

Episode 3: Asunder

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“Welcome to Titan’s Grave. This ... isn’t its best moment. At least, I’m pretty sure it’s not.”

Abigale couldn’t hear what was going on around her, but she had a pretty good feeling that Kirol was right about that. The air here was thick with tension. Even simply walking along the path between the student cabins, toward the dig site, was earning them all sorts of glares.

Has there been any sign of Lluwen? she signed, her words broadcast telepathically by her hearing aid. Someone at the edge of her vision opened their mouth to scream something at her; she chose to politely avoid reading their lips.

“Not yet,” said Kirol. “I’ve tried looking around here, asking questions, you know the drill. But with all the chaos, I don’t think anyone wants to talk.”

They weren’t exaggerating about the chaos. Just ahead, past the landing bay, the dig site was in total disarray. Students stood in groups arguing with one another. Kirol spotted an elf holding an owl in up by the scruff as they argued over who had the rights to their particular site. Delivery drivers stood next to wagons full of supplies in search of someone to accept them. No one in sight was taking charge of anything at all—and without any idea what was going on or why, the newcomers were being met with vitriol. All it would take was one misplaced bolt of magic, and this whole place would go up in a mass of paranoid flame.



Art by: Leon Tukker

Kirol dodged a jug flung through the air, then caught it and took a sip from what remained as they handed Abigale a commemorative Titan's Grave shirt. It matched the one they were wearing. "Lluwen's in there somewhere, but I wanted to wait until all of us were here before I ran in."

Am I the last one? Abigale signed.

"I was earlier than you for once," said Sanar. He leaped down from the roof of one of the cabins, where he had been keeping an eye out for any further trouble, clad in his own commemorative shirt. "It brings me no pleasure to admit as much, of course, but the facts are hard to argue against. Though perhaps it's for the best you missed some of the nastier shouting matches. And the star arch archaic." He jabbed a finger into the air. "Let's not waste another moment. Our friend's in trouble, and the situation is in horrible disarray!"

Abigale looked between the two. She pulled on the shirt with a sigh. *Do we have any idea what's going on?*

Kirol shook their head. They gestured for the others to follow. "Same as with Lluwen. No one wants to talk."

Another flung jar. They batted it out of the air this time. Sanar seemed to consider picking it up.

That's concerning. Fractured communications only further contribute to the breakdown of law, signed Abigale. *From the buzzing I feel in the air, I might be lucky.*

"The shouting doesn't stir the spirit," said Sanar. "But I can't blame them. Lluwen told us that there was a giant archaic and that the rest have been acting strangely. While there haven't been any other sightings of the star arch archaic, there also hasn't been any sign of Professor Fel."

"All sorts of stories, though," said Kirol. "On my way here I bumped into Kequia Akosa on *her* way back to the fields. Did you know Ajani and her grandfather are friends? She said she wouldn't be surprised if Professor Fel was involved, that he hangs around archaics a lot whenever he gets the chance."

Abigale puffed her feathers at this. Her signing grew slow and forceful. *I was worried something like this might happen ...*

"Look, it's easy," said Kirol. "All we have to do is find Jadzi. If Fel has her, then we beat him up!"

Abigale's hearing aid didn't need to translate the roll of her eyes. *He's a Planeswalker, and Lluwen's letter didn't indicate that he had her, directly, only that he knew of what had happened. If he's acting as some sort of puppet master, then I doubt you'll be able to knock him out.*

"You just don't believe in me! I get it," said Kirol. They turned toward the others, spreading their arms wide as they walked backward through the chaos of the camp. "That's fine. When we find Lulu, he'll have my back for sure."

As they said this, Kirol felt a paw settle on their shoulder.

"Tell me more about how easy it is to best a Planeswalker," rumbled Ajani. "I'd like to hear it."

Kirol went pale—paler than usual, even—and stopped in place. "How did—"

"You might have been clever enough to sneak away, but I was clever enough to know how to find you. A battle and a war are two very different things," said Ajani.

Kirol flicked the tip of their nose with their thumb. "Yeah, yeah ..."

"Not to worry—I'm only here to help," said Ajani.

Sanar couldn't keep his chuckling at bay, and even Abigale was hiding her beak behind her wing. Kirol looked at them with the sort of put-upon sadness one might find in a cat that has fallen into a bucket of water.

"Fine. Okay. Let's just get going. We don't have any time to waste," Kirol said. Even though, deep down, they were happy to be laughing again.

