

Episode 6: Two, Three, Five, Seven

K. Arsenault Rivera

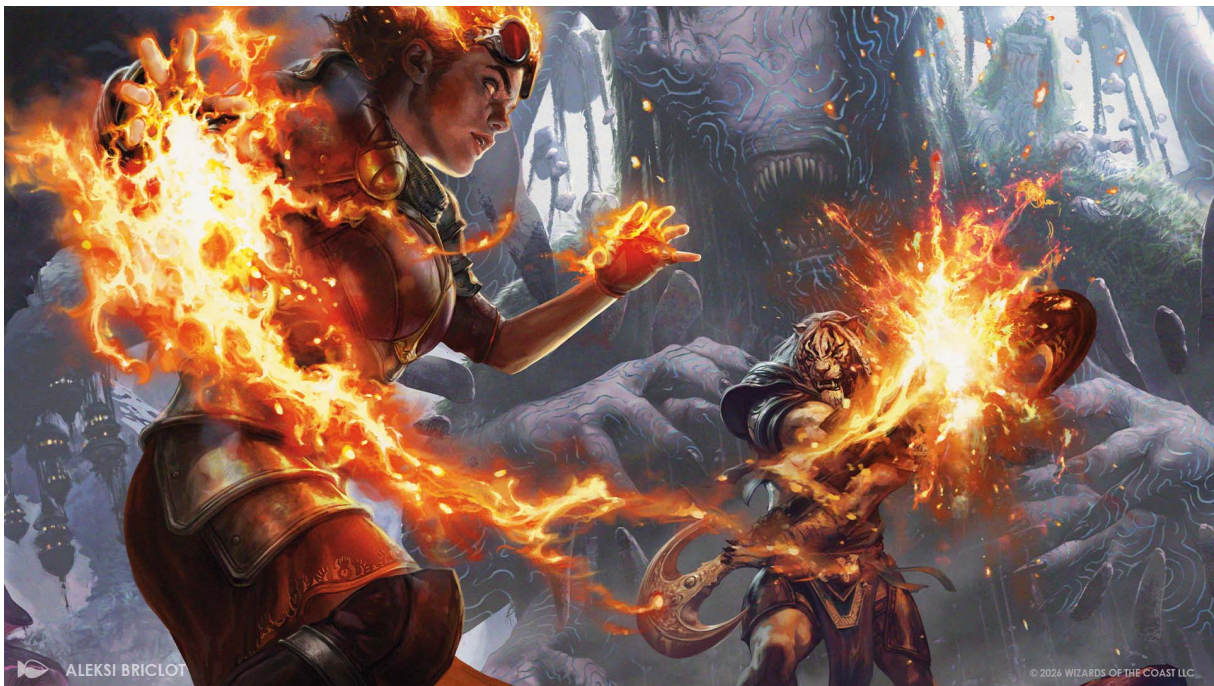
From set *Secrets of Strixhaven*

30. 03. 2026

Fighting brought him no joy.

A fireball soared at him. It was all he could do to raise the flat of his axe in time. Old muscles strained; he roared with effort. With all of himself working in cohesion he managed to bat away the incoming fire. A pivot and swing of his hips—always follow through—saw the ball crash against the bone walls of their chamber.

In the hazy wake of the fire, he looked at Chandra. She could have sent another fireball at him while he was still preoccupied with the first. It would have been easy for her to do. Overwhelming the enemy was one of the simplest tactics you could deploy, and she was more than strong enough to do it.



Heated Argument | Art by: Aleks Briclot

But she didn't.

“Why won't you give up on this?” she shouted at him. “Why can't you see?”

“I could ask you the same,” he answered. He closed the distance between them with a pouncing leap; Chandra summoned a curtain of flame to keep him from connecting. His claws dug into the ancient earth below. “Aren't you tired of this?”

She looked up at him with bared teeth. “Tired of explaining myself to you? Yeah, you could say that.”

A flaming hook from the pyromancer. Ajani couldn't help but notice how much her form had improved over the years. Though this had all the wild fire of her earlier fights, her fist was straight now, the knuckles lined up just so. This was no uncoordinated flail—it was a concentrated delivery of force.

He noticed all of this in the instant before the punch connected.

