
Episode 4: Something to Offer

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Tam wasn't used to headaches. Study was the only time she'd had to deal with them, and even then, it was nothing a pot of Ravnican coffee couldn't dismiss. Most of her stipend was spent on the stuff.

No amount of espresso, no matter how well extracted, was going to fix this one.

She blinked, her hair levitating and writhing in response to the swirling adrenaline in her system—that happened sometimes; she couldn't entirely control it—as she shook off bits of rubble. That bulky frame hurling boughs off the trapped students could only be Kirol. Slowly, she registered the others—Sanar drumming a beat on a hollowed stump to boost morale, Abigale's inklings helping where they could to beat away the dirt.

Lluwen she didn't notice until she felt his hand on her shoulder. "Everything in its right place?"

"I ... think so," she said. "Where are we?"

"In Titan's Grave. Deeper than we have any records of going, if we can trust the Shattered."

He helped her to her feet. Up above ground, she'd always thought it strange that they couldn't see the rib tips of the creature that gave this place its name—only the spine. Here, she realized why: The towering bone arches that seemed to rake against the sky itself were only the top third of the creature's ribs. The rest were beneath the earth. They lined the walls of this tunnel, each as wide as a classroom, great undulations of ivory against the loam. Roots intertwined overhead, three or four to a strand in places. Tam couldn't help but try to trace the fractals she saw in them. For a moment she was frozen in childlike awe, head tilted back, the tendrils of her hair reaching for the impossible constellations above.

But that was cut off when the others called her attention again.

"I hope you're wearing your hiking boots," said Kirol. They grinned at her as they pointed to their own hefty footwear.

Tam fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Of course I am. I knew what I was getting into here."

Kirol slapped at their sternum. "I'm glad *someone* is listening to my advice!"

One of the most vital parts of solving any problem was knowing when to stop trying. If you kept bashing your head against a wall of equations, you were only going to end up sleepless and incomprehensible. Kirol was *at least* as stubborn as a wall. At least.

So, Tam stepped away from it. Lluwen helped her up, and Abigale flew higher into the chamber. Headaches and desperation were no excuses for slacking off—all of them knew it. Meanwhile, the Shattered cleared away the last of the wreckage.

Tam had to admit Chandra's students were clever. Three of the Shattered working together had created something like a circular saw: a great disk of stone rendered sharp by the team's effort, its teeth limned with white-hot flame. The leader of the cohort was the one controlling the thing—angling it this way

and that through the roots and rubble. Despite all this, she stood perfectly still. Were it not for the slight movement of her hands at her sides, it would be easy to imagine her as some sort of statue.

“They’re not bad, are they?” whispered Lluwen.

Tam nodded. “But do they know which way to go? Or are they guessing?”

Abigale landed next to them right on cue, but they didn’t need her hearing aid to tell them she didn’t bring good news. She gestured for everyone to gather up.

The Shattered kept going about their work.

But could they be trusted? Sure, the Shattered and Chandra had ambushed them and kept them in the camp. Sure, that sucked. But none of them had hurt any of her friends. The worst they’d caught were a couple of elbows and stern looks. More than anything, the Shattered had been eager to learn whatever the group was willing to share.

That girl leading the excavation had spoken to them, even. Tam was pretty sure of that. Her stiffness was as hard to mistake as the elegance of her gestures. Hadn’t she been talking to Sanar?

“Suki, was it?” Tam called.

The Shattered girl did not look back from her work. “Yes.”

“Come join us,” said Tam. “I think Abigale has some information you might want to hear. We all have to stick together if we’re going to make it out of this.”

Lluwen’s hand on her shoulder, Kirol’s gaze, Sanar’s tilt of the head. Of course they were suspicious. The Oriq were a plague upon the school and had already caused so much harm.

But these weren’t the Oriq.

They deserved a chance to be other than what fate had made of them.

“I’m sure,” she whispered.

And that was enough for her friends.

Suki and the other Shattered came over to join the group. A grateful nod was all that needed to be exchanged; anything more and they’d be wasting valuable time. But it felt good, all the same.