Following in Ajani's wake made moving through the camp easy enough to do. Whoever threw anything at them would inevitably end up hitting the big cat, and he didn't seem to register the blows at all. Each offered their scant theories on what might be happening as they walked: an unknown creature crossing an Omenpath and disguising itself as an archaic; Fel working some sort of puppetry; Jadzi needing to speak to the giant archaic for private reasons.

All of that stopped mid-discussion when Kirol spotted Dina with a bubbling cauldron set up in front of her, trying her damndest to calm the surrounding students.



Pull from the Grave | Art by: Pauline Voss

"I know it's terrifying right now, and I know Professor Fel is *really* hard to deal with, but that's no reason to descend into chaos! Please, you're Strixhaven students! Think of the example you're setting!"

Her earnest plea was met with another commemorative cup thrown in her direction. Thankfully, it bounced off the wall next to her. She picked it up, gave it a sniff, and upended the contents into her cauldron with a belabored sigh.

"Do you, uh, need help?" called Kirol.

"Talk about a tough crowd," said Sanar.

"It's ... fine," said Dina. An entire college's worth of students working on their finals could not sound one tenth so belabored. Her smile, forged on the anvil of marking papers well into the wee hours of the night, was not fooling anyone. "I've got to take responsibility whenever our professors step out to

take care of urgent matters, right? That's what being a grad student is all about. Got to prove that I'm reliable, and—why are you all staring at me like that?"

Sanar clambered up onto Ajani's shoulders. With one hand, he shielded his eyes from the sunlight; with the other, he pointed to a curl of green smoke rising in the distance. "That's Lluwen's signal! It must be!"

"Green smoke means ... What does green smoke mean?" asked Sanar.

They were trudging together through the forest. Well, most of them were. Sanar was still hitching a ride on Ajani's shoulders. "This is why I suggested a three-color system. You can be far more expressive that way. Is this rot-green or growth-green? I suppose it's something like mint. But are we to take that as a sign that he and Tam are relaxing?"

Green wasn't on the list of approved signals, signed Abigale. While Kirol was hiking for their life, Abigale's talons and wings let her bound through the brush with ease. Signing didn't slow her down at all.

"Maybe it means they're all set at their camp? It's a pale green against the mountains, friendly as can be," said Kirol. A bush in their path was riddled with thorns. After a moment's buildup, they tried to jump over it and mostly succeeded. Mostly.

"What was that groan?" asked Sanar. Ajani wheeled around so fast that the goblin had to cling to keep from falling.

The two of them found their vampire friend caught on a bramble, their shirt poked through with thorns. "If I move any more, I'm gonna tear it ..."

Kirol, it's a shirt, signed Abigale. Nevertheless, she came over to try and untangle them.

"It's not *just* a shirt! It's a symbol of our friendship!"

"Don't you have a spare?" asked Ajani. He crouched down to try and work through some of the tears—only to find that burrs had attached themselves to the bottom hem. "I thought you had a better mind for hiking than this."

Kirol pouted. "I do have a spare, but I wanted to give it to Lluwen so that we'd all fit in together and he'd feel less alone."

Ajani studied them. "And how would he fit it over his horns?"

Two students and one Planeswalker all focused on helping a poor, woebegone vampire lamenting their torn clothes.

They were making such a fuss that anyone within a few yards would have heard them—indeed, such a fuss that not a single one heard the approach of the masked figures behind them.

"As for the smoke In certain cultures, green smoke comes up from funeral pyres thanks to the wood used," said Ajani.

It was the last thing he managed to say before the whole group got hit with a wave of concussive magic.

"All those legendary leonin senses ... and you still fell for an ambush. I think you're getting old."

Ajani rubbed his good eye—or tried to. Thick bands of magic locked his wrists in place. A pang of fear ran through him, followed by a burning in his chest he didn't much like. A cub's reaction, a young warrior's; he could be neither now. There were students to look after.

He gritted his teeth and tried to stand despite a dizzying headache. To his surprise, his legs hadn't been bound at all. A benevolence, perhaps, from whoever had spoken?

Yet when he managed to open his eye, when he heard the voice again and realized who was speaking, he struggled to keep his balance.

Chandra Nalaar stood surrounded on all sides by cloaked figures in masks that looked like they had been shattered and then reassembled. But it couldn't be. What was she doing all the way out here? Hadn't she gone back home to Avishkar for a while? Planeswalkers had so few opportunities to live happy lives. Why had she forsaken hers to slink around the forest on Arcavios, setting ambushes, surrounding herself with ... whoever these people were?

Ajani had known Chandra for years—and had looked out for her just as long. When they'd met, he had seen a lot of himself in her: the temper, the drive, the aimlessness. Watching her grow from a girl who hid her nervousness with blustering energy to a true hero of the Multiverse had been one of the great prides of his life. Yet throughout that time, she had been bright-eyed and driven, always moving, always looking for the next thing to do.

