

MAGIC
The Gathering®

ONSLAUGHT CYCLE • BOOK I

ONSLAUGHT

J. Robert King



THE UNHEALING WOUND

Jeska clutched the wound in her belly and curled up in a soft bed of soil. Centuries of humus had made this a lovely place to lie, a likely place to die.

Jeska didn't want to die.

She wasn't home. Instead of her people, tawny-skinned and golden-eyed, she was among mantis folk. Instead of her brother Kamahl, who had carried her across the continent to be healed, she was tended by an ape-faced horse-man.

"It's all right. It's all right," Seton soothed. "This is a place of ancient power. It will heal you, if any place can. . . ." Already, the mantis folk had told him she would not live. "The infection has gotten under your skin, that's all. It's just skin deep."

Jeska shook her head in denial and pain, and ferns clutched her thrashing hair. All around her, trees twisted into the sky. Birds and bushbabies and other things stared down from the green fronds and sent forth strange whoops of laughter.

Kamahl said she would be healed here. He hadn't said she would die.

She would die.

Jeska let go of the unhealing wound and gripped the arms of the centaur. Her fingers stained his flesh red and black. "Tell

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me what I must do. You are a druid, a healer. How can I live?”

Seton glanced up, seeking the support of the mantis folk. They were gone. They had withdrawn. He looked longingly at the forest, as if he wished to join them. “I should bring back your brother.”

“No! Don’t abandon me. It’s bad enough to die among strangers, but to die alone . . .”

“It’s going to be all right—”

“For you! Oh, what I would trade to be in your skin instead of mine. Tell me what I must do to live.”

His simian face was grieved as he stared down at her. Then there was something else—terrible pain. Seton shuddered and reached up over his shoulder. He gasped a breath and blood poured from his mouth. Eyes fixed in horror, he toppled forward onto her.

Jeska shoved at him. “Seton! What’s happening! What are you doing?”

A new voice came, a woman’s voice. “He saved your life—if you have the will to claim it. Do you, Jeska? Will you embrace a nightmare to live?”

Jeska stared over Seton’s still shoulder but could not see who spoke. Her own strength failing, she said only, “What must I do?”

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGE AND TRUTH

For some, pit fighting was about killing. Just now in the pit, a gigantipithicus ape and a griffon tore each other apart. The air shimmered with feathers and fur, and the stands boiled with cheers. Avid faces peered down in concentric rings from the height of the arena. The crowds loved killing.

Ixidor shook his head, averting his eyes from the arena gate. He did not wish to see the fights as they were. He wished to see them as they should be. His hands flashed through a series of paper disks. Each showed a contingent of noble warriors arrayed for battle, striking blows, deflecting attacks, advancing, falling, fighting, prevailing. In pen and ink, Ixidor had rendered the scenes with such clarity they sank away from the page as if to imprint themselves on reality. Shortly, these images would become reality—and victory. Image magic.

For Ixidor, pit fighting was about art.

He paused in shuffling the disks and reached out to his partner. His hand settled on her knee and his eyes on her figure. She was more perfect than any art. Beautiful, brilliant, bold, garbed in white robes and bedecked in jewels—she was everything he was not. How Ixidor, a gawky artist with jutting jaw and unkempt hair, could be the companion of this gleaming angel, he would never

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know. Perhaps she needed him. After all, a work of art needed an artist.

“The avens aren’t ready,” Nivea said as if in a trance. Though she grasped his hand, her mind was faraway, tapping other creatures. “We can’t count on them for this fight.”

Ixidor’s angular face split in a bemused grin. He fished a disk from among the others. It showed a contingent of bird-men advancing with pikes foremost. Crumpling the thing, he threw it to the floor of the prep pen. “Avens’ve been worthless for a couple of seasons. I’m not going to waste time with them anymore.”

Nivea smiled—not because of his words, but because of another summoning she prepared. “Still, the Order refugees are raring to go.” Nivea herself had once been part of the Northern Order before it was decimated. “They’ll be enough.”