I wish I had more to share, signed Abigale. Her signing was broad and expressive—sometimes she did that with new faces. It was a bit like raising her voice so they could hear her better. *We’re in a chamber of some sort—that much is obvious. But there are at least two dozen ways out of here, maybe more. I counted only the ones that were plainly visible. It’s possible, even likely, that there are some we can’t see, thanks to the roots or the rocks.*

Kirol frowned. “Is there any sign of wear on the paths? Or use? Mine carts, maybe, or something an earlier civilization used to get in or out? Hooks for ropes?”

Owlin have good vision, but not that good, signed Abigale. She paired this with a very flat look to their vampire friend.

“Kirol’s onto something, though. Maybe we could check for airflow?” said Sanar. “The fact that we can breathe means that air has to get in here somehow.”

Lluwen touched a finger to his chin. He hopped up onto a shard of bone. High places helped him think sometimes—he’d told Tam that.

“If there’s a way out, I think I can find it,” he said. “Let’s split up. I’ll scout out a path. The rest of you can ...”

Tam sighed. “If you want to go off on your own, you can just say so. Otherwise, you should have come up with something for the rest of us to do.”

The elf winced, but there was a touch of a smile to it, too. “I used to be a scout, remember? This was my entire job. You can trust me with this.”

To Tam’s surprise, it was Suki who answered. “It’s best if you have someone with you. I understand if you aren’t comfortable with me or my friends, but you should have one of yours. We don’t know what we’re dealing with here.”

“Dibs!” shouted Kirol.

“So, Lulu.”

Lluwen groaned. “Do you really have to call me that every time?”

The frown on Kirol’s face made him regret it as soon as he’d said it. In the dark, their eyes flashed, both in search of the path they needed. Underfoot were unknown roots, bones whose purpose had long since been worn away. Looking down this hallway, Lluwen could not shake the feeling that they had wandered into an ancient, dried-up artery.

“I thought you were feeling lonely,” said Kirol. They scratched behind their head. “I’m your chum, you know? And whatever happened, we can probably figure it out.”

Who says chum? Who pulls off saying chum? If Kirol weren’t so charming, they’d be the most annoying person in the Multiverse. But ... Lluwen liked that about them. An adolescence filled with the pursuit of perfection had no need of people like Kirol.

But this new life I’m leading? This place where people can be strange and unique and wonderful?

Plenty of space for their rough-and-tumble friend.

Lluwen looked over his shoulder. “You don’t like talking to your family. They’re too focused on your classes.”

“Well, yeah. But I would for you.”

Kirol hadn’t even hesitated.

Something rose up in Lluwen’s chest. *Would any of my hunting pack have made a sacrifice like that for me?*

“Kirol ...”

Lluwen stopped, one hand against something that might have been the root of a millennium tree or the desiccated tendril of a long-forgotten beast. When he turned toward his friend, he saw them: the little creatures from earlier. Lumarets.

There were six of them by Lluwen’s count, all balanced along a bramble behind Kirol. The tallest of them bore a little banner of luminescent moss. The others were waving their wings and pointing to the moss-bearer in the center. When Lluwen’s eye fell upon them, the ones at the edges started to jump and dance.

“Yeah?” Kirol said. “If there’s something you want to tell me ...”

“I think I found our way out of here.”

As Lluwen walked past his friend toward the gathered forest creatures, he did not notice the slight slump of Kirol’s shoulders.



Art by: Olivier Bernard

The only thing worse than the headache was sitting still.

Tam paced about the camp. How long had it been since Lluwen and Kirol took off? Sanar and Suki were working on a metronome-based clock. Tam didn’t think it was terribly accurate, but it was helpful.

When the sound didn’t make her want to tear her hair out, anyway.

Click. Click. Click.

What are the others up to? Why did I agree to hang back? She should be out there with them. What if they get to Jadzi first? What if they charge ahead? Kirol would, and Lluwen would go along with them. Proving himself a hero was a surefire way to gain the approval of the other students, and it might go a long way toward fixing his reputation.

They could have already left her behind.

Click. Click. Click.

Sanar and Abigale. Suki and the other Shattered. Conversations she could join, if she wanted, but none that she felt invited to.

The best she could do was find them all something to drink. Maybe some of the fungi here would be edible, too. They needed to be in good shape when Lluwen came back.

Tam saw her friends chattering and turned toward the dark.

That jerk.

Who turned around like that when they were alone and then just ... changed the subject?

Kirol wasn't mad. *I could never be mad! Lluwen is my best friend! Of course I'm not mad. What possible reason could there be for such a thing?*

Yet as they followed along, their hands opened and closed, their chest burned, and they thought of things they wanted to say but hadn't had the time to figure out. It all felt so heavy, even for them, like they couldn't lift it all even though they loved lifting and ...

It hurt.

But they followed. In the dark, they followed.

Did the water find Tam, or did she find it?

The answer was hard to come by. It certainly wasn't in the lake. In her head, she knew the reason for the reflection: Light from the bioluminescent moss and Sanar's mage fires bounced around the dark, illuminating wherever it went. And when the light met the water, some of it bounced off and some didn't. Her image on it was a thin, distorted, diffuse reflection. Any Quandrix second-year could explain it. Even a great deal who hadn't yet matriculated.

But there was something different about this one.

The Tam who moved across the surface of the water was marred by ripples. That Tam, the one on the lake, had no internal thoughts or feelings—yet the shadows clung to her face tightly, painted her bright eyes dark. That Tam's shoulders were slumped and broken. That Tam, thanks to the mundane magic of reflections, was alone.

Alone, alone, alone. The word rang over in her mind. It was foolish to dwell on any of this. Unreasonable. What was the point? What was the point of her hackles rising, of the pit in her stomach?

All she had to do was bring some water back. That's all. The rest of it ... she'd worry about that when the time came.

Yet as she knelt by the surface, just for a moment, a flash of white crossed her vision. She blinked it away. In the aftermath, her gaze dropped once more to the water, to the reflection—and it was not the lonely Tam who stared back at her.

It was a man in white.

A stone in her throat. She opened her mouth to speak—

“Everyone! We're saved!” Lluwen's voice cut through the dark.

When she looked back at the water, the man was gone.

Lluwen led the way.

How long had it been? Maybe since Lorwyn. As the others fell into line behind him, a feeling of rightness settled over him.

This was where he deserved to be.

The young elf strode proud down the twisting, impossible hallways. A loamy scent in the air; mushrooms aplenty; velvet darkness for a cloak. Up ahead, the little creatures walked, swirling and dancing like falling petals.

“Do they have names yet?” Sanar called up ahead.

“Lumarets,” Lluwen answered. “But that’s what we call all of them. I don’t know if they have individual names. This is only the second time we’ve met.”

Pools and small streams running alongside them bubbled and moved. Dust and clumps of earth fell from overhead. One knocked against Lluwen’s shoulder; he shook it off with nary a thought. Pride was boiling up within him, and nothing would stop its rise.

Yet when he glanced over his shoulder at his friends, it wasn’t gratitude he saw.

Strange. With every step they took, they climbed higher. He could feel it in the core of his ear, the way the balance was shifting. A faint breeze blew in their faces. He’d made a group of important new companions, but ... why the frowns? Weren’t they grateful for him? What would they do without him?

Lluwen ground his teeth. Why? Why now, when he’d finally been proven right?

“Lluwen?” Kirol called.

“What’s wrong?” he called back.

Kirol’s big, heavy breath echoed in the winding corridor. No, *echo* wasn’t quite the right word. It was as if there was a rasp that followed in its wake. Like a claw raking across stone produces both the grinding sound and the dust that fills the rend. “Does anybody else have this weird feeling in their chest? Like something’s trying to tear you apart from the inside?”

“Yeah,” said Suki.

“Hrm. I agree,” said Sanar. “Not that I thought I would. There’s this ...”

This pernicious feeling. A longing to pick and tear at a scab, signed Abigale.

“You guys are overreacting,” Lluwen said. “We’re all tense. It’s only natural, given the situation. I don’t know why we’re wasting time talking about it.” He linked his fingers together behind his head and turned away from them.

“You don’t think it’s strange that we’re all feeling this way?” said Tam. “Lluwen, you sound like Professor Fel.”

An arrow shot from a bow; Lluwen’s temper snapping. “I thought you said you respected that asshole. Maybe it’s a good thing?”

“What in the hell was that?” asked Kirol. “Chill out.”

Lluwen spun around. “You’re the one who brought up the tension. We were having a great time just following those creatures and then you had to go and ruin it.”

Kirol grabbed Lluwen by the scruff. They lifted him with ease, their eyes glowing in the dark. “You’re not acting like yourself. I don’t think any of us are. There’s something wrong, something going on here. The fields taught me that a place can warp the people in it. If we aren’t careful—”

“Kirol,” said Suki. The Shattered’s voice was cold as stone and just as firm. Hard to argue against. Even Lluwen had to turn toward her. “The creatures are hiding.”

What?

Yet when Kirol dropped him and Lluwen got a look, he had to admit that Suki was right. The happy-go-lucky lumarets were scattering into the thick bramble-root walls.

“Guys?” Lluwen called. He ran after them, but there was no response, only their glowing footprints as they hid. He swallowed. “I ... Uh, maybe the exit is just around the corner?”

It wouldn't have been a convincing argument at the best of times, but this was not the best of times. The tunnel was beginning to shake.

“Lluwen,” said Tam. “I need you to listen to me. I think I understand why Kirol asked what they did.”

Kirol stood at Lluwen's side, Sanar next to them. Soon the group was gathering in a circle, each facing out, each trying to find the source of the shaking. Great chunks fell from the tunnel above them. A thick cloud of black mist rolled over the earth at their feet. The air went rancid.

“There are creatures on Arcavios that feed on negative emotions,” said Kirol. “Horrible creatures who try to offer you power when you're at your weakest.”

“Daemogoths,” said Suki.



Art by: Raph Lomotan

An awful laugh echoed through the tunnel. A pair of sickly green eyes burned in the dark. “I thought I'd have longer for you to ripen.”

There was no more time to speak. All at once the tunnel itself was turning against them—brambles whipping at their sides, hunks of stone crashing against them, bone shards slicing at their skin.

Lluwen ducked his head and gritted his teeth against the pain as a shard cut across his face. Where was the daemogoth hiding? He couldn't see. He tried to pull at the roots with his own magic, but ... no use. It was too strong.

“What a shame that you will all die here,” came the wretched voice. “But perhaps someone will come looking for you, in time. And I will find more food.”

Vines wrapped around Lluwen's ankles and threatened to pull him into the earth. It was only Tam and the others reaching out that kept him from falling in.

Kirol looped their arm through Lluwen's. "Hang on to me!" they said. "I'm not going to leave you behind, Lulu!"

"We've got you!" said Tam.

The roots around him hauled him back even as his friends kept pulling him up. Breaths came hard and rough, each desperate gasp a fight against the tendrils threatening to crush his ribs. A sickening crack heralded a fresh wave of pain.

"You have ... to go!" said Lluwen. It was the only way. The only possible way for them to get out of there. The daemogoth wanted him, didn't it? "The rest of you can get out of here!"

"We're not leaving without you!" said Sanar. Lights shone down on him. Lluwen's eyes burned.

But Lluwen could not answer. The roots grew out and covered his mouth when he tried to scream. He felt Abigale's talons on his shoulders trying to help him up; he saw her, too, overhead. But as she pulled, a second set of talons wrapped around his waist.

His eyes met Tam's, met Kirol's.

Let go, he thought. It's fine. Elves from back home don't live that long anyway.

As the daemogoth cackled behind him he heard a strange voice—Professor Fel's. Maybe it was imitating someone he feared? "You've transgressed upon my wards for the last time."

Yet the rumbling, horrible voice that answered came from below Lluwen. "Dellian. Have you returned to make that deal with me?"

Gasping for breath, his vision fuzzy, Lluwen searched the lip of the chasm for Professor Fel's face. What he saw instead was an explosion of life: grasses rolling over the surface, the dark roots shot with green, the rancid smell giving way to an insistent bloom of flowers.

"Professor!" said Tam. "We didn't mean to summon it, we swear!"

"Of course you didn't. You're not a *fool*," answered Professor Fel. "Let me handle this. Out of the way!"

The students scrambled. Lluwen, his heart hammering, clung to the edge of the pit with all the strength he could muster.

He looked up at Professor Fel, and the professor looked back. In the flickering of the light, he thought he saw a fungal bloom swallowing up the professor's eye and tongue, but in an instant, it was gone.

With a single arcane gesture, the roots holding Lluwen in place fell away, and fresh vines flung Lluwen onto the soft grassy earth. It was then that he got his first look at the daemogoth—but also the last.

Lluwen watched as the flowers filling the pit crawled up and into the demon itself. From its fearsome bones sprang marrow-flowers; from its foul blood sprang a row of bright mushrooms, grapes forming from its eyes and lichen from its teeth.

The daemogoth screamed in the moment before glorious life sprang from its head, bursting its skull.



Grapple with Death | Art by: Nereida

Lluwen’s breath caught in his throat. Professor Fel had done ... all that? Was that what Planeswalkers were really capable of? Well, he’d heard stories about Professor Vess, too, but ...

But there was one thing that stood out to him, one thing that if he did not say now would die there, a pile of bones and twigs just like the daemogoth.

“Professor, what did the daemogoth mean?” he said. “Did you make a deal with it?”

Professor Fel offered Lluwen an arm. “With that provincial bogeyman? Ridiculous. It has nothing to offer me.”

Tam and Kirol helped him the rest of the way up, brushing off the dirt. Tam was already checking on his ribs. Abigale was up ahead with Sanar and Suki.

Kirol put an arm on Lluwen’s shoulder. “I’m glad to have my friend back,” they said.

“I think if we get to a healer, you’ll be all right,” said Tam. “Can you bear the pain for now?”

Lluwen bit his lip. He’d had worse, but that wasn’t what concerned him. “Why are you here?” he said to Fel.

The professor raised an eyebrow at Lluwen’s boldness. “I could ask you the same,” he said. There was a pause, a set of the jaw. “I have been trying to surmise a way to keep a promise I once made. A promise whose roots run deep in the soil of my soul.”

Quiet in the tunnel—save for the gentle scratching of a quill. Abigale was taking notes, wasn’t she?

It was Tam who broke the silence. “That’s why you were interested in the archaics, wasn’t it? That’s why you were here. Because of their relationship to nonlinear time. You wanted to try and find some way to go back and save the woman you loved.”

Fel raised a brow. “And how do you know any of that?”

“Oracle Jadzi told me,” Tam mumbled.

It seemed as if he might have more to say. Indeed, from the way his eyes narrowed, he did not like that answer. But instead, he moved to the front of the group, past Tam, past Abigale. “We aren’t far from the exit. The last we saw of that huge archaic, it was carrying Jadzi not far from here. If you’re all well enough to travel, we may be able to catch up.”

The students exchanged looks.

“Ajani was right about trauma creating Planeswalkers, wasn’t he?” said Kirol. “Poor guy. Is all that power really worth it?”

The surge of incredible life Lluwen had seen; the waver in Professor Fel’s voice as he’d spoken. No wonder he’d been so insistent on the students finding something new here. He must have already combed this place years ago. The daemogoth had offered him help and Fel ... Fel had refused it.

Lluwen sighed. He stepped forward. “Professor Fel.”

“What?” The man did not turn back.

“I saw something the other day, with the archaics.”

A grunt of acknowledgment. For a moment, Lluwen feared that was all the answer he would get from the man. “What Oracle Jadzi has told me is worse than anything we’ve ever had on record. I imagine that whatever you saw was a result of that. If we can find her, she may have more information. But that may also be why the archaics have taken her.”

Kirol squeezed Lluwen’s shoulder.

Tam leaned in toward his side. “You should tell him.”

A deep breath. “I saw them, lots of them, gathered around a snarl. They were doing some kind of chant, or ritual, I think, and they all looked to me and—”

Fel stopped in his tracks. When he turned toward Lluwen and the students, his eyes were as bright as the grass that had killed the daemogoth. “What did you say?”

“I don’t know what was going on. I’m just telling you what I saw,” Lluwen said.

Fel closed the distance between them. “Did you say they were gathered around a snarl?”

Lluwen couldn’t fight the urge to hold up his hands. “Y-yeah.”

“There are no snarls in Titan’s Grave. There never have been,” said Professor Fel. He narrowed his eyes. “Can you take us there?”

And for the first time since he’d gotten to Arcavios, Lluwen felt like he had something to offer.

“Chandra.”

She made no answer.

“Chandra,” he called again. As if that would help. As if she hadn’t heard him the first time.

She waved a hand in the air. “You know your voice carries here, right? You don’t even have to try. If there’s anyone in these tunnels, they’re going to hear us from miles away at this rate.”

Too harsh? Probably. But it was hard to be patient when she was this frustrated. Not to mention the pain. In the back of her head, she could hear Nissa telling her how important it was to try and meet people where they were and not where she was. Nissa struggled with that sort of thing, too, sometimes.

Nissa had done so much for her already. Probably too much. She'd been patient with her as she'd struggled through her recovery. And when no one else had believed her, Nissa had been at her side.

Going from that to the brick wall that had been Ajani's disbelief was hard, but Chandra didn't know what to expect from her old friend anymore. Every time she looked at him, she saw not white fur but plates of red and white.

She wanted so badly to believe in him. To let him prove that he really was trying as hard as he said he was. But she couldn't trust him if he couldn't do something as simple as listen to her.

"Are you going to ignore me the whole time we're here?" Ajani asked. He had the decency to keep his voice low this time.

"Are you going to say something worth listening to?"

Chandra walked to a wall of roots. With a single touch and a moment's focus, she turned them to ash. Nissa or Wrenn would have found some way to coax the trees around, a gentle way. But Chandra wasn't them, and she didn't have the time to pretend to be.

"You're not thinking," he said. "You're just acting. Acting *rashly*."

She let it hang for a while, really turned it around in her head. Was she? They were up against a Multiverse-level threat that only she saw, and the best he had done was to tell her she must be imagining things.

An unbidden flashback to the Grand Prix press: *Chandra Nalaar, hero of the Multiverse.*

Yeah. Fat lot of good it was doing her now.

"The others told me that during the invasion, too," Chandra said. "But I was right then, and I'm right now."

Ajani sighed. "What did you say you think Jace's plan is?"

She slowed down her blustering walk—but only a little. "I think it's the archaic. The big one."

Quiet, save for the crunch of the leaves beneath them. Then the warm familiarity of Ajani's voice. "What do you think he's doing with it?"

"Trying to ... incarnate into it, maybe. I'm not sure. The memories are ... it's all jumbled. Sometimes I can't tell what's mine and what's his." There was *one* easy way to tell, but she didn't need Ajani to know how much she now knew about Vraska.

Another peaceable silence. "And ... you're sure he's taken a dark turn? It wouldn't be such a bad thing to have someone who could see the history of the Multiverse."

"Why don't you ask your angel friend about the state she found me in the next time you see her?" Chandra snapped. Unfair, maybe, but not untrue.

A deep sigh behind her. "How can I help?"

The answer came without her being able to stop herself. "Help me find that huge archaic and help me kill it before Jace can use it for his plan. We have to act fast and we have to hit hard or he'll hurt us worse than I would ever hurt you. Worse than you've hurt your friends."

Churning in the pit of her stomach. She didn't *want* things to be this way. But if he had just listened to her from the get-go, if he had let her attack the archaic when they'd had the chance ...

It was so hard to be patient at the best of times. These hardly even ranked as "good."

“I’ll support you, Chandra. But if it looks like you’re wrong—”

“I’m not.”

“But if it does,” he said, “promise you’ll *think* before you start blasting away. You’re better than that now. Wiser.”

“No promises,” she said. If she had blasted the archaic, they wouldn’t be in this mess. If she had blasted *Jace* rather than try to talk him down, her head wouldn’t be so screwed up.

Ajani didn’t try to push the point. They walked the rest of the way in silence.