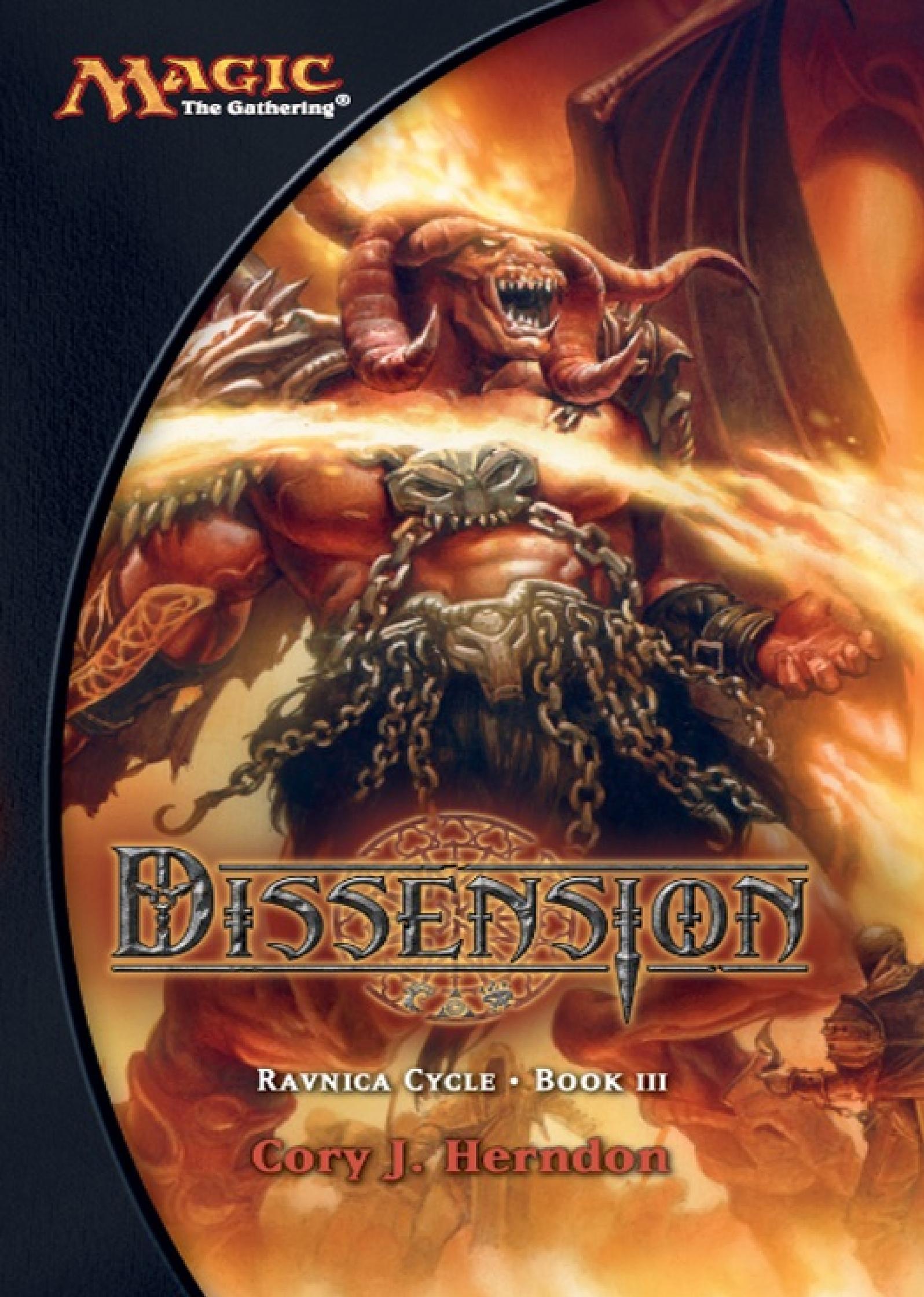


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# DISSENSION

RAVNICA CYCLE • BOOK III

**Cory J. Herndon**

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Ravnica Cycle • Book III

## The title "DISSENSION" is written in a large, ornate, gothic font. The letters are filled with intricate patterns and designs. Behind the text is a circular globe with various symbols and patterns. The title is framed by horizontal lines, with a vertical line extending downwards from the end of the word.

Cory J. Herndon



## **Dedication**

For cousin Erik, my collaborator on many an unpublished  
monster comic.

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the unflappable Bayliss, and the unstoppable Remo.



*Possession is nine-tenths of the law—we take care of the other tenth. Capobar and Associates specializes in object retrieval. No job too small, too big, or too dangerous. Satisfaction guaranteed. Fee negotiable, consultancy available (100 zinos/day plus expenses). 15017 Funnel Street, Midtown, Center of Ravnica. In-person meeting required. Expenses not negotiable. Everyone is looking for something. Send a falcon to us for an appointment today!*

—Long-running classified advertisement,  
*Ravnican Guildpact-Journal*

29 GIZARM 10012 Z.C.

Evern Capobar, master thief, hadn't been out on a job in almost ten years. The last one had taken him into the undercity of Old Rav, where he had almost lost several limbs to Devkarin bandits before getting away with one of their more sacred relics. He hadn't been on a job outside the City of Ravnica for almost three decades. This new job had the potential to be even stranger, and more dangerous, than a journey into the depths of Gulgari territory, but Capobar was not worried. All jobs were strange in their own way, even if this one wasn't his usual cup of bumbat. Near as he could tell, he wouldn't so much be stealing something as retrieving it—and long-running classified advertisements aside, stealing was generally the job for which one hired a master thief. "Retrieval" was, of course, a convenient euphemism.

Capobar had people for this sort of thing, assuming you stretched your definition of "people." For this job, his personal attention had been requested, and fortunately the basic skill set for treasure hunter and thief were remarkably similar. Capobar had crossed that line on several occasions.

As the primary stakeholder of one of the most successful independent, fully licensed thieveries in the metropolitan center of the plane, Capobar rarely saw the need for personal risk and even less for passing through the city gates to the world beyond. He was not a coward, or fearful for his life, but he was realistic. He wasn't as nimble as he used to be, and truth be told, he had taken to his office more and more of late. Well into his eighties Capobar had been the best thief in the whole section. Now he had the books to oversee and face-to-face negotiations to lead. Those were the heart of his business as he entered his 101st year. Fortunately he had an excellent eye for talent, so Capobar and Associates was doing as well—if not better—than it had when he took on most jobs alone.

The exceptions were those clients who, for whatever reason, wanted Capobar to do a job personally and were willing to pay extra to ensure that the master oversaw the operation. For the right price, the right client, and the right job, Capobar would occasionally come out of semiretirement to add that personal touch. He still had a few tricks he hadn't taught his employees. More than once he'd even accepted jobs involving said employees, honor among thieves being relative. He would never have told the client, but even if Capobar's personal participation had not been requested he might well have gone ahead and done it anyway. You didn't get to be a master thief without a powerful sense of curiosity, and he was mighty curious about this job. For one thing, his client was a guildmaster. By definition, one of the ten—no, nine, he corrected himself—most powerful and wealthy beings on the entire plane of Ravnica.

For that kind of coin, Capobar would accommodate quite a bit. He would honor the client's odd demands and travel hundreds of miles from his urban stomping grounds to this far-flung reclamation zone.

He stood at this moment inside the ribcage of a creature that provided excellent cover from the still-noisy township and gave Capobar a glimpse of what he could expect inside the ruins. The blackened bones were all that was left of the massive corpse that had crashed and literally burned three weeks ago. Half a mile north, a similar jumble of charred skeletal remains marked the final resting place of the second dragon.

Rare as they were, these skeletons were not his objective. The rotting, corroded bones were useless to his client and therefore useless to him. They'd been set ablaze by the locals, it seemed, to ensure there was no chance either still lived. The black smoke coming from the region for weeks had spread as far as the city, and reports of the Utvarans torching the corpses had been on the front page of the newssheets the next day. For a short time, there were fears that the smoke would bring the dreaded *kuga* plague along with it, but Simic biomages had reassured the public that they detected no trace of the pathogen. The plague had been wiped out, or so it seemed, by a cure some *other* Simic dropped on the population. He'd been glad to hear that, though he kept protective gear and a couple of 'drops on his belt. Just in case.

He contemplated retrieving that gear when the smell began to burn his sinuses but decided to hold off. His partner wouldn't be much longer. Partner on the job, that is, since the shadewalker worked for Capobar. The bones had begun to corrode and filled the air with a metallic tang. Putrid, gelatinized marrow oozed from within. A drop fell from the dead dragon's tenth rib and sizzled as it melted into the stone near his right foot. If he hadn't been on a schedule, he would have found a way to collect some—it certainly would have made a potent poison and a simple, if pungent, way to get through most any lock. But dragon skeletons and acidic marrow were not what he'd been hired to find and retrieve.

What Capobar *had* been hired to retrieve rested in the center of a ring of

ruined architecture built over a simmering volcanic caldera. He pulled a black bandanna over his nose and mouth to fight the odor of decaying dragon bones. He could move as soon as his scout returned from—

“The path to the ruin is clear,” a disembodied voice whispered over his right shoulder. The sound, as usual, came without warning—not even footsteps marked the shadewalker’s passage, one of the reasons he and his kind were paid so well. Another was near-perfect invisibility, which prevented any but the shadewalker himself from knowing exactly what a shadewalker’s “kind” really was. Capobar, for all his sources, had never been able to find out whether that invisibility was some kind of ability inherent to the shadewalker’s species or if the stealthy operator was simply a human with remarkable skills of deception.