The Chandra who stood before him now was perfectly still. That brightness he'd come to value on the battlefield was smoldering. The hard lines of her face spoke as loud as any words that she was in *pain*, and that rent him as much as her words.

"Chandra," he said. "Why are you doing this?"

She did not move. "Because something has gone horribly wrong, and I'm the only one who can stop it. Until I know for sure whether you've been compromised, it has to stay that way."

"Little Candle, I'm confused. Please help me understand."

"You're worried about the children, I'm sure, but you shouldn't be. They're safe," said Chandra. "My friends are talking with them now about what they've seen. We don't mean them any harm."

Ajani scanned their surroundings. A camp in the vast ribcage of the dead titan, and a hidden one at that. Chandra's new friends favored hammocks and lean-tos over sleeping bags and tents. Twenty-eight of the shattered-mask students, if he didn't miss his guess. None threatening him directly. Four flanked Chandra while the others milled about the camp—some huddled in conversation, some chopping wood, some practicing spells in tandem.

Kirol was helping with the wood, of course. Sanar seemed to be telling five of them an elaborate story. Abigale he saw observing the practice. To his surprise he spotted Lluwen and Tam, too, standing near one another. They weren't restrained, either, but they *were* being watched.

"If you didn't mean to harm us, why the ambush?" he asked. "Who are these people?"

It wasn't Chandra who answered him but Lluwen. "They're the Oriq." One of his minders elbowed him in the ribs.

The Oriq? Ajani's breath left him. He couldn't summon so much as a question for Chandra—all he could muster was a gobsmacked look. He took two shambling steps. Twice, he tripped, but he kept going.

Chandra made no move to stop him, but she did glare at Lluwen. So, too, did all of her companions. “The Shattered aren’t Oriq anymore. Their masks should tell you as much.”



Shattered Acolyte | Art by: Ashly Lovett

“You believe them because of a fashion statement?” Ajani said. Though he felt a stone of sorrow crushing his sternum, he continued. “They tried to kill everyone at the university. How could you ally yourself with such people?”

Chandra Nalaar sprang forward. In what felt like a single step, she’d closed the distance between them. Motes of flame danced in the air around her as she stared Ajani down.

“Because I know I can trust them,” Chandra said. “I know they aren’t part of this. All they want is to learn what they can as safely as they can.” She met his eyes only for a sharp second before spreading her arms wide to the rest of the camp. “I can’t say that about you. Not for sure.”

“Chandra.” The stone grew heavier.

“Look, I get it. You and I go way back. You want me to open up the way I always do and let you in. But I can’t. Not yet. And it’s because ...”

Her hand flew to her temple, as if nursing a great pain; her face contorted for a moment. With a shake of her head, she gestured to the others around them. “Shattered! What’s our first rule?”

“What is shattered can be reforged!” two or three said. A small round of cheers echoed through the camp.

Ajani still did not look up. Something in him wanted to roar, and something in him wanted to run, and the thought of doing either was worse than the shackles around his wrists.

He gritted his teeth. Chandra hadn’t made these—couldn’t have made these. They must have been a student’s work. Perhaps he could break them, grab the students, and run?

No. What a cowardly thought. He couldn’t leave Chandra behind.

“That’s correct,” said Chandra. “And right now, Ajani, my trust is in tiny little shards.”

Ajani took a breath. “How does Nissa feel about you allying with murderers?”

Chandra clenched her fist and socked him straight in the gut. Unfortunately for Chandra, Ajani’s core was solid and unyielding. Not that it didn’t hurt. But she knew that, he was sure; if she had wanted to hurt him, he’d be doubled over.

“People deserve second chances.” She cracked her knuckles. “No one here will teach them anything—not when they used to be Oriq. Never mind that what everyone here *really* wanted was instruction in the first place. Joining up was the only way they knew how to get it, then they were barred from it forever. None of the people here attacked the school, Ajani. They all refused. Shattered their masks and decided it wasn’t for them.”

She looked around at the others wearing an expression Ajani knew well: pride.

“They’re all pyromancers. Every single one of them. I found them while I was trying to track Jace down—a ragtag little group trying to teach one another. I took them under my wing.”

More eyes on him as she paced. “You attacked *students*.”

“We didn’t attack anyone. We needed to know what the students had found out,” said Chandra. “As you can see, nobody’s hurt. And ... if we’re being honest, Ajani, I would have let them go already if you weren’t here with them.”

Ajani growled without thinking. When his hands flexed, the magical bonds strained against his muscles. “Why me, then?”

“Yes, why him?” Lluwen? It must be. He was crossing the distance, Tam and the minders following behind. The young elf stood between them as if he were a wall. “Ajani has nothing to do with the archaics—”

“You’re right, Lluwen. He doesn’t. He’s worried about keeping all of you safe and keeping that lovable goober over there out of trouble,” said Chandra. She narrowed her eyes. “But the problem is that he thinks I’m just as much a student as you are. He feels obligated to try and protect me. To stop me.”

Kirol padded up next to Ajani, standing a little taller for all the praise. “I think you should give him a try. He’s always helped us. And if you’re so big on second chances, then it only makes sense, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t hear Abigale approach, but he did hear the gentle puff of air about her wings as she landed and signed, *It weakens your argument not to allow him the opportunity.*

A moment of silence rolled over the crowd. The imagined stone crushing his lungs went light. As embarrassing as it was to have students come to his aid like this, he had to admit he was grateful for it. Ajani Goldmane, the young warrior on Naya, could never have dreamed of being defended in this way. Of being trusted.

But was he worthy of that trust?

They didn’t know what he’d done. The blood on his hands. Could he be equal to the friend they saw in him?

He looked up. As a cloud passed overhead, he thought, just for a moment, that he saw the Chandra he knew so well.

“I’ll give it a try,” she said.

Ajani nodded. “What brought you here?”

Chandra crossed her arms. A rumble in the distance. The towering ribcage overhead made him imagine the creature stirring in its sleep.

“Jace is alive,” said Chandra. She held up a hand. “Before you start, I know what you’re going to say. I don’t care. I saw him back on Avishkar.”

Chandra pointed to her temple. The floating motes of fire around her began to swirl.

“He *did* something to me. To my head. The healers said that if Elspeth hadn’t been there for triage, I wouldn’t have made it. I would have died there in front of what’s left of my family, in front of everyone I knew back home, because *he* had some kind of plan.”

Her chest rose and fell with every word, as did Ajani’s.

Be the person they need you to be, he thought. But how could he in the face of all this?

“Chandra ...”

“He’s still inside my head. Headaches that last for hours. Dreams where I can’t tell who is who, where I see faces I’ve never known and do things I’d never do. Every day that passes it hurts more and more, a balloon of pain swelling up inside my skull, and I’m terrified of what’s going to happen when it bursts.”

“I know you think so, Little Candle,” said Ajani, “but I saw him on Tarkir. He had a plan to remake the Multiverse, but he failed. He didn’t just die; his essence was *unmade*. He’s as dead as Gideon.”

He knew the moment the words left him that he’d made a mistake—knew it from the slow open of Chandra’s mouth, from the soft sound that left her, from the sinking of Kirol’s shoulders.

But he couldn’t let her further bury herself in this delusion.

“I’m not doubting your pain. Clearly something’s hurting you. But it couldn’t still be Jace. Perhaps Ashiok in disguise, or—”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand. I *knew* you’d try to stop me,” said Chandra. Her voice trembled. She paced away from Ajani, a flare flashing around her fist. “Why’s it always all right when *you* want to go charging ahead? Why doesn’t anyone *ever* trust me?”

“I do trust you!” Ajani took a step forward, but once more the ground began to tremble. This time, the others noticed. The Shattered exchanged worried glances. “Chandra, let me go and we can talk this through. You’re not acting rationally—”

She wheeled around. “No. You’re the one who’s not acting *rationally*. I was right about the Multiverse being in danger once before, and I’m right this time, too.”

Shaking ground wasn’t going to keep him from following her. “But what could he possibly be doing here?”

“Manipulating archaics!” Chandra roared.

The words rang through the woods. Birds took off from their perches; an animal howled. But worst of all? It wasn’t because of what Chandra had said, or even how she’d said it. Not a second after she’d finished, a sound tore through the clear blue sky like an axe through a skull.

Neither of them spoke about it, but both knew, in that instant, the only thing it could possibly be.

Towering overhead like a testament to the grandeur of the universe was the archaic—the *giant* one. Arches around it seemed to swell and pulse and swirl in time with the breathing from its massive chest. Each exhalation was a wind upon the encampment. Though it had no eyes, Ajani could feel in his teeth, in his bones, that it was staring at them.



Art by: Josu Solano

Had it heard? The archaic's footfalls were the source of the shaking they'd all felt. It was coming closer and closer by the second, a shambling inevitability, a colossal unanswered question.

Ajani's eye was on the archaic, but it fell, then, to Chandra. The pyromancer was pulling her goggles down. Twin flame helixes surrounded her forearms. The patterns were like the aether spirals of Avishkar. It struck him in an absurd moment of misplaced pride that she had far more control over her magic than she had the last time he'd seen her.

But it was a short-lived pride, and he knew it. No matter how beautiful they were, he had only seconds to act before she blasted the archaic with her full strength.

Talking wasn't going to help. She'd made that clear enough. Shouting would do nothing but waste the precious air he needed to do what might, instead, get them somewhere.

Ajani sucked in a breath and hurled himself at Chandra.

Too preoccupied with lining up her shot, she had no warning. Ajani bowled her over and took them both to the ground. Before she could right herself, he brought his bound forearms down on the small of her back.

"I can't let you hurt it before we know what's going on," he said. "I'm sorry—"

"Look, in the palm of its hand! Oracle Jadzi!" Lluwen's outcry hurt almost as much as Chandra's searing glare.

She was right, wasn't she? But they didn't have all the pieces ...

Ajani expected many things from Chandra: that she'd fight back, that she'd use fire to do so, that he'd have next to no time to react.

He *hadn't* expected a flame jet-fueled kip-up into a backflip onto her feet. Flames singed his fur as he dashed back to keep from getting burned. A billowing carpet of fire spread out around her.

And Chandra, swathed in flame, signaled to her students. “Keep them occupied. He’s not going to stop me.”

Leave it to the pyromancer to throw a match on a powder keg. The Shattered blazed into action. Walls of fire rose up around the encampment, cutting Ajani off from his own students. His heart caught in his chest, but he couldn’t afford to leap back and defend them. Not when Chandra was about to make this so much worse.

Ajani brought his forearms down against his raised knee. His bonds shattered to pieces—just in time for him to make another try at grabbing Chandra.

She repaid his efforts by catching him with a flame-strengthened uppercut.

“When are you going to learn I’m not a child anymore?” she said, though with his ears ringing he only caught every other word. “I’m not going to let you stop me from doing what’s needed to save the Multiverse. Again.”

Reeling, he brought himself to his feet. She wanted a fight? Then he’d keep her busy as long as he needed.

He rushed her again, shoulder first this time. When she tried to sway, he caught her by the scruff of her coat and swept the back of her knee with his shin. Balance fell away and so did she, but not before she got in a swing at his ribcage.

Ajani grunted. He could feel it: his blood rising at the thrill of a good fight. With the fires around them, he could practically hear the old war drums. No—not war drums. Those were the Shattered and the students. Sanar must have conjured a battery to daze them. If he tried, he could hear Kirol’s war cries over the din, see flashes of Tam tearing through the vines trying to keep her in place.

She was on the ground in front of him. He could let things lie.

But I can’t, can I? Not really. Chandra wasn’t going to.

He lunged forward before she could recover. A gout of fire down his side only awakened something in him, made him feel more alive. He slipped one arm under her chin and the other hand behind her head.

“What does attacking now accomplish?” he asked as Chandra kicked back against him. “If we tail the archaic and find out its intentions, we can better defend Jadzi. All you’re going to do is start a fight you’re not ready to finish.”

The phrase Chandra uttered into Ajani’s forearm would have made most parents pale, Pia Nalaar excepted.

He leaned back. With their height difference, there wasn’t much Chandra could do to get loose if she couldn’t find any purchase. If she kept fighting back, she’d pass out, and when she did, he’d put her somewhere safe while the rest of them figured out this mess. All he needed was another few seconds ...

But he wasn’t going to get them.

Although Chandra had stopped moving, it wasn’t because she’d passed out. The fire burning around her—the flames that scoured Ajani’s sides—all poured down to the palm of her right hand.

And before he could stop her, Chandra hurled it over both of their heads.

“What are you—” he started, but he knew it was no use. He set her down and tried to shield her from the archaic’s inevitable counterattack. And, when it came down to it, he had no great want to see the fire make contact.

There was no need to. He'd remember the sound it made, the tormented scream, until his dying day. The archaic's pain echoed in the great hollow of his chest. He gritted his teeth against the unrelenting sorrow of its voice and found that he could not fight it for long.

Though wordless, he heard the accusation: *why did you do this to me?*

How many times had he been asked that question of late? How many more times would he hear it? As Chandra sputtered beneath him, he forced himself to look.

A bubble of force kept Jadzi safe from the flames that consumed whatever they could find of the archaic. Howling in agony, the glow of its magic made the flames seem dim.

Just for a moment, the archaic looked down at Ajani. At Chandra.

Then it brought its hand down and tore the ground asunder.