Deftly, Ixidor moved the appropriate disks to the top of the stack. He closed his eyes, imagining the armor he would grant the Order soldiers. Nivea would summon warriors to the pits, and Ixidor would wrap them in image magic. She commanded reality and he illusion. They had not been beaten yet, and today would be no exception.

Though her mind still moved among magical mercenaries, Nivea’s attention had shifted. “How much will we make . . . if we win?”

“*When* we win,” corrected Ixidor, “we’ll make plenty.”

“Plenty enough to quit the pits?” Nivea asked. The visionary light had left her eyes, and she fixed them on Ixidor. “I hate all the killing.”

Ixidor flashed her a winning grin. “I know, but we don’t kill, my dear. We subdue.”

“What if we *get* killed?”

He kissed the back of her hand. “We can’t get killed, not while we’re together. Who can stand against us? None so far.”

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“So far,” echoed Nivea.

“Come on.” Ixidor stood and stretched. In one hand he held his paper disks, and in the other he held the hand of Nivea, lifting her from her seat. He drew her up beside him and wrapped her in his arms. “Look in my eyes. What do you see?”

Nivea stared. “Confidence. Cockiness. Courage.”

“Look closer.”

Her gaze grew more intent. “I see myself.”

“Yes. As long as you are in my eyes, I am complete. As long as I am in your eyes, you are complete. How can any of these half-hearts compete with us?”

The worry left her face, and the smile that formed there was radiant. “You always know what to say.”

“You mean I’m always right.”

She shook her head ruefully. “I mean you *almost* always know what to say.”

Ixidor laughed, and Nivea joined him. This was as much a part of their pre-fight ritual as preparing their magic. They could not truly fight together until they could laugh together. The sound of it tuned their souls.

Beyond their laughter came an agonized shriek from the griffin. The crowd roared ecstatically, and the death bell tolled. The gigantic ape bowed amid a flurry of lost-wager stubs. Pit vermin scuttled out and dragged away every shred of the bird-lion.

Before the ovation could die down, the gate before Ixidor and Nivea swung open, and the two emerged onto the pit floor. They lifted their hands together to hail the crowd, and they laughed.

The clamor united Ixidor and Nivea, no longer two entities but one. Some teams were sundered by that roar—each member fighting as if alone and dying the same. Not these two. Ixidor and Nivea were utterly amalgamated.

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They were crowd pleasers, despite the fact that they rarely killed. Crowds loved beauty almost as much as blood, and to watch Ixidor and Nivea fight was to watch beauty.

Ixidor turned, gazing out at the pit. It was a deep, black well, ringed round by tiers of seats. Spectators bunched out like violent flowers. Faces lit with anticipation, human and inhuman—elfin, aven, centaur, barbarian, simian, and unnatural combinations thereof. All shone with the same bloodthirsty light.

“We belong here together,” Ixidor said, his heart pounding.

“We belong together,” Nivea replied. She pivoted and bowed before the roaring crowd.

The cheers fell suddenly away, as if choked by a killing cloud. Ixidor felt a dark presence at their backs. Still clinging to Nivea, he turned. Together they saw.

From a dark prep pen, their adversaries emerged. The first was a tall, lean man. Pallid skin stretched across his knobby skull. Blood-red eyes smoldered in sunken pits. Yellow teeth clenched in a crescent grin. The man wore black robes that swayed as he lurched forward. He seemed a marionette—long limbs quivering, feet clumsily pounding sand. He planted a gnarled staff beside him and halted, leaning on the ancient wood. From the staff hung small skulls that rattled against each other, momentarily masking the approach of the other creature.

It shifted in the dark pen, a noise like sand sliding over metal. Scales glinted above coiling muscles. The creature advanced into the arena, seeming to drag the darkness with it. Only then did Ixidor realize that it *was* the darkness.

“A giant serpent,” he whispered to Nivea.

“Undead,” she replied.

A side-winding snake, as large around as an elephant, looped its coils out across the sand. It welled up behind the simpering wizard, and its cobra-hood spread to eclipse the stands.