“Well done,” Capobar whispered. “No sign of the plague?”

“I would have smelled it,” the shadewalker replied. “The air is clear as well.” The invisible stalker added, “Clear of plague, at least. There is much death, and the scavengers have not yet taken it all away.”

“Perhaps the scavengers are among the dead,” Capobar observed.

“If by ‘scavengers’ you mean Gruul, I would say you are right. They number among the more distant corpses. Many, in the hills.”

“You’re talkative,” Capobar said. “Nervous?”

“Hardly,” the voice replied. “May I ask your instructions?”

“Stick with the plan,” the thief replied, a little nervous himself. He wasn’t a stickler for rank in this informally organized business, but it was peculiar, and a little unnerving, that none of the shadewalkers he employed at quite handsome rates had ever used the slightest of honorifics when speaking to their employer. No “sir,” no “boss.” Capobar might even have been content with “Mr. Capobar.”

The master thief kept three shadewalkers on retainer (as far as he knew—getting a head count was tricky, and he was only *paying* three of them), but had not worked much with them personally. He didn’t even know this one’s name. It wasn’t like he could tell them apart. Shadewalkers lived in a state of natural invisibility. Certain tricks could reveal them—though Capobar pitied anyone who tried to toss powder or paint on one—but no living eye could detect them without magical assistance.

They always took payment in cash. Cash that disappeared, literally, from Capobar’s hands. He wondered what they did with it. Presumably they had to eat, but what else did they buy with the zinos?

The shadewalker’s heightened senses were only one reason the master thief had brought the invisible agent along. From his vantage point at the edge of the Husk, the glowspheres of Utvara’s main thoroughfare still flickered, and the noises of a typical evening’s debaucheries continued. A great many of the miners on the flats continued to work through the darkness or hired

graveyard shifts of nomadic laborers to do it for them, and there was little cover between Capobar and the remains of the Cauldron.

The flats were the real problem. They were not endless by any means, ringed as they were by the Husk (and beyond that, mile after mile of architecture), but they were huge enough. An open wasteland now, at some time in the distant past it had been a grandiose pavilion, paved with brick and stone. Beneath that stone were layers of ancient, abandoned civilization littered with treasure, or so the fortune-seekers working their scattered islands of prospecting activity testified.

The target was sitting smack in the middle of it. Anyone who cared to glance might spot him at some point, no matter how many precautions he took. Capobar had never trusted invisibility magic, personally—it could be quite dangerous when applied by unskilled hands—which made the shadewalker instrumental.

He had to work under the assumption he would be seen, but Capobar still had to personally retrieve the booty according to the doubly enchanted, thrice-signed, and virtually unbreakable contract. Then the shade would move the actual item back to the office in the City of Ravnica. Just because the client had hired him to personally retrieve it didn't mean he had to transport it all three hundred miles back to the city. Success relied on two factors. Capobar had to reach the target quickly—he had that covered—and any response from the locals had to be slow. They might reach him by the time he was heading back out, but by then the shadewalker would be slipping into the foothills on the way to delivering the financial future of Capobar and Associates. According to his inquiries, new settlers were flocking to the area. A new face wouldn't be overtly surprising. Capobar reasoned he could put off any serious inquiries by simply claiming to be new in town and curious about the ruins.

More dangerous than the miners in the township were the tribal Gruul who laid claim to a ring of crumbling hills that bordered the small region on all sides. The Husk—the ring of corroded hill country surrounding the Utvara township—was their sovereign territory since the battle weeks earlier, from that day and on into perpetuity (though that word, “perpetuity,” had many different dimensions and definitions when it came to Orzhov contracts). Capobar had no doubt that at this very moment one or more Gruul scouts watched him even as he watched the township, the flats, and the ruins. Just as he was counting on the local constabulary, such as they were, to respond with midnight lethargy to a lone man walking into the Cauldron, he had done enough research into the area to learn that the Gruul didn't give a wooden zib what you did in the flats. If they cared they would already have been on him. Judging from what the shadewalker had said they weren't in any shape to show an interest even if they wanted to. But if he tried to cut through the Husk on his way out, the trespass alone would mean the end of the venture, even if their numbers were reduced.

He slipped a pair of mana-goggs from his forehead to the bridge of his nose and tapped the refraction crystal several times to get a look at the entire spectrum of magical auras. The old magelord's djinns and elementals, even his goblins, had long since abandoned the place or, perhaps, been driven away by the same townsfolk who had incinerated the dragons's corpses. On the lowest and highest refractions he thought he could make out a haze over the path ahead, perhaps a magical fog, but with so much mana recently burned away here, that was to be expected. The small swath of farmland to the west looked gray under the moonlight but glowed green in his crystallized vision. Elsewhere, other spots of magic appeared on the inner lenses—the reddish shape of a miner in a strength-enhancing liftsuit, the streaking white line of a passing falcon enchanted for speed, and the olive-gray wall surrounding two structures that looked like dorms for zombie labor.

A month ago, Capobar knew little of Utvara. It was just another reclamation zone, one of many such areas all over the world, places where the old, crumbling infrastructure of civilization was flattened and rebuilt anew. It was a process long since perfected, in theory. Then the dragons had come, which had, of course, been big news even in the central city. Two of them had torn out of the still-smoldering ruins that stood a half mile away from him. They'd flown, they'd fought, and they had killed each other. Most blamed the Izzet magelord who had built the collapsed power station and adjoining superstructure, though it was widely reported that some damn fools had tried to *ride* the things.

Capobar's client said that there had been three dragons, and only two had made it out of the caldera. And whether it was simple superstition or a real concern about safety, the ruins of the Cauldron had lain undisturbed for three weeks and change. The townsfolk had no idea of the treasure that lay within or its value. The Orzhov baroness certainly didn't or it wouldn't still be there.

And it was definitely there, suffused with a blazing orange and blue aura, sitting in the ruins. It was so bright he had to tap the goggles again to bring it into focus.

Capobar adjusted his cloak as he stood and stretched his legs, wincing involuntarily at the popping joints. He was dressed in dark, unassuming clothes that didn't scream out "master thief" but didn't draw attention to him either. Capobar tapped the mana-goggs until the refraction field settled on the higher spectrum of magic that had shown the "fog" and left it there.

The thief pulled his hood down tightly over his head, popped his knuckles inside his fingerless gloves, turned over his shoulder, and whispered, "Stay ten paces behind me until I have it. Make the exchange without a word. Wait for me at the office, and don't even think about running out on me." He added the last almost by reflex as he leaned down and pressed his palms against his outer thighs, over the twin swiftfoot magemarks tattooed on his legs. The magical markings were relatively new features on his aging body and had cost him a pretty zib. He whispered the activation words and potent magic rushed

into his muscles, bones, and circulatory system all at once. They would not last long, but in twenty-four hours (give or take) he could use them again. Not that he expected the need to arise. In twenty-four hours Capobar intended to be sipping hyzdeberry wine and counting the take from this little adventure.

“The thought occurs that if you did not trust me, you did not need to hire me.”

“The thought also occurs that I’m not paying you to think,” Capobar said. He shuddered before making a small hop that almost sent him crashing headfirst into the half-arch of a blackened rib. It always took him a few minutes to get used to the magemarks’ effects. “From here, the only real danger is falling rocks and cooling lava. In fact, between you and me, the paycheck on this job makes even less sense now that I see this place. The road is clear, and there are no guards at all.” He tapped his foot, which made a sound like a hummingbird and looked a bit like one too. A craving not unlike thirst was settling into his bones thanks to the magical tattoos. Capobar needed to *run*.

“Of course my fee is nonnegotiable,” the shadewalker whispered.

“Of course,” Capobar snapped. “Your *salary* is the same as always. And,” he added before the shade could reply, “the bonus will be waiting back at the office.”

In his accelerated state, Capobar saw the fog slowly form sharp edges all around him. A second later the ground rocked and knocked him off of his feet.

It sounded like an enormous footstep, while the impact felt like an underground explosion. Capobar curled and came down ready to spring, expecting to see—well, something. He managed to stay upright when the second “footstep” came, and he realized why there was nothing to see. Whatever was making the footsteps was “walking” (or pounding) on the underside of the ground Capobar stood upon.

It sounded big, and it sounded like it wanted out.

He pushed the mana-goggs back onto his forehead. The magical field was blinding. Whatever was down there was practically sweating mana into the air. Through solid rock. Another crashing thump sounded beneath him, and this time a radial crack in the stone before him appeared.

“Strike what I said. That fee is making more and more sense every second,” he muttered, then said a little louder to make sure the shadewalker heard him, “But there’s no way I’m going back empty-handed. You still with me?”

“I am uncertain why we are waiting,” the shadewalker replied.

“Uncertain why—” Capobar began, but a fourth thump cut him off. The cracked ground took on a vaguely conical shape. “Never mind. This is a distraction. Let’s go.”

Capobar bolted forward just as the biggest crash yet struck the flats from

below. A single accelerated step took him more than twelve paces, and he caught the sole of one foot on a rising slab of stone that erupted ahead of him to form a rapidly elevating ramp. The spring-loaded thief used the stone's momentum to launch himself into the air like an acrobat. He risked a look down as he soared faster than a speeding bamshot over the center of a split in the earth.

In the center of the crack, a single yellow eye with a pupil like a cat's blinked at him once. The alien glare hit Capobar with a palpable wave of malice, like a sucker punch to the soul. The wave made him forget to roll when he landed on the far side of what was rapidly turning into a crater. He regained his footing at a dead run with all of his bones intact only because of the quick reaction time afforded by the magemarks. He didn't look back, nor did he call for the shadewalker. Capobar just ran as fast as he could for the Cauldron. In a corner of his mind, he was already adding an astronomical amount of hazard pay to the day's expenses.

The master thief spun in midrun and ran backward, feet blurring beneath him and wind whistling past his hood. He pulled the mana-goggs back on and cast his eyes about for the shadewalker, tapping the refraction until he spotted the ghostly blue shape of his partner dashing down the path beside him. Reason number one Capobar had plunked down so many zinos for this particular piece of equipment: Invisibility was in the eye of the beholder. The mana-goggs let him keep track of his entire staff, including shadewalkers.

As a side benefit, the mana-goggs also made it slightly easier to gaze at that baleful yellow eye. It had risen from the crater in the road and stared from atop a writhing mass of a long, scaly tentacle. The mottled appendage clutched the eye like it was a rubber ball, and through the focused goggs he could see it was misshapen, not like a true eye at all. Some kind of camouflage? Why would something that large need camouflage?

Not that this creature was his concern as long as it stayed put. The crashing seemed to have stopped, and the eye-that-wasn't-an-eye simply watched him run. The hair on the back of Capobar's neck stood on end, but as long as it only watched, it didn't change the original plan. Whatever the thing was, it hadn't disturbed the Utvara nightlife. It certainly wasn't another dragon, and though it was visible from the township no one there seemed the least bit concerned about it. The carousing continued beneath the glowposts, and the mining equipment continued to delve beneath the surface.

The master thief had known there were monsters in these parts but not that they were quite so big. But if it didn't bother the locals, it didn't bother him either. The thing certainly couldn't catch him if it wanted to, regardless. He could use it for any explanations he might need to give later, however—new in town, monster attack, took shelter in the nearest structure, even if it was a smoldering ruin.

It only took a few minutes for the fleet-footed master thief to reach the edge of the Cauldron. The heat and smoke grew more palpable and made him pull

the bandanna back over his face, sweat beading on his forehead. The place might be a ruin, but it was still sitting atop an active geothermic vent. Nothing rose up to threaten him but the temperature.

Good enough.

He took a few slow breaths as the swiftfoot effect started to wear off. The magic was useful but didn't last long. It was with relief that he saw the shadewalker keeping pace.

There had once, it appeared, been two main entrances to the caved-in cone that remained of the Izzet magelord's massive Cauldron project. One of them still provided access to the interior—Capobar could tell from the way the target's magical aura brightened inside the shape of the arched door. With hardly a sound, he scrambled over the rocks and boulders that hid the access point from the rest of the flats and entered the Cauldron proper.

Upon seeing the interior of the ruined structure, he bit back a warning that had been forming on his lips. From the look of it, a loud voice might trigger one of two outcomes, neither desirable. One, the whole place might finish the slow process of caving in. Tangles of metal architecture and broken stone lay everywhere, illuminated by the soft, orange glow of the lava that made the place as hot and humid as a jungle. A huge disk, looking for all the world like a gigantic broken dinner plate, hung suspended on one end by the wreckage. The other edge of the platform rested atop the indisputably crushed remains of a gigantic egg. Strange geometric shapes were still visible on the disk's surface.

To Capobar's surprise, he and the shadewalker were not alone inside the ruin. And to his relief, he had not yet been spotted. The second possible outcome, and the more likely one in his estimation, would be death by monster.

A few taps of the mana-goggs showed that this giant had some kind of magical kinship with the tentacle-eye thing under the road. It was big but nowhere as large as the skeletal dragon—maybe about the size of a pair of good-sized wagons stacked on top of each other—but it might easily have swallowed him whole. Its body was shaped like a beetle's, though it had no carapace or wings. Its skin appeared disturbingly human, pink and fleshy, with a long tail and a flat, toothy face showing no eyes. It stood on four muscular legs that appeared to end in parodies of human hands, and it shifted back and forth on its hand-feet as it dug into what, for it, must have seemed like a feast—a smashed egg twice its size.

Unfortunately, that meant the eyeless thing's head was buried nose-deep in the bright glow of Capobar's target. Fortunately, it was a big target, and he still might avoid detection. The monster looked quite focused on its meal.

