delicate petals forming a canopy around the softly padded center. The faerie dove toward that central bed, dropping its sprig of foxglove onto the pillow of the figure sleeping there. Then it rose, wings buzzing wildly, and flew out the chamber window into the courtyard.

The bed's occupant was a strange creature indeed. Tall as an elf, but with pale green skin that appeared hardened and semi-crystalline, almost opalescent. Her hair was long and black and fanned out around her in her sleep to form the shape of wings against her bedclothes. She had the curved antelope horns of a Mornsong elf, even greener and more crystalline than the rest of her, nearly pearlescent in the light. And from the way her face was screwed up and her cloven hooves were digging into the mattress, she was having a truly terrible dream.

With a gasp, Maralen awoke and sat upright in her bed, claspings the blankets around herself. The motion knocked the spray of foxglove from her pillow, and she turned to stare at it with wide, wounded eyes. Cautiously, she reached out to pick it up, still staring as she did. The flowers gave no indication where they had come from as she lifted and studied them, and so she dropped them again, clutching at her head.

Something was very wrong. Something big enough to seep into her dreams and twist them out of truth. Maralen shivered and turned her face away from the flowers, then released her grasp on her own temples and ran one long-fingered hand through her hair, coming away with a palmful of delicate lavender petals. These she scattered through the bedding around her, letting them fall to join the others already there. Carefully, she shifted herself to the edge of the bed.

She stood, unsteady on delicate hooves, and moved toward her vanity to begin preparing to face the world when a swarm of faeries came pouring through the hole in the door. They surrounded her in an instant, a whirling windstorm of faeries, all of them talking at once in their quick insectile voices.

Maralen lifted her hands, palms out. "Stop!" she said. "Stop. You can't talk over each other if you want me to understand you. You." She pointed to a black and brown faerie that resembled nothing so much as a handful of dried leaves that had come together as a living organism. "Camey. Tell me what's going on."

The little faerie drew herself up taller while hovering a few feet away from Maralen's face, then flew boldly forward, toward the queen. Maralen put her hand out for the faerie to land on. Several of the others gasped at this show of favoritism, even as Camey settled, shook her wings into a neutral position, and said, "We're your personal flock, ma'am."

"Yes, you are," Maralen agreed. These were the faeries who had been chosen—or had elected themselves, in some cases—to see to her physical needs as she and Glen Elendra continued to adjust to one another. As an avatar of the former faerie queen who had been created to mimic a Mornsong elf, it was unclear just how far those adjustments would go. The palace had taken the better part of a decade to expand enough to grant her access to all its spaces. It had taken more than twice as long for her skin to begin hardening into a faerie's hard carapace. During these transitions, the faeries had decided both queen and castle needed help to ease the way. Maralen hadn't objected.

As an avatar of Oona who rejected her maker so vociferously, it was difficult for her to properly connect to her subjects. Her name didn't carry the weight of her maker-mother's. If the faeries wanted to bond themselves to her more tightly through service, she would allow it, and gladly.

"There are thirty-five of us, for the days in proper swarming season," continued Camey.

"Yes," agreed Maralen, lacking anything else to do.

"But now there are thirty-four of us, and Aherin is missing, and he's not slacking off in any of the usual places, but we've all had to do his work for him," said Camey. She scowled, looking frustrated. "He's been gone hours and hours and hours, and we've sent a few scouts looking for him, but he's not to be found."

Maralen blinked.

"Worst, though, someone's been using his bed and his place, and when the flock's in motion, it seems there's thirty-five. So we don't know where he is, or why, or who's been putting their head to his pillow!"

Maralen had long since learned to take the concerns of her faeries seriously. When added to the dream that had woken her, which was fading into jagged streaks of darkness and a stomach-twisting feeling that things were out of order with the world, it was genuinely unsettling. She was still trying to decide what this might mean when the chamber door swung open and an elven man stepped inside. He was dressed in the greens and browns of a Gilt-Leaf hunter, and a complicated glamer made it look as if his long-destroyed horns graced his head with the span and majesty they possessed on the moonlight side of the cycle, where his Shadowmoor self walked without the injuries of his Lorwyn past. Like the faeries who thronged the halls, he had long since learned the art of stepping around shadow, keeping himself on the side of the aurora that contained his memory of the moment.

"Rhys," said Maralen, voice thick with relief. She lowered her hand, leaving Camey to hover where she had been standing for a moment before she flew to rejoin the rest of the ever-circling flock. Maralen started toward her friend.

Rhys was far older than any elf was meant to be, ancient by any standard of their once shared people, but like her, he showed none of it on his face. Any who saw him would have thought him a hunter in his prime, if not for the silent warning provided by horns, which were larger and wider than they would ever have had time to grow under normal circumstances. He was her friend, her confidant, one of the only people who understood how much she had changed and how much she feared the changes yet to come—and should the need arise, her executioner.

Maralen was born of Oona, and Oona had been the rot at the root of Lorwyn-Shadowmoor's very heart. The death of the old faerie queen had been a gift to the world, given at great cost, and Maralen refused to allow herself to follow her creator's path into cruelty. Should she show any sign that her slow transformations had started to lead her down her creator's path, Rhys would kill her, pulling the dagger he kept drenched in moonglove extract from his belt and driving it through her heart. There was no cure for the poison known as moonglow in Lorwyn. Some said that dawnglove, which bloomed only in Shadowmoor, could be used to counter it, but there was no proving that while the sun was shining.

Neither flower would grow in Glen Elendra. They required an environment that was all day or all night, not mingled as they were around the faerie court.

As long as Maralen needed him to kill her, Rhys would live. And as long as Rhys lived, Maralen would fight to not make him carry the burden of her death.

“I knew you were awake when your faeries stopped bouncing off the walls and came this way,” he said. “Bad dreams again?”

“Yes,” said Maralen. She turned toward the window. “One of my faeries is missing.”

“Really?” asked Rhys. “How can you *tell*?”

“After living among them so long, how can you *not*?” snapped Maralen before pausing, ashamed. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.” She turned back to Camey, still hovering. “Get the others and go looking for Aherin,” she said. “I’ll stay in the palace until you tell me he’s found.”

Camey nodded and flew for the window, the flock following. Maralen watched them go, then turned back toward Rhys. Midway through the motion, her eye caught her mirror, and for a moment, it looked like there was a third person in the room with them, smaller, made entirely of living flower petals and glaring at her with unending menace. Maralen jerked backward, and the reflection was gone.

“Mara?” asked Rhys. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just ... unsettled,” she said, trying to cover her dismay. “I need to go walk in the courtyard. Is Eirdu still on the grounds?”

“Yes,” said Rhys. “But why ...”

It was too late. Maralen was already moving toward the door, walking quickly away from the frowning elf.

She glanced back as she exited the chamber, then winced as the sound of ghostly laughter filled her ears. Rhys didn’t react, ensuring he couldn’t hear it.

Maralen fled.

The grounds of Glen Elendra were sweetly scented and strangely bare of flowers, given the solariums and everything else that surrounded them. It had confused Maralen at first, until she paused to think and realized that planting flowers inside a giant flower could go poorly. Still, the massive courtyard was pleasant enough for its barrenness, cobbled in flat stones taken from the brook below, with low tables holding potted ivy near the walls where it could be encouraged to grow.

At the moment, the courtyard contained only daylight, stripped of all shadow. Unlike the rest of the palace, there was no ambiguity here, no variation. Only Lorwyn. And at the center of it all lounged a great, impossible beast, six-legged, with red and white fur and a long tail of thorns that looped around the entire space as barrier and banner. Its wings were folded in contentment, and to make it small enough to fit. A gleaming sun hovered just above its head, and warmth and light radiated off of it in a wave, turning the courtyard golden and comforting. It raised its head as Maralen approached, looking at her in silent familiarity.

To be beloved of Eirdu was to be beloved of the sun in all its impossible vastness. Maralen sometimes thought the day elemental was too great to be fully perceived by anything less than itself; when it stood, it seemed infinitely large, but when it curled close and content, it could fit into almost any space it chose. Like a courtyard, like the company of a queen.

“Hello, old friend,” said Maralen, coming closer. The beast brought its head lower, until she could press one hand flat against its muzzle, marveling as always at how the elemental made her seem as small as one of her own faeries. She pressed her palm flat against its skin and closed her eyes, just standing there

for several minutes. The beast snorted lightly, and she stepped back, opening her eyes and smiling. It rose like the morning sun, shaking itself before ambling toward the courtyard's edge.



Art by: Lucas Graciano

“I suppose I’ll see you later,” said Maralen before turning to return to her room as the glorious beast left the courtyard and walked away, still radiant, still warm.

She would wait, and when her faeries had news, they would bring it to her.

A cluster of faeries on the wall watched the beast as it left. “Never good to keep the day contained,” commented one.

“He’ll be back,” said another.

As Eirdu walked away, the patches of darkness that grew everywhere else on the grounds began to pepper the courtyard, their opening accompanied by patches of night in the formerly smooth blue sky above. Maralen kept walking, sticking to the sunlit path.

Not far away, the little blue faerie listened to their exchange and frowned, visibly perplexed. It looked around, spotting a newly opened patch of Shadowmoor, and dove into the moonlight, letting its transformation repeat in reverse, blue becoming green, smoothness becoming jagged and ornate. Now giggling and delighted, it took to the air, following Maralen’s path through the palace to her room.

Its business in Glen Elendra was not yet done.

Liliana Vess had been at Strixhaven long enough, both as a professor and a student, to understand how Introduction to Magibotanical Environments worked. The students would sign up, learn about the magical plants of Arcavios, and when the time was right, they’d go out to gather specimens while she got an afternoon off from teaching and could catch up on her grading. And so far, that was exactly what she’d gotten.

Until now. She glared at her office door like it had personally offended her, silently commanding whoever had dared to knock outside her posted office hours to go away and leave her alone.

Instead, they knocked again. Lilitana rose in a swirl of black skirt and stormed to the door, intending to give the intruder a piece of her mind. Instead, she opened the door and froze, one hand rising to cover her mouth.

In the hall outside her office, Ajani Goldmane stood and met her stare directly, expression as endlessly gentle as always. "Hello, Lilitana," he said.

"Ajani." She stepped back, gesturing for him to enter. "This is a surprise."

"I suppose it is," he agreed, stepping inside so she could close the door. "I needed to see you. I needed to be sure ..." His voice trailed off, like he wasn't sure how to continue.

Lilitana took a sharp breath. "Tea?" she asked. "I don't have anything stronger; this is a school."

"That doesn't stop everyone."

"Sadly, when you're trying to apologize for as much as I am, following the rules becomes essential." She turned to cross to the tea set on her sideboard, then stopped, pressing her hands flat against the wood, back to Ajani. "Who died?" she asked.

"How did you know?"

"I've been a necromancer a long, long time. It's not always about zombies and cackling in the moonlight. Sometimes it's about telling people you weren't fast enough, and that just because you can make them get up and walk around, that doesn't mean you can bring them *back*. So please, Ajani. Let's not kid ourselves that we're old friends, or that you just came to see how I am. We've lost someone, and I know that's why you're here. Who died?"

"Jace."

It was such a small word. One syllable, four letters, and yet it fell into the room like the end of everything, like a hammer against the hardened walls of what remained of her heart. Jace? Jace Beleren, that brilliant, beautiful disaster? He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be gone. Not after everything he'd survived, not after Tezzeret and Bolas and New Phyrexia. He had been his own necromancer so many times, bringing himself back from beyond the point of no return. He couldn't be dead now.

She looked at her denial with critical eyes and decided it was the only reasonable response. She'd loved him once. She didn't love him, not anymore, and she was never going to love him again, but that didn't mean he was allowed to be *dead*. She'd buried too many pieces of her heart to let another one go this easily.

Her hands didn't shake as she began preparing her tea, and she didn't say anything, letting the silence hang until Ajani asked, uncomfortably, "Did you hear me?"

"I heard." She added honey to her cup and finally turned, looking at him expressionlessly. "I just don't believe you. What happened?"

"Lilitana, I—"

"What. Happened?"

Ajani almost flinched. Then, in a low voice, he began: "You know the dragonstorms we've been experiencing? I was on Tarkir. I helped Elspeth and Narset stop them. We wound up following the signs back to the Meditation Realm, where we found Jace. He was—" He paused for a moment, swallowing. "He wasn't Phyrexian anymore, but he was wrong, somehow. He was casting something none of us could identify, and he lost control. He lost control of the spell, and it came apart in his hands, and then he came apart with it. The spell took him, and he was gone. Just light and energy on the wind."

“He ...” She stopped and shook her head. “There was no body. He’s not *dead*. Jace Beleren wouldn’t die without leaving a body.”

“Liliana—” Another pause; another swallow. “There’s something else I have to tell you. The storms wracked the Meditation Realm. They ripped through everything. And Jace lied. When he let you go on Ravnica, he let Ugin capture Bolas at the same time and allowed us all to think that he had died.”

“So?”

“So Bolas escaped.”

Her teacup shattered as it hit the floor.

“He used an Omenpath—we don’t know whether his spark is intact, and even if it is, he doesn’t know where you are. But you needed to know.”

Liliana was still staring at him when the office door banged open and Dina barged inside, leafy hair askew. “Professor Vess, four of the students I took out with me today are missing!”

Liliana turned away from Ajani and toward her student, professionalism settling over her like a shroud. “What happened?”

“One of them shouted about seeing this weird little flying thing, like a big bug with hands, and took off. The others followed. We think they fell down an Omenpath, but it closed before we could go after them. Please, we need to find them!”

Liliana and Ajani exchanged a look.

“Weird flying thing? Like a big bug?” asked Liliana.

“That could be too many things,” said Ajani.

“There’s nothing like that around here,” said Liliana.

Dina looked between them, panic seeming to abate somewhat as she passed the responsibility along. “Can you find them?” she asked.

“I can certainly try,” said Ajani. “Can you show us where they were?”

Dina nodded, and they set off.