Flames singed his fur; the skin beneath screamed in pain. He sucked in what breath he could. The scent made his stomach churn. Not good. Nausea was a killer on the battlefield—and Chandra knew that now, with what she'd said about her head.

“All I want is to put a stop to this plan before anyone else gets hurt, and here you are ...”

The rest of the sentence was lost, drowned out in another of Ajani's roars. Healing himself in the middle of a battlefield wasn't new to him, but it did take up some of his precious attention. He dodged out of the way of wild swings as his magic soothed his wounds. At the end of Chandra's flurry of blows, he caught her fist in his open hand.

“Here I am,” he said, his forehead nearly touching hers, “keeping you from doing something you're going to regret.”

Her eyes burned. Now it was she who roared at him. As the haze of flame threatened to swallow her, he hurled her across the chamber.

No, it did not bring him any joy to see her back crash against the sharp protrusion of bone. It brought him no joy to hear her cry of pain. A teacher should never hurt their student in this way.

For a moment, he paced the space between the archaic and Chandra silently—he could not bring himself to speak.

He *hated* this.

But when he saw Chandra stand up, dazed as she was, with determination writ on every inch of her? Even considering the circumstances ... he was proud.

“I think we take a left here. The air's starting to taste like the moss that grows on yew trees, so we've got to be close by.”

The group ran through the winding caverns beneath Titan's Grave as hard as they could. Even Professor Fel! Tam hadn't been certain he'd have it in him. To be honest, she wished he wasn't here. But she wasn't about to tell any of the others that.

“Are you sure?” she called out. “The architecture of these tunnels doesn't follow the standard rules you might find elsewhere. Everything's operating on fractals, like the marks left behind when lightning strikes a tree. I think the next branch should be to the right.”

Lluwen looked over his shoulder at her. She could feel his confusion. When had she ever bothered to give directions before? Never.

What did he see when he looked back at her?

Before Lluwen could respond, Sanar took a big sniffing breath. “Does anyone else smell burning?”

A grunt from Suki next to him. “Shatter Prime's in trouble.”

It was all the warning they got before Suki went bounding off down the righthand path.

Tam followed.

Head spinning. Stomach threatening to empty with every step. How was she still standing? Easy—she had to be.

Chandra Nalaar, hero of the Multiverse, had to stand up for people who couldn't stand for themselves. There was no time for self-pity—could be no time for it. Every second that passed was a second more of the universe itself unraveling around them.

She held another ball of fire in her palm. A staggered step forward, then a blink. She was someplace else. No—*he* was. An impossible network of shapes and figures, a spiderweb of creation.

Another blink. Back now. Was it what Jace was doing to her, or the magic rippling through this cave? She wasn't sure. The archaic, howling in pain, was flinging spells left and right. And then there was the swirling nexus of magic. Whatever it was, reality was going unsteady around it.

She sucked in a breath, tried to keep steady. Everything was topsy-turvy. The injury, probably. "I'm never going to regret keeping people safe," she said. The words came out slurred, and she hated that they did, hated that she couldn't be as strong as she needed to be. Chandra hurled the fireball at Ajani. In its wake she scrambled as fast as she could in the opposite direction. She needed to get a good angle on the archaic.

But Ajani was too clever to stay put. He leaped onto a boulder and from there to an ossuary tree. When he dropped, he was just in time to tank another jet of fire meant for the archaic.

The groan that left him brought her no joy. If he would just get out of the way, she wouldn't have to hurt him, but ...

With his fur still burning, he swung his axe at her—brutal, strong, quick as could be.

Chandra was too hurt, too worn down to dodge. Metal bit into her shoulder. She hissed. No time to let it make her any weaker. She brought her hand to the wound and cauterized it in a second of blazing pain.

But that was a mistake. There was another blow coming at her, this one vicious and efficient. Ajani caught her with the hook of his axe. He *pulled*.

She didn't have the balance to stay on her feet. Tumbling forward, it was all she could do to blast the ground with fire. That brought her back up—but it did nothing to soothe the stomach-churning, the spinning.

Focus, she told herself. *This isn't just about you.*

"Whatever I have to do," she said, "I can't let anyone else get hurt because of him. Not ... hurt like me."

She drove a lance of fire into the leonin's thigh. Sizzling flesh heralded another cry of pain.

"Then stop hurting your friend!" Ajani snapped.

The axe-head came down.

In the instant before he connected, Chandra realized that he had a point.

When the group found themselves standing at the same four-way crossroads again, Tam could feel the tension. It was a knife to her throat. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the sounds of the fight:

the rush of flames, Ajani's roars. Every few steps they took the world itself trembled around them. Reality was a rippling tapestry being torn apart and rewoven right before their eyes.

"I told you, we should have gone left!" shouted Lluwen. This time he did not wait to entertain any arguments. Sanar, Abigale, Kirol, and Suki followed in his wake.

And then Tam.

The smell of burning only got worse the farther in they went. She had to cover her mouth to keep from throwing up. There was a part of her, a distant part, that wondered about the ethics of starting a fight in a place like this. When Chandra or Suki or any of the other pyromancers lit things on fire, there was rarely a chance for their recovery. How many species, unknown to those who stood on two feet, were being burned away right now? How many possibilities was this world losing?

As smoke began to fill the hall, she told herself it wasn't worth worrying about.

Again and again he hurled her away. With his hands. With his axe. Into a pool of water, where she floated for a too-short moment of reprieve. Into the wall, where she bounced, where he heard her bones crack. He was trying so *hard* not to hurt her in a permanent way.

But every time he rebuffed her efforts, she got back up.

Her blows came like a battering ram against the gates. As time wore on, she was losing some of her coordination. Was it anger? Was it the injury? Was it something else? He didn't know. He hated that he didn't know. And he hated the small possibility that she was only so out of it because he was hurting her.

He parried each of the incoming hits, one after the other, until she'd pushed him back against a plate of bone. He raised his axes to defend, only for her to grab hold of the haft, her hands between his.

"Chandra," he said, "why are you doing this?"

"Because ... being a Planeswalker means ..."

She was stammering so hard he could hardly understand her.

"It means ... helping people," said Chandra. "It means ... doing the right thing. Even when it's hard."

The weapon's grip went warm, then hot. Holding on was only going to hurt him. He understood, then, what she was trying to do: Without a weapon, she supposed he'd have no way to defend himself. She was wrong about that.

But was that a lesson he wanted to teach her?

The axe clattered to the ground between them. He'd held on to it as long as he could. With no weapon threatening her anymore, Chandra forced him to the ground. She set her knees on his elbows and cocked her fist.

She was exhausted. Anyone could tell. Her chest was heaving with every breath. She could hardly hold her fist straight anymore.

It was then, when at last the fighting had slowed, that Ajani spotted Jadzi. The whole while she had been on the archaic's shoulder, tending to their wounds, whispering. Helping, no matter the danger.

There was a better way.

Ajani covered Chandra's hand with his own. In truth, he was too big for her to stop him like that.

“Chandra,” he said, “being a Planeswalker means we’ve already been through enough.”

A wordless, weak scream. Chandra tried to punch at him, but he kept hold of her.

“Please. Let’s try to find another way to solve this,” he said.

And there, in the depths of Titan’s Grave, Ajani Goldmane decided he really *had* been through enough. A fallen brother, a friend who’d become something more and something less than human. War after war after war. After all that, what was he proudest of? What did he have to show for any of it?

This.

We’ve been through enough.

Chandra Nalaar let out another shaking breath. Then she clambered away and stared at her hands.

And he knew that—for whatever it was worth—the battle was won.

A mossy cavern, lined with lichen and mushrooms; the faint scent of mildew and mold; ground that squished underfoot.

A swirling passage through the desert; shifting walls of sand that sliced whatever skin they could find; heat that sapped the moisture from you.

An underwater cave, dark and cold as the grave; the taste of salt; claustrophobic squeezes where fish became one’s bosom companions.

Three steps, each one after the other, each breaching a whole new environment. As the group ran through the cave to the chamber, they could hardly keep track of what was real. What had seemed so incontrovertible, so solid—the remains of the titan—was now little more than a suggestion. And what were they to do when reality itself was a suggestion?

Kirol spit up sea water.

Lluwen stopped to slap their back as the reality-wave settled. “What’s going on here?”

“Reality’s shifting around the archaic,” said Sanar. “It must be. No matter how impossible it sounds to say something like that.”

It’s more than impossible, it’s ... Abigale’s forefeathers hovered over her temples; her face wrenched in concentration. Even her hearing aid was struggling to keep up with her.

“Arguing about what we’re seeing benefits no one,” said Fel. “Stick together. You’re more helpful to us as a group.”

Up ahead, Suki barreled into the chamber. “Chandra!” she shouted. “We’re here! Tell us what you need!”

Tam could see what was going on only vaguely. Chandra Nalaar was on waning feet. Like Abigale, she was clutching at her head. A stream of blood colored her mouth and neck as red as the robes she wore. Next to her—with her arm slung across his shoulders like a wounded soldier—was Ajani Goldmane. There were scorch marks all over him. Even so, his hand was against her side. He was trying to heal her. Her wounds were bad enough that it took most of his attention.

Had they been fighting?

Tam’s heart sank. She had hoped they could work things out. Everyone deserved that chance before the end. When she looked back on her life, when she thought about what it was she’d most enjoyed ...

Sanar's wild pranks and grandiose music. Late-night debates about poetry with Abigale. Kirol leading the way to new adventures. Lluwen, blooming at last.

But maybe she was jumping to conclusions. Maybe they'd make up, in the end. Maybe things would be fine for them.

Provided anyone made it out of this situation.

She had only a moment to look at what was going on before another wave of magic rolling out from the not-snarl made the world tremble anew. Bone walls turned to shimmering oil, to raw flesh, to fungal phalanges. The archaic howled with every pulse of white-gold-blue light. Jadzi stood before it with her arms out. Trying to calm it? She must be.

Everything happened quickly.

Chandra looked up at Suki and the others. Her bloodied mouth opened, and she began to voice *something*. Before she could finish, another reality-wave swallowed her and Ajani. Both froze mid-stride. Time itself came to a stop, or slowed to a crawl. Just how much power was in that whirling pit?

Suki shouted and ran ahead to try and help; Kirol caught her by the hood and pulled her back. Lluwen asked Tam what was going on, but she had no good answer for him, nothing to say except that they should do whatever Fel told them to.

Fel, his eyes aglow, started the incantations of a spell—only a pulse of magic, rolling off the many gesticulating hands of the vast archaic to thicken into amber around him, enveloping the professor before he could react.

Tam locked eyes with Jadzi. All around her, the screams of her friends.

“Get out of my hair and get somewhere safe!” Jadzi shouted. “I need to calm the archaic!”

A shared look between the students. Horror. Uncertainty. She thought of all the times their hands had interlinked, of how adding facets to shapes improved their structural integrity. Together, they were so, so strong.

Kirol into the pulsing breach of light, Lluwen on their heels. Sanar and Abigale tending to Fel and the other Planeswalkers. Jadzi walking to the edge of the not-snarl, tendrils of magic swirling around her.

Everyone knew where they needed to be.

So did Tam.

Across the shifting landscape, slow and steady. The trick was to focus on the constants—the things that never, ever changed. Mathematical ideals. Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen ... Breathe in. Breathe out.

Certain things would always happen. This was one of them. It was inevitable. Incontrovertible. A fixed point around which everything had to revolve. If she told herself this enough, then it would be true, and she could be brave enough to do it.

Jadzi gestured to the archaic. She was starting up a spell, too, just as Fel had. Tam knew from a glance that it was an *old* sort of magic, a thing she could never fathom if she had all the time in the world. And she did not. Certain magics were possible only because those who came before had laid the groundwork for them; the complexity of the shapes involved here would have taken her a lifetime to learn. She was struck by the grandeur of it all. The precision. Every angle exactly right, every shape folding into the next.

It was beautiful.

Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen. Some things were constant.

Standing behind Jadzi, Tam could see straight into the swirl of magic before the two of them. If she tried, she could see flashes of other worlds in the bright lights.

Two lives. Three jokes Sanar had told her. Five times Kirol had encouraged her when no one else would. Eleven poems she'd learned from Abigale. And thirteen nights exploring Titan's Grave with Lluwen. Tam sucked in a breath. Her friends scrambled to try and free the Planeswalkers ... and she did what had to be done.

She pushed Jadzi into the churning pit of magic.



Banishing Betrayal | Art by: Craig Elliott

It was so easy. She'd thought it would be harder, wished that it had been harder. Something this painful should be more difficult. Shouldn't it be hard to attack an oracle like this? Shouldn't it be a struggle?

But there was no struggle. Jadzi, so focused as she was on the spell she was weaving, had never suspected Tam. In the moment when she tumbled into the pit, there was a cry and that was all. The rest was swallowed by the next pulsing wave.

All eyes on her. She felt them before she saw them, heard the dead quiet that rolled over the chamber.

"Tam?" said Kirol. Pure disbelief in their voice.

"What did you just do? She was trying to help us!" Lluwen shouted.

Oh, it hurt. How it hurt to stand there. She wanted nothing more than to fade into the dark. And she would. Yes, she would. But she owed them this.

Tam bit her lip. She tried to meet their eyes but found that she could not. "I was made to do this."

Sanar's breath rose and fell; hyperventilating, his hands trembled. Abigale's talons could form no further signs. Even brave Kirol was stuck to the spot.

Dragging this out would only hurt them more. She swallowed. "I want you all to know that you made me happy."

One step toward the pit of magic. “The days we spent together were the happiest of my life.”

Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen.

She was always going to jump. It was always going to end this way.

Lluwen stared at the not-snarl as it snapped shut. If he’d been an instant faster, if he’d been able to shake off his shock, maybe he would have been able to jump in after them both. But he hadn’t.

A pit had opened somewhere in his stomach. Tam ... Why had she done that?

The more he thought about the situation, the worse things got. What should they do? What *could* they do? But he still had his friends. People he needed to be here for. Lluwen took a breath. They were dealing with a mess, but what kind? What did they have to work with?

Kirol was hurling Fel’s amber cage around. Tears rolled from their eyes; every bit of their shock came through in the wordless cries of effort they let out. But no cracks appeared—Fel remained well and truly trapped.

The archaic was trapped, too. Still in pain, from the howls they were letting out. Though the not-snarl had closed, their wounds hadn’t, and the situation didn’t seem to be getting any better for them. Magic still surged out in waves.

Lluwen ducked the blast of another rogue spell from the archaic. The energy crashed into a tree behind him, rendering it into a translucent mass of slime. Horror spread through him as he thought about what would have happened if that had hit him—all of his organs, all of his bones becoming a singular mass.

Queen’s dreams. How could they get out of this?

He couldn’t help Kirol; he wasn’t strong enough. As more spells bounced around the ever-changing walls, the ground began to jiggle, to quake. Great seams appeared beneath every footstep. He tried to reach Sanar and Abigale only for one of the chasms to open beneath him.

Lluwen began to tumble. Cold fear and hot shame mingled within him. Had he gone this far only to lose to a hole in the ground?

But for the second time that day, someone picked him up by the scruff. Suki.

“You’d better have a plan for this.”

Lluwen’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Did he? “We have to stop the archaic, calm it down somehow. That’s what Jadzi was trying to do before ...”

“Before your so-called friend doomed us all?” said Suki.

“She must have had a good reason,” mumbled Sanar. Not that he sounded any more convinced than the rest of them.

“A good reason? A *good* reason? I’d be happy to hear it—”

But before Suki could finish that line of questioning, the air went thick with smoke—too thick to breathe. Suki gasped, her eyes wide. Her hand flew to her throat. She crumpled to her knees ... and only then took big, gulping breaths. Sanar was at her side in an instant. It was no use. Reality wasn’t stable around this panicking god-like being. They were all trapped in a horrible cocoon of uncertainty and change.

Lluwen’s eyes found Abigale’s. The owlin, usually so steady, was trembling. *Lluwen ... if the air starts to change too much ...*

She didn’t need to finish the rest of the sentence. Truth be told, Lluwen didn’t know if he could stand to hear it. There was too much going on already—reality itself fading like a bad dream around them, all their hopes of rescue gone.

Lorwyn elves didn’t live very long lives. He’d always known that he’d die before his friends. But the fear that was coming over all of them now as they had to face their deaths ... it wasn’t right. He should be the only one dying early. He loved the others too much to grant them anything else. There had to be some solution, if only he could think ...

The archaic roared. In the agonized flail of their hands, Lluwen saw a flash of magical light. Small, delicate chains around their gray flesh were straining to keep them back, but the network was incomplete.

Jadzi’s spell!

The shockwave sent Lluwen scrambling. He used that momentum to leap across eye-stones and tooth-trees toward the giant archaic.

“Everyone! We have to finish the spell!” he said. How was it that she’d been moving her hands? He’d been so intent on it. Bend the knuckle here, angle the wrist this way ... “Try to follow what I’m doing!”



Together as One | Art by: Néstor Ossandón Leal

“We can’t do that—we’re not as strong!” said Kirol. The pain in their voice twisted Lluwen’s heart. “Jadzi was an oracle, and we’re just ...”

“Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?” Lluwen screamed. His throat was going hoarse, but it didn’t matter—not when they had so much on the line. “Come on! Just try for me, Kiki!”

Kirol stared back, amber-encased Fel lifted overhead. An impossible moment passed between them. Veils of sand-rain and sprays of lava-gold obscured a little of Kirol’s expression but could not obscure the change in their bearing.

They tossed Fel away. “All right!” they said. “Let’s go! Everybody follow Lluwen!”

He offered his friend a smile. If only they had time for more. He leaped onto the archaic’s arm and started running up its side, his hands moving the whole time.

“I know we don’t know each other very well, and maybe you hate me, and maybe I’m scary,” Lluwen said. His voice wasn’t as steady as he would have liked. Still, if Jadzi had been talking to the archaic, there had to be some value in trying. “But I’m trying to help you as much as I can. And to be honest, you scare me, too. So, we’re even.”

The eyeless face turned toward Lluwen. In the creases of its flesh he thought he saw rivers of glowing, indescribable color. Everything in him was screwed to the spot. Terrified.

But he held his hands up all the same, high as he could. “Whatever you’re going through must be awful. I can’t imagine what it’s like. But we’re going to try and figure it out. We’d like to, anyway. Except we can’t do that if everything around us keeps shifting. We need you to help us.”

Could the giant archaic even hear him? Jadzi had seemed to get through to them. He couldn’t worry about what would work; all he could do was try and make himself believe that this would.

“You’ve hurt people. I get what that’s like. I’ve done it, too,” he continued. “But we can fix it. We can make it better if we just try together. Can you do that for me?”

Part of him felt like an idiot. What was he even saying? He sounded like a character in one of those skits they made the students do about safety on campus. He meant all of it. But meaning it wasn’t enough.

They needed the spell to work. But how was it supposed to ...

Lluwen, I don’t believe it’s working! shouted Abigale into his mind.

The ground rumbled beneath them. Mud, this time, deep enough that he could see Kirol sinking into it from the corner of his eyes. Overhead, Titan’s Grave groaned under its own weight. How much longer did they have before everything collapsed?

Lluwen swallowed. This had to work. It had to.

“Please!” he said. “Please, I know you can help us!”

Looking at the chaos unfurling around them, he finally received a bit of hope—but it did not come from the archaic.

Instead, his eyes fell upon what at first seemed to be a massive blanket of glowing lichen. It was only when the little spots of light began to move that he realized what he was seeing: the lumarets. They were mirroring him. They couldn’t get the movements exactly right with their wings, but he knew what he was seeing. No one lumaret could form the sharp right angle of an arm and elbow. Five of them, though? Five of them could get there. Everywhere he looked, the little creatures were working out how to make the shapes in time with Lluwen and his friends.

The air began to hum. Lluwen felt the spell wrap around him, as if he were the stamen and the magic was the petals of a massive flower. Power built up within his hands. Power born from many small creatures, all working in harmony. Power he could channel.

With a giddy look around the shifting landscape, Lluwen let himself bloom.

Gold light rolled across the chamber. Every pulse from the not-snarl threatened to disrupt it, but this wave kept right on rolling forward. He watched it solidify into more of the small chains, watched them wrap around the archaic. And he knew, then, that what they were doing was not binding it. They were

encasing it. Enveloping it in the light of their unity for one brief, beautiful moment. Uniting it with the great mass of voices and views and lives and loves of Arcavios.

For a second, Lluwen beheld the eternity of the positive—then it was over. He was on his back in the archaic’s palm. For the first time in the past hour, the walls stayed walls, the ceilings stayed ceilings. The great eyeless face stared down at him, and though he did not see peace there, he saw something like understanding.

“Is everyone all right?” said Ajani.

Lluwen rolled over. When he looked behind him this time, he saw Ajani and Chandra moving again. Suki had thrown her hands around her teacher. Chandra, it seemed, was all too happy to have some support.

“Feel like I got hit by a Keelhauler,” she said. “What happened?”

“Allow me to answer that.” No mistaking that voice. It was Fel. Covered in cracked and melting amber, clearly shaken, but still Professor Dellian Fel. “The archaic’s sorrows complicated matters ... but young Lluwen has found a way to soothe it.”

Lluwen’s heart leaped. He looked at his friends—the remaining friends, at least—arrayed around him. And no matter how much Lluwen’s heart had sunk knowing there was still so much left to do, he was glad not to have to face it alone.

Elsewhere

Two, three, five, seven, eleven. Some things will always be themselves: indivisible by anything except the great unity that created them. In the stark black and white of numbers, figures, and science, she’d taught herself to take comfort.

But the truth is always more complicated than that. A single constant can be expressed in a variety of ways across cultures, across time. Some had no equations to go along with them—only the knowledge that there must be an equation. If you knew, for example, that everything when dropped moved at a certain speed, you’d know that there were laws governing those speeds. But you wouldn’t know what they were.

A flare of light. Tam tried to catch her breath. Time flowed differently here. So did reality. She existed in some ways and not in others. When she looked down at her hands, if she was not careful, she might see them unraveling. Shaping themselves this way and that. Five fingers on each hand. Seven. Eleven.

But she did not want to look down at her hands. In all universes they were bloody. She was sure of that now. So long as there was a Tam, there would be blood. It was her nature. The very purpose of her creation.

Another flare. In the place-that-was-not, she turned her attention to Jadzi. Soft blue light illuminated her frame. Without her considerable charisma and presence to animate her, she was so small. So slight. How could a woman no larger than some children have so much power buried within her? How could this be Jadzi?

Tam walked in a circle around the oracle. So much of this was still *weird*. This place was Strixhaven—but it wasn’t. Nothing was where she expected it to be. Even though she’d been in this office a dozen times before, it was never quite right. Different curios, different organization methods, different books. Someone else lived here. Someone else’s stories lived here.

There was a shift in the air around her—a ripple of energy she knew as well as she knew her own name.

“It wasn’t an easy thing, what you did,” he said.

“No,” she answered. “No, it wasn’t.”

His hand on her shoulder. Reassurance flowing from his mind to hers. “No one ever appreciates the person who makes the hard choices. We won’t be remembered for what we’re doing, because in the end, no one will know it was even done. But we didn’t do any of this to be remembered.”

Tam watched the rise and fall of the sleeping Jadzi’s breath. She wanted to believe that. She really did. But how could Jadzi ever look at her the same way again? How could her friends?

If she even saw them again. It was safer if she didn’t, and she knew it.

“I’m proud of you,” he said. His hand left her shoulder. He, too, walked a small circle around Jadzi. His white robe hovered over the shifting ground as he moved. “It’s almost done now. And you won’t be so alone anymore.”

She looked up at him. The tattoos on his face glowed in time with the changes in the world around them: bright, dim, bright, dim. Was there any regret in those eyes?

“You’ve found the others?” she asked him. He had always promised her there would be others.

He nodded and smiled. It was supposed to be a friendly smile, and she knew that it was, but there was something about it that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Why don’t I introduce you? That might take your mind off things.”

She followed the gesture of his hand. There, in the shifting light, she saw them for the first time. The others. Just their silhouettes for now—but she was sure she’d come to know them in full, soon.

Would they treat her as kindly as her friends had? Would they forgive her, knowing what she had done? Were they like her—beings created to betray?

She hoped, more than anything, that they would understand. That they would tell her she had done the right thing—and that she could believe them.

She was so tired of bearing all of this weight alone.