The Gruul called creatures like this “nephilim,” but it wasn't the name of a species so much as a generic term for large, presumably dangerous, mutations that emerged from time to time from the caves in the Husk. They were as

large as a cargo wagon, though the tribes claimed they had once been towering and godlike. Nor were the Gruul the only ones who believed it, though it was their name for the creatures that had stuck. Such monsters had been the stuff of both legends and history on Ravnica for as long as anyone could remember, but only in wilder regions like Utvara did one find them anymore. The Gruul also believed the nephilim to be immortal, but Capobar wasn't the sort to accept such claims. Magic was magic, and magic could do strange things, but magic was a tool first and foremost. Things lived, things died, sometimes they lingered, but nothing lived forever, of that he was fairly certain. No matter how magic they were. Not even the angels were still around. No guarantee that they were dead, but they *had* disappeared. Everyone knew that.

The nephilim shuffled toward Capobar to get a better angle on its food. The thief ducked behind a dromad-sized piece of some bizarre, twisted wreckage that had once been an assortment of polished Izzet contraptions.

If Capobar approached the broken egg from the far side, he could still make it out with the treasure. Summoning all the control he could muster, he willed himself to be perfectly silent. The thief padded quietly around the nephilim's shuffling bulk without incident.

A smell like rotten eggs washed over him. The nephilim smelled as unpleasant as it looked, but compared to the corroding dragon bones it was almost refreshing. At least the nephilim's distinctive nasal signature wasn't likely to permanently destroy your nostrils and most of your face.

His eyes trained on the monster, Capobar almost stumbled over a goblin corpse. There were a few scattered here and there, workers who had been unable to escape. Curious that the nephilim hadn't touched them. He'd have thought the creature would find the corpses to be bite-sized morsels. Perhaps they were too cooked. A careful, silent leap took him over a bubbling seam in the floor that exposed more cooling lava.

Capobar almost collided with a second nephilim that was doing much the same as the first. Hunks of ruined machinery and the rocky lava dome that was the egg's nest had concealed it. This one was serpentine, with a tubular, coiled body covered in multihued scales and patches of the same pinkish skin he'd seen on the other two. It was impossible to tell exactly how long the creature was, but it sat atop several coils. Its head and upper body were one, and again the creature had a freakish resemblance to at least part of a human being. A pair of humanlike arms with clawed hands picked small pieces of dragon flesh from within the steely eggshell and popped them into a small mouth ringed by silvery teeth set in the navel of a torso-shaped head. In the center of the nephilim's chest-face was a single yellow eye that stared intently at the feast. It reminded the thief in an odd way of the flying snakes the Simic had set loose into the wild for the Decamillennial celebrations. Or a centaur that was all tail and eyeball.

This second feasting creature paid Capobar no more heed than the first. The

remains of the egg must have been some good eating, he guessed, at least if you were a freakish mutant amalgamation. He just hoped they'd leave enough to satisfy his client.

He realized his heart was racing and reminded himself who he was. Evern Capobar was the master. A master, at least. So there were monsters. Big ones. He'd gotten around a monster or two in his day.

One exposed section of the egg was still clear. All he needed to do was get around this second monster undetected and he would be out of sight of both. He carefully slipped past a writhing tail as big as a tree trunk and over another desiccated goblin body, then risked a look up. The cyclopean snake-thing's claws continued to pick at the morsel. One of them snapped at the first nephilim, which growled. The two creatures were making short work of the stillborn dragon's remains.

Capobar raised a hand to signal the shadewalker. A few seconds later an empty silver cylinder about the length and circumference of his arm appeared in midair and dropped into his open hand. From his own pack, the thief screwed a sharp, hollow needle into the business end of the cylinder then raised it overhead like a soldier preparing to impale an enemy.

Capobar took no chances. Had he been caught before getting into the Cauldron he would have had difficulty explaining the implement.

The entire affair had gone unnoticed by the snacking nephilim. But not everyone had missed it.

"Human," a voice rumbled, and the thief almost dropped the syringe. The voice seemed to be coming from—

No, it was *definitely* coming from within the egg.

Capobar only waited a second before he replied, "Yes?"

"Human," the dragon repeated. Its voice was unnaturally deep, and it shook the master thief's bones. But it was obvious even to Capobar, who had never seen a living dragon in his life, that this one was incredibly weak. The thief doubted its words would carry to the ears of the nephilim, let alone outside the Cauldron ruins. And why shouldn't it be weak? It was being eaten alive.

Capobar had to hand it to the client. The timing was crucial for this particular retrieval, as he understood it, and it seemed to the thief that he had walked in at exactly the right time. Extraction had to take place before death, but preferably *just* before death, according to his instructions. He wondered if his client had known about the nephilim. Perhaps even sent them. Guildmasters—especially this one—could almost certainly manipulate such monstrous, if rather stupid, creatures.

The thief had expected the dragon to be alive. There was no point in being here otherwise. He had never expected the thing to speak to him.

"I am a human," Capobar whispered to the darkness inside the ruined egg. He took a silent step forward and looked deeper into the shell where he could

make out the shape of a reptilian snout. A faint, red circle appeared in the shadows.

The eye blinked once, slowly, with the sound of sandpaper rubbing together.

“You hear me,” the dragon wheezed. Even as it spoke, Capobar could also hear the two nephilim continuing to tear it apart. He was glad he’d skipped dinner. “You understand.”

“Yes,” Capobar whispered. “I’m trying to keep those two from knowing it though. Could you keep it down?”

If the dragon heard him, it didn’t acknowledge the fact. “You will kill me,” it said. Though truer words, Capobar reflected, had rarely been spoken in his presence, it did not sound like a prediction. The words were a command. A command painted with a hefty coat of plea.

“You want to die?” Capobar asked.

“You will kill me,” the dragon repeated. It didn’t falter even when the snake-thing ripped away one of its ribs.

“I will,” Capobar said. He raised the syringe. “This is going to hur—”

His mouth froze in place as the red eye focused on him with a hint of blazing irritation, even at the end of life. The scrutiny was palpable. Evern Capobar loosened his collar absently.

“However you do it,” the dragon wheezed, “do it. No time to waste.”

“Could you lift—?” Capobar began and grimaced. “I’m sorry, but I’m helping you here, so maybe you could help me. This would be a lot easier if you could, maybe, stretch out your neck? Poke your head out a little bit?”

A gravelly, repetitive wheeze came from inside the crushed egg. The dragon was laughing. “You are small. You cannot see. I am trapped. My spine, crushed or gone. My flesh is being stripped. Consumed. My head is going nowhere, morsel.”

No, I can definitely see that, Capobar thought. He tried to ignore that he’d just been called a “morsel.” To the dragon, he whispered, “Then I guess I don’t need to ask you to hold still.” He tucked the huge syringe under one arm. With careful steps, he moved over the pieces of jagged eggshell and a fortune in dried dragon blood until he could see the massive disk resting just overhead. The red eye was right in front of his face.

“Why do you wait?” the dragon wheezed.

“Just need to make sure I hit the right spot—the gland is right ... *there*,” Capobar said as he raised the needle and drove it home just above the enormous glowing orb. He braced a foot against a stirrup bolted onto the side of the cylinder and pulled with all his might. After a few moments that threatened to throw his back out permanently, a pane of glass showed him that the syringe was filled with a thick grayish-red substance that pushed the definition of “liquid.” A few seconds later he saw that the plunger had

retracted as far as it was going to retract.

The needle slid free without a sound. Capobar unscrewed it and returned it to his pack. He slammed a cork stopper into the improvised canister and tucked it under his arm again—with the stopper extended it was the only way to carry the precious cargo.

“Thank you,” the dragon said, and died.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shadewalker had already left to meet Capobar at the edge of the ruins. He thought he heard the sounds of dromad hooves from the direction of the township. Sure enough, someone was coming to check him out. The enormous eye was nowhere to see or be seen.

“Now?” the shadewalker whispered over his shoulder when he arrived.

“Yes,” Capobar said and held out the container that held the precious substance. An invisible hand took it from him, and the portable payday disappeared. “I’ll see you back at the office,” he added. Reiteration never hurt. “Plan on going with me to the client. I could use a little insurance.”

“This is true,” the voice said.

Then Capobar felt something like ice press against his chest. A tiny pinprick of cold just over his heart made him pull back with a start, and he felt himself caught by another pair of strong, invisible arms before he went over backward.

He knew he should never have hired shadewalkers. They were entirely too ... shady.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nephilim fed for hours. The two that Capobar had evaded became three. Three became four. When the fifth nephilim arrived, there was no longer enough room in the Cauldron to hold them. Their bodies would not stop growing, so their hunger would not subside.

Each one was unique. One looked like living rock, a hunk of hillside on three crustaceanlike legs. The head of an ancient statue hovered over its center of gravity, a peculiar effect born of this nephilim’s own magical nature and a recently ended four-century nap during which it had played the part of actual hillside a bit too well. Another resembled a six-legged cross between a salamander and a bloated fish: all arms, legs, and gullet. The bulbous throat of the beast writhed with what looked like a thousand tiny imitations of itself, some of which wriggled free of the thing’s mouth and hopped into the streets, attacking fleeing Utvaran townsfolk. Finally, the burrower moved in, the thing that had ripped its way through the ground at the edge of the Husk and almost ended the master thief’s latest exploit ahead of schedule. When fully exposed, it resembled a cross between an octopus, a jellyfish, and a freakish tree on tentacles. Smaller appendages supported eyestalks like the one that

had watched Capobar flee. The creature ripped away bits of meat with barbed hooks lining its writhing arms and stuffed the flesh between light-sensitive eye sacs, there to be digested directly by an organ that had no known analog on the plane of Ravnica, a combination stomach and brain. It could see in every direction, and in seven dimensions.