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Though the crowd had gone momentarily silent at the arrival of this great menace, now hisses and murmurs told of wagers withdrawn and new stakes offered.

Ixidor's hands worked quickly, drawing a few new disks from pockets in his jacket and replacing others. He spoke through a tight smile. "Any of your Order cronies know how to turn undead?"

She shook her head. "Nope." She stared at the massive serpent, a wall of black sinew. A vermillion tongue lashed out, tasting the air. "I don't suppose you have any illusions that smell?"

"I have a few that stink, but not the way you mean," Ixidor said.

"Now we're staring down death," Nivea pointed out. "Do you still think we belong here together?"

He squeezed her hand. "We belong together. Let's do this."

Releasing his grip, he lifted the disks and fixed his eyes on the images there. Ink lines pulsed and began to lift from the pages. Hatch marks turned to true shadows. Image strained to break into reality. The moment the bell tolled, the disks would fly, and the images would emerge.

Beside him, Nivea grew still. Her vision retreated inward. With her mind's eye, she gazed out across the world. In the far north, she had once fought beside Captain Pianna of the Order. Now captain and Order both were decimated. In place of honorable battle, Nivea and her comrades had only dishonorable blood sport. Still, it was a living. She tapped the warriors who had granted her summation rights. Each would receive a share of the purse—if he or she survived. Otherwise . . . there were the pit vermin. With inward eyes, Nivea called them. Riding on lines of light, they answered the summons.

The bell tolled. The match began.

Nivea took a staggering step back, her arms flung wide. In the

space before her, motes of light twinkled into being. They seemed stars in a wide cluster but then lengthened into stalks of light. One by one the stalks swelled to take solid form: twenty warriors in the leather and canvas armor of the Order. They bore bone-tipped pole-axes and hook-ended swords. These warriors fought as a unit, striking hard and fast, straight at the foe. Digging toes into sand, the Order contingent charged.

They had not taken two full strides before Ixidor cast a spell. Hurling the first of many disks from the stack in his hand, Ixidor spoke an evocation. The words tore away the whirling paper and left only the lines across it. Ink unraveled in the air. Black and white schematics flung themselves out around the warriors. Drawings overlaid armor of canvas and bone.

Ixidor's magic took hold only just in time.

The marionette man lashed clawlike hands down through the air. His fingertips lanced black fire. It cut down across the warriors and would have sliced them to pieces except for their shimmering protections. Failing to bring forth blood, the spell shot into the sand. There, it *did* find blood—old stains from former duels. Dark flames coruscated. Heat melted the sand to glass and spun it up into the air. A razor thicket of glass formed before the charging troops.

They couldn't stop. They smashed into the glass. It shattered and spun about them. Any exposed flesh was laid bare. Cheeks, eyelids, lips, knuckles, all were flayed. Still, the warriors did not stop. Oozing red, they charged through and sank their pole-axes into the flank of the undead serpent.

Shafts gored black scales. Bone blades clattered amid desiccated ribs. Hunks of rotting flesh fell away. Roaring, the warriors twisted their weapons and yanked. Gobbets of corruption came away. The withered organs of the monster gaped within.

Undead things did not need organs to live. The serpent did not

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even recoil from the assault, bringing its titanic tail around to smash the troops. Triangular scales rattled above creaking bones. The rotten bulk impacted.

An Order warrior was flung through the air to crash against the arena wall. Another snapped like a twig and fell in a crumpled mass. Two more died beneath the tail's crushing weight. The rest climbed out of the tail's path, clambering up the snake's heaving sides. It was the wrong retreat.

The snake's head darted down. Its mouth splayed gray fangs. One pierced a warrior from crown to gut. Another caught the armor of two men and dragged them into the jaws. A comrade who tried to save them was hurled away by the thrashing head. With a crunch of the creature's jaws, four warriors died.

"That's almost half!" shouted Ixidor. He frantically flung a disk that bled blue lines in the air. A net of power wrapped the other warriors and dragged them from harm's way. "Any more troops?"

Nivea's eyes were intent, though she focused on distant places. "I'm bringing in the avens."

