

MAGIC
The Gathering

a PLANESWALKER NOVEL™

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CHAPTER ONE

As it turned out, the district of Avaric wasn't any more appealing when one was drunk than when one was sober. The fog of irrimberry wine didn't make the filthy cobblestones, the half-decayed roofs, or the sludge coating the roadways any more attractive; and the sweet aroma of that libation didn't remain in the nose long enough to muffle the stagnant rot and the eye-watering miasma that passed for air. The rows of squat houses and shops leaned over the road like tottering old men, and the wide spaces between them resembled gaps left by missing teeth. Perhaps the only redeeming quality of the entire evening was the surprising lack of mosquitoes. Normally the rains brought plague-like swarms up from the swamps and sewers that were Avaric's unsteady foundation, but apparently even they were taking the night off for the Thralldom's End celebration.

Kallist Rhoka, who had spent a considerable amount of coin on the journey to his current state of moderate inebriation, glared bitterly at his surroundings and felt that the world's refusal to reshape itself into a passingly tolerable form was the height of discourtesy.

Then again, the Avaric District wasn't alone in its refusal to change its nature to suit Kallist's desires or his drunken perceptions—and between the stubbornness of a whole neighborhood, and that of a certain raven-haired mage, he was pretty certain that

the district would break first.

At the thought of the woman he'd left at the Bitter End Tavern and Restaurant, Kallist's stomach knotted so painfully it doubled him over. For long moments he crouched, waiting as the knot worked its way up to become a lump in his throat. With shaking hands—a shake that he attributed to the multiple glasses of wine, and not to any deeper emotions—he wiped the pained expression from his face.

Not for the first time, Kallist spat curses at the man who'd driven him to such a sorry state. Less than a year gone by, he'd dwelt in the shadows of Ravnica's highest spires. And now? Now the structures around him were barely high enough to cast shadows at all. Now he'd have had to actually live down in the sewers or the under-cities of the larger districts to sink any lower.

It was enough to make even a forgiving man as bitter as fresh wormwood, and Kallist had never been all that forgiving.

Still, it would all have been worth it, if she'd just said yes. . .

Kallist, his wine-besotted mind swiftly running out of curses, stared down at his feet. He couldn't even see the normal color of his basilisk-skin boots, one of the few luxuries he still owned, so coated were they in the swamp sludge that always oozed up from between the cobblestones after the rain. The boots kept swimming in and out of focus, too. He wondered if he might vomit, and was angered that he might waste the expensive irrimberry wine he'd drunk. The notion of falling to hands and knees on the roadway was enough to steady him, however. He could still hear, ever so faintly, the singing and dancing of the Thralldom's End festival, back in the direction of the Bitter End, and he'd be damned thrice over if he'd let anyone from the tavern find him pasting a dinner collage all over the road. With a rigid, yet swaying gait that made him appear sober to nobody but himself, he resumed his trek.

Avaric wasn't really that large a place; none of the local neighborhoods were. It was a backwater district, surrounded by other backwater districts save for those few spots where the underground swamps pooled to the surface, ugly and malodorous cysts on Ravnica's aging face. Those who dwelt here did so only because

anyplace else they could afford to move was even worse, and a few small fungus gardens were more than enough to feed the lot of them. Thus, even though the Bitter End was at the far end of Avaric from the house Kallist shared with the woman on whom he currently blamed his inebriated state, it should normally have taken only about twenty minutes to walk from one to the other.

“Normally,” of course, allowed neither for Kallist’s current shuffling gait nor the fact that he’d already taken the same wrong turn twice. It had now been well over half an hour, he could still hear the faint strains of singing off in the distance; his eyes were beginning to water and to sting . . .

And he really, really had to find somewhere private to release some of that wine back into the wild. Kallist looked down at his feet, looked over at the nearest alley—filled almost ankle deep with a juicy mixture of swamp-water and refuse—muttered a brief “Hell with it,” and strode off the avenue.

He shuddered at the soft squishing beneath his boots, but tonight, the urging of a bladder growing fuller by the moment outweighed Kallist’s concerns for his footwear. Had he been either a little more sober, or a little more drunk, he might’ve worried about encountering sewer goblins, or even Golgari fungus-creatures leftover from the struggles that ended guild rule, but as he wasn’t, he didn’t.

With a deep sigh, Kallist relieved himself against the stained wall that was also the back wall of somebody’s house, and staggered back to the road just in time to all but run into a fellow striding the other way.

“Gariel,” he greeted the newcomer, trying to straighten himself into a semblance of sobriety.

“Who . . . Kallist? What’re you doing in the alleys this late at night? You’re not worried about gobbers?”

Kallist spun, expecting in his drunken haze to see a gang of the foul creatures behind him. When none appeared, he sank slowly to the muddy road, waiting for yet another surge of nausea to pass.

Irritably, he looked at his friend, who failed to suppress a smirk. Physically, Gariel was everything Kallist wasn’t: dark-skinned to

Kallist's natural pallor; heavily muscled where Kallist was wiry; exceptionally tall where Kallist could have been the standard by which average was measured; and with earthen-colored eyes to contrast with Kallist's own oceanic blue. Gariel even wore a well trimmed beard, not out of any desire to follow current trends—the styles of Ravnica's affluent meant little here in the backwaters—but simply because the man had an intense dislike of shaving. “Any knife comes near my face,” he'd told Kallist once, “it damn well better have a sausage on the end of it.” Had their hair not been similar shades of wooden brown, they might as well have been of different species entirely.

Something must have flashed across his face, something Gariel saw even in the feeble moonlight and the glow of the emberstone he held in his left fist. He dropped his hand and lowered himself to the grimy roadway beside his friend.

“This doesn't look like a celebratory drunk,” he observed, leaning back against the nearest building.

Kallist looked up at him, all but trembling with the effort of keeping his face a stony, emotionless mask. He glared at Gariel as though daring him to say something.

Silence for a few moments, broken only by the call of a spire bat flying low over the few pools of exposed swamp between the wide roadways and cheap row houses.

“She said no, didn't she?” said Gariel at last.

Kallist's shoulders slumped. “She said she'd ‘think about it.’”

Gariel forced a grin, though he felt the blood pounding in his ears, furious on his friend's behalf. “Well, at least that's not a ‘no,’ right?”

“Oh, come on, Gariel!” The smaller fellow punched the mud. “When was the last time you knew Liliana to take her time to think about anything? Everything she does, she does in the moment.” He sighed, and tried to swallow the lump that had climbed once again into his throat and appeared bound and determined to stay there. “You know as well as I do that ‘I'll think about it’ means ‘I don't want to hurt you by refusing.’”

Gariel wanted to argue the point, but the words clung to the

roof of his mouth like a paste. “Well. . . Look, Kallist. You’ve been together—what? A few months?”

“Yeah. Ever since . . .” He didn’t finish the sentence. In all the time Gariel had known him, Kallist had never finished that sentence.

“All right, a few months. Give it some more time. I mean, she’s obviously not ending it, or she wouldn’t have bothered to spare you the ‘no,’ right? Maybe in another year or three . . .”

Kallist couldn’t help but laugh, though the sound was poisonous as hemlock. “Right. Because the one thing Liliana does more often than anything else is to change her mind once it’s made up.”

In fact, in the time Kallist had known her, Liliana had done so precisely once.

And again, Gariel knew them both too well to argue. All that emerged from his mouth, escaping like a fleeing convict before he could think better of it and snap his teeth shut, was, “So maybe you’re better off this way.

“I’m sorry,” he added immediately. “That didn’t come out right.”

“Nothing tonight has.” Kallist rose and set his bleary eyes toward the southeast. “I’m going home.”

“Wait.” Gariel rose, too, and placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Where is she, anyway?”

“Where else would she be during Thralldom’s End?”

Gariel actually saw red. “What?” He’d doubtless have awakened half the street with that squawk, if they hadn’t all been out celebrating. “You mean even after your talk . . .”

Kallist shrugged, and couldn’t help but smile a bit. “She said there was no reason to ruin a perfectly good dance. Even asked me to stay, but—Gariel? Where are you going?”

The larger man was already several yards down the road. “I’m going,” he answered, barely turning his head, “to give your woman a piece of my mind for treating you this way.”

“Gariel, don’t . . .” But he was already gone around the nearest bend. Were Kallist less exhausted, less depressed, and certainly less drunk, he might have caught Gariel, or at least tried. As Kallist

was, he could only drop his chin to his chest and shuffle home, hoping he remembered to get even drunker before he fell asleep.

He did, however, spare a brief thought to hoping that there was still a Bitter End Tavern standing, come tomorrow morning.



Though the guilds were gone, much of Ravnica still celebrated the Festival of the Guildpact, as if remembering the years of prosperity and order might keep them from fading away in these modern, more tumultuous times. Much of Ravnica—but not all. Some of the plane’s districts had suffered rather more than others beneath the guilds, and not a few were just as happy to see them gone.

Some such as Avaric, whose families had long labored in all but serfdom to the usurious patriarchs of the Orzhov. So when the so-called Guild of Deals had fallen, it was the best news the citizens here had received in several thousand years.

The walls, the floor, the tables, and the chairs of the Bitter End shook as though in the midst of an earthquake, as the good folk of Avaric celebrated Thralldom’s End. In one corner, a gaggle of performers pounded on drums, plucked the strings on a variety of instruments, blew through various horns, in a veritable frenzy of activity that should have produced nothing but anarchic noise, yet somehow managed to shape itself into actual music. Around the perimeter of the common room, the people not currently caught up in the dance clapped or stomped to the highly charged beat, and the footsteps of the dancers themselves kicked up clouds of sawdust from the floor and brought showers of dust sifting from the rafters. Before the start of business tomorrow, a handful of floorboards, a couple of chairs, and a legion of mugs and plates would need replacing—but the Bitter End was the largest establishment in Avaric to hold a Thralldom’s End gala, and if a bit of ruined furniture and broken crockery was the price for such a huge influx of custom, it was a cost Ishri, barkeep and the tavern’s owner, cheerfully paid.

Liliana Vess was a whirlwind sweeping through the assembled dancers, leaving footprints not merely in the sawdust, but on the hearts of a score of hopeful men. Her midnight-black hair moved

about her head like a dark cloud, or perhaps a tainted halo. Her cream-hued gown, which was cut distractingly low, rose and whirled and fell, promising constantly to reveal more than it should, but, like a teasing courtesan, always managing to renege.

She breathed heavily from the exertion of the rapid dance, spinning and twisting through the arms of a dozen of her fellow celebrants. Her smile lit up her features—high and somewhat sharp, forming a face that few would envision when imagining a classic beauty, yet which all would agree was beautiful once they saw it—but that smile failed to reach her eyes. For all that she tried to lose herself in the festivities, in the adoration of those who watched her, who reached out in hopes of a simple fleeting touch, she could not.

Damn him anyway! Guilt was not an emotion with which Lili-ana was well acquainted, and she found swiftly that it was not at all to her liking.

The bizarre accumulation of notes and beats and rhythms successfully masquerading as a song came to an end, and so did the last of Lili-ana’s ability to fake any remaining enthusiasm for the celebration. The musicians, bowing to much applause and acclaim, left the stage for a well-earned break, leaving an instrument with enchanted strings to play a slow and lonesome ditty until they returned. Several couples remained in the room’s center, swaying to the somber notes, but most returned to their tables to await a more energetic piece.

Liliana watched them go, marveling at these people among whom she’d made her temporary home. They were all clad in their best and fanciest—which here in Avaric meant tunics with long sleeves instead of short, trousers without obvious patches, and vests that actually boasted some faint color, rather than their normal browns and grays. Nobody here could afford the rich dyes or the fancy buttons and clasps of the rich, yet they wore their “finery” with pride; splurged on lean steaks when they normally subsisted on fungi and the occasional fish or reptile hauled from the swampy pools. And they lived it up as though such ridiculous luxuries actually meant something.

Liliana didn't understand any of it. She approved of it, even respected it, but she didn't understand it.

Even as she floated back to her table, hand reaching for a glass of rough beer to quench her thirst, Liliana spotted a figure moving toward her through the crowd. A gruff face, split into what the owner probably thought was a charming smile, leered at her through a thick growth of beard. Two sausage-like thumbs hooked themselves through the pockets of a heavy black vest, perhaps trying to draw attention to the fine garment. The drunkard had been watching her all night, since well before Kallist had ruined the evening and stormed off in a huff. Every night there was always at least one, and she'd wondered how long it would take him to drink enough nerve to approach.

"I couldn't help but notice," he slurred in a voice heavy with beer, "that you finally sent your scrawny friend packing. That mean you interested in spending some time with a real man?"

In a better mood, Liliana might've engaged in some light flirting before telling the drunk to find his own personal hell and stay there. Not tonight.

Liliana lifted her dinner knife, still stained with remnants of her overcooked steak, from the table. "If you don't walk away right now," she said sweetly, "you won't be a 'real man' for very long."

It took a moment, the battle between common sense and beligerent pride that raged across the fellow's face—but finally, aided perhaps by the unnatural gleam in Liliana's eyes, common sense won the field. Grumbling, he turned and shuffled back to his table, where he would tell his friends all about how he'd turned down the woman's advances.

Liliana sighed once as she lowered herself into her chair, and found herself uncharacteristically wishing that Kallist had been here to see that exchange. Damn it, she thought once more, reaching again for her mug. If it's not one thing.

"Hey! Bitch!"

It's another.

Half the tavern turned toward the large, dark-skinned fellow who'd just come stalking through the front door, his boots leaving

a trail of castoff mud, but Liliana already knew precisely for whom his call was intended. She rose gracefully and offered her most stunning smile.

“And a joyous Thralldom’s End to you, too, Gariel.”

“Don’t ‘joyous Thralldom’s End’ me, gods damn it!” he growled, pushing his way through a few of the slow-dancing couples to stand before her table. “I want to know what the hell you think you’re—”

They were skilled, Liliana thought later, when she actually had a moment to think; you had to give them that. She hadn’t noticed them at all, until a blade sped toward her from over Gariel’s shoulder.

There was no time even to shout a warning. Liliana brought a knee up sharply into Gariel’s gut—she had just enough respect for him as Kallist’s friend not to hit him any lower—and caught his shoulders as he doubled over, using his own weight to topple them both backwards over her chair. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t graceful, but it took them out of a sword’s sudden arc with half a heartbeat to spare.

The sounds of the chair clattering over, and the pair of them hitting the floor, were just loud enough to penetrate the din. First a couple of faces, and then a handful more, turned away from dinner or dancers to stare at them; a ripple in a still pond, awareness that something was very much not right spread through the Bitter End.

Liliana gasped as the wooden edge of the seat dug painfully into her side, but she didn’t let that stop her from rolling. Their bodies tilted across the chair like a fulcrum, her head striking the hardwood floor, but that, too, she ignored as best she could. Twisting her grip on Gariel as they fell, she kept him from landing squarely atop her. She left him gasping on the floor as she scabbled swiftly to her feet, trying to keep the table between herself and her attacker.

No. Attackers, plural. Damn.

They were strangers here, certainly. Avaric was small, yes, but not quite tiny enough for everyone to know everyone else by sight.

From a distance, then, these two blended perfectly, both of roughly average height, both clad as workers gone out to hoist a few after a long day's work, before going home to hoist a few more. But up close, their cold, emotionless eyes marked them as something else entirely.

Well, that and the heavy, cleaver-like blades.

They advanced unhurriedly, even casually, one passing to each side of the table. Clearly, despite the speed of Liliana's evasion, they didn't expect much in the way of resistance.

And in terms of anyone coming to Liliana's aid, they were correct. The folk nearest her had only just begun to run, to scream, or to freeze in shock, as best befit their individual temperaments. From behind the bar, Ishri emerged with a heavy cudgel in hand, but hampered as she was by the bulk of the crowd retreating from the coming bloodshed, there was no way she'd reach the table before it was all over. To his credit, the suitor whom Liliana had just rebuffed was also making his way back across the tavern, fists raised, but he was already so drunk that even if he managed to reach the fray, it was unlikely he could meaningfully contribute.

But then, Liliana didn't require anyone's help.

Crouching slightly, she shifted the dinner knife—hardly an intimidating weapon, but all she had—into an underhand grip. Beneath her breath, her lips barely moving, she began to utter a low, sonorous chant. Across her neck rose an abstract pattern of tattoos that suggested even more elaborate designs farther down her back, as though burned across her skin from the inside out.

Had they been able to hear it over the ambient noise of a panicking tavern, that sound alone might have given her attackers pause. The tone was surreal, sepulchral, far deeper than Liliana's voice should ever have produced. The syllables formed no words of any known language, yet they carried a terrible meaning that bypassed the mind entirely, to sink directly into the listener's soul.

But they could not hear it, those deluded fools who thought themselves predator rather than prey. And even if they had, it would have been far too late to matter.

As though biting the end off a leather thong, Liliana spat a word

of power into the aether, gestured with her blade. Something moved unseen beneath the table, just one more shadow in the flickering lanterns of the Bitter End, summoned from abyssal gulfs beyond the realms of the dead themselves. With impossibly long fingers it stretched out, farther, farther, and brushed the edges of two of the table's legs. Rotting away as though aged a hundred years, in single instant, they folded in on themselves, putrefying into soft mulch. The rest of the heavy wood surface toppled to the side, slamming hard into one of the bandit's calves. He cried out in pain, stumbling and limping away from the unexpected assault, a handful of dishes and a half-eaten loaf of pumpernickel bread clattering around his feet.

At that cry, the second man's attention flickered away from Liliana for less than a heartbeat—but that was enough. Ducking in low, she drew the edge of her knife across his extended arm. Cloth and flesh tore beneath the serrated steel, and the bandit barely muffled a curse of pain behind clenched teeth.

Blood welled up, beading along his wrist in a narrow bracelet. It was a shallow wound, stinging but harmless, and his grimace of pain turned into a savage grin as he realized just how ineffective his target's attack had proved.

But then, Liliana's attack wasn't intended to cause him harm. It was meant only to draw blood—and the attention of the unseen shadowy thing sliding impossibly across the floor. Invisible to all, darkness against darkness, black on black, it stretched forth its talons once more and dipped them into the welling blood. A foul corruption leeches into the seeping wound, intertwined itself around the muscles and vessels of the man's arm.

He screamed, then, an inhuman cry of agony, as gangrenous rot shot through his flesh. The blade fell from limp fingers, lodging itself in the wood by his feet, as the skin turned sickly blue, the blood black and viscous. Flesh grew stiff and cracked, splitting to unleash gouts of yellowed pus. Falling to his knees, the sellsword clutched his dying arm to his chest and bawled like an infant.

Liliana spared him not so much as another glance. His suffering would end soon enough—when the spreading necrotic rot reached

his heart.

Growing ever more unnerved, the second bandit had nonetheless recovered from the impact of the table against his leg, swiftly closing to within striking range. Snarling, he raised his chopping blade high and brought it down in a vicious stroke that no parry with the fragile dinner knife could have halted.

Liliana didn't even try to lift her feeble weapon in response. No, lips still moving though she must long since have run out of breath, she raised her left hand and caught the blade as it descended.

The cleaver should have torn through her upraised limb like parchment. Should have, and would have, had it not begun to turn black at the apex of its swing, suddenly cloaked and tugged by wisps of shadow. By the time it should have reached the flesh of Liliana's hand, it was simply gone, drawn away into the nether between the worlds of the living and the dead. The swordsman was left standing, staring at his empty fist.

With a shrug, Liliana bent two fingers into talons and drove them into his staring eyes. Hardly fatal, but more than enough to take him, screaming, out of the fight.

And just like that, the tavern grew calm once more. The eldritch symbols across Liliana's back faded as swiftly as they appeared, leaving her skin pristine. Ignoring the slack faces that gaped silently at her from those partygoers who hadn't already run screaming from the Bitter End, Liliana moved away from the fallen bandit, dismissing the spectral shadow with the merest thought. Only she, of all those present, heard its woeful cry as it spiraled back into the endless dark.

She placed one foot atop the fallen chair and leaned on her knee to gaze meaningfully down at Gariel—who was, himself, staring up at her as though she'd sprouted feathers.

“What . . . What did . . . What?”

“All good questions,” Liliana told him. “Are you all right?”

“I—I'll live.”

“Let's not jump to conclusions just yet.” She reached down to offer the flustered fellow a hand up—then yanked it away as he began leaning on her, allowing him to fall flat on his face

once more. The floorboards shook with the impact. “There’s still the little matter,” she said with a predatory smile, “of you stalking through that door, yelling at me, calling me all sorts of ugly names.”

“I—you. . .” Gariel wiped a hand across his face, smearing rather than removing the blood that now dribbled from his nose. “People are watching, Liliana.”

“That didn’t bother you when you were shouting obscenities at me.”

Gariel could only gape once more, at the gathered audience and at the injured bandits, and wonder exactly how crazy his friend’s girl actually was. He’d actually opened his mouth to ask such a question—only to choke on a spray of splinters as a bolt that appeared roughly as thick as a tree trunk slammed into the floor mere inches from his head.

Liliana heard the whir-and-click of a mechanized crossbow even as she jerked away from the sudden impact, glaring at the figures standing in the doorway.

There were three more, all strongly resembling the pair who had attacked her moments ago. Only these three, Liliana realized as she stared at a trio of self-loading identical weapons, were far better equipped.

“The next one,” the man in the middle told her gruffly, “goes through his head.” His gaze flickered to the two figures on the floor, one breathing his last, one blinded, and his face hardened. “I don’t think you’re fast enough to stop all three of us, witch.”

She scowled in turn. “So shoot him. He means nothing to me, and even with those fancy crossbows, I promise you’ll not have time to reload.”

“Ah,” the man said, voice oily, “but he means something to someone, don’t he?”

Liliana’s scowl grew deeper still—but her shoulders slumped, and she knew that they saw it. “What do you want?”

“What I want is to put a few shafts through you for what you did to my boys,” the bandit told her. “But what’s going to happen is this . . .”