At first, there was plenty of food for all concerned, and so all were content. Then things changed.

The four-legged one that looked like a walking mouth and tail was the first to realize that its body was pressing against the inside of the ruins. A few minutes later what remained of the Cauldron walls cracked and split. With a bold snap of its jaws, the tube-tail tore loose the last substantial hunk of dragon flesh and gulped it down whole. It roared into the night sky. The others followed suit with their own terrible cries, and the ground shook as the giant things circled each other, looking for advantages over the corpse. They were hungry, painfully hungry, and each one was both predator and potential prey.

Their bodies grew at an alarming rate, growing even larger as they moved from dragon flesh to dine on freshly caught Utvaran miner on the moonlit flats. The bigger the predator, the bigger the territory, the Gruul said, and the disappearing remains of the crushed dragon were gone. The nephilim would have to expand their territory outward, and they all seemed to realize it at once.

As their gargantuan bodies expanded and mutated, they looked about for something to eat or fight, preferably both. They clashed with each other in brief collisions that shook the ground like thunder, a counter to the terrible shrieks and roars that filled the early morning light. Others turned to the relatively tiny townsfolk and their puny homes, business, and outposts.

Within hours, the whole of Utvara was roiling with panic and chaos. Anything that could burn was burning amid fires that had erupted when the nephilim smashed the old Yorboff forge. The nephilim's footsteps and roars triggered landslides in the Husk that sent the Utvar Gruul bolting for cover as their wood-and-leather structures toppled. The nephilim snapped them up and devoured them whole, occasionally stopping to fight over the livestock that scattered across the foothills, fleeing the giants. Townsfolk bolted in every direction, driven by a wave of palpable terror that knocked the few vedalken in Utvara to the ground in pain.

In the less and less intact township square, a serpent sat coiled on its tail, its head and neck swaying easily to a rhythm only it could hear. It watched the nephilim turn toward the city and the tiny, shrieking things that infested it. The serpent knew all about infestations. Had any of the screaming people been paying attention, they would have noticed the serpent's head take on a peculiarly human shape, with the face of a small girl. The face smiled, melted into a writhing mass of bluish worms for the briefest of moments, and became reptilian again. Satisfied, the serpent slithered into the crowd to gather a

complete report for its master.

\* \* \* \* \*

The one person who might have been able to prevent the disaster in Utvara arrived hours too late to help. The goblin rocketed through the sky over the reclamation zone, clearing the cloud cover without the typical sonic boom that accompanied normal observosphere flight protocol. The goblin pilots assigned to observation duty by the Izzet magelords usually reveled in the sound, which more often than not was a precursor to an especially spectacular death.

This goblin had seen enough explosions recently, which made the sight of Utvara's ongoing ruin that much harder to take. The bubbling scar that stood where the Cauldron had so recently fed power and water into the small boomtown was especially jarring, she admitted to herself.

She was returning from a visit with the guildmaster, the dragon Niv-Mizzet. The dragon had appointed her head of the Cauldron, shattered as it was, but the goblin had plans she was certain would prove successful. Now her best chance for her own colloquy was gone, and a newly adopted home crumbled beneath the feet and tentacles of creatures that the goblin knew very well. Until a few weeks ago, she had been an Izzet courier and spent a great deal of time with the tribal Gruul who inhabited the Husk. She'd almost been killed by the nephilim.

They'd been smaller then.

The observosphere pilot tapped the smooth, faintly glowing, translucent white stones set into the flight panel, and the ley-crystal hummed to life. The shimmering, mirrorlike surface of the viewing pane materialized in thin air above the crystal and almost immediately reflected the features of a bald human woman in her early hundreds. She wore a tattoo in the shape of the Izzet guild sigil on her forehead, and her neutral face hardened into a stern scowl when she saw who was calling.

"This is—" the goblin gulped nervously. Her title was still more than a little grandiose for her mouth. The new, dragon-given syllables of her name felt stranger still. "This is Master Engineer Crixizix," the goblin said. "I hereby request the assistance of the Emergency Containment Corps. There is a disaster in progress in the Utvara reclamation zone that poses a much wider threat."

"Where is your magelord, goblin?" the woman said. "You are not authorized to use this ley frequency for frivolous—"

"This is not frivolous," Crixizix said as calmly as she could. "This is quite serious. And perhaps you did not hear me clearly. This is *Master* Engineer Crixizix. You will immediately send a containment team to the Utvara reclamation zone. Do you understand?"

Crixizix forced herself away from an impolitic but self-satisfied smirk when