Growling, Ixidor remembered the aven disk he'd crumpled in the prep pen.

The marionette man spoke the words of a wicked spell.

Ixidor snarled. "I'll take the wizard."

Reaching to the center of the stack, he drew out a circle scribed with wild vortices. His wrist flicked. The disk sliced through the air. Halfway to the wizard, the paper flashed away. Ink lines whirled into true cyclones. A bundle of spinning storms swarmed the marionette man. Winds picked at his limbs and flung them akimbo. The spells forming before him dissolved. He lost his footing. Kicking frantically, he spun away from the arena floor. A twist of Ixidor's hand sent the wizard up to crack against the

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serpent's jaw. The great snake reeled. The white-faced man tumbled behind it.

"Here's your opening!" Ixidor called.

Nivea stood with arms wide. A contingent of avens winked into being before her. The bird-warriors were a mixed group—some with humanlike heads, others with the heads of eagles, some land bound on raptor legs and others already flapping into the air for battle. Whether with mouths or beaks, they emitted the same shrieking cry.

The sound mounded up through the arena, and the crowd added its own roar. Since the destruction of the Northern Order, it was a rarity to see nomads and avens fighting side by side. The match, especially against so vile a foe, harkened back the glory days of the Order. The sight energized the crowd.

On sand and wing, avens rushed the undead serpent. Talons clutched scales and tore them out. Beaks dived through ribs to pull out organs. Wings beat at the serpent's darting head to confuse it, and one aven rammed his pike through the snake's eye.

Amid pumping wings, Ixidor's disks whirled. With utter precision, they cracked upon the backs of the avens. Magic ambled out across them. Blue power annealed pinions into wings of steel. Rock hard, avens pummeled the serpent with their bodies. They punched through flesh and bone and tore out the other side.

In moments, the undead beast was riddled with holes. Its scales hailed down. Its ribs cracked loose and augured into the sand. Its lashing head flailed on a crackling neck. Avens and Order warriors swarmed the monster, dismantling it.

"Not bad for an improvisation!" Ixidor called out.

"Not good enough!" Nivea answered.

Suddenly, the black beast was gone. It did not vanish but dissolved to a cloud of ash. Avens that had perched on it took startled

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wing. Order warriors dropped down through spinning clouds of white. Ixidor feared at first that they would suffocate in the ash, but something drew it rapidly away. A great roar came from behind the cloud, draining the ash into the marionette man. His body absorbed the strength of the giant serpent.

“Soul-shift!” Nivea warned.

The marionette man leaped forward. Gone was his loose-jointed gait. His body, which had once seemed bones and skin, now bristled with muscles and power. No longer were his eyes sunken, but they bulged like bowls of blood. His crescent smile had grown wider, teeth jutting in fierce triangles. Powerful arms lashed out, and black lightning cracked from fingertips. Each bolt traveled with a will, seeking avens in the air and warriors on the ground. Where the jags of power struck, fighters fell.

Their souls were ripped right out of them. An Order warrior lay boneless, his hair burning. An aven flashed to a skeleton, her flesh turned to drifting smoke. One by one they fell until all of the summoned soldiers were reduced to charred ash.

“Got any more?” Ixidor called out.

Nivea only shook her head, face white with dread.

The black wizard cackled. He lifted his hands above his head. Ebon energy crawled into the air and formed a killing dome. Even the spectators high above leaned back, lest some stray bolt end their lives. In the sudden silence, the mage’s shout was clear to every ear:

“Bow then, or be destroyed. You are finished!”

Ixidor and Nivea traded grave stares. Every eye in the pit watched the undefeated pair. Thousands of wagers and millions of coins waited on their decision. There was only defeat or death. Which would they choose?

Shaking his head angrily, Ixidor flung away his unused disks. They whirled out across the smoldering sands and landed, inert.

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Beside him, Nivea sighed, and the glow of summonings vanishing from her eyes.

A sound, half growl and half sigh, rolled down from the stands.

“May we approach to bow?” Ixidor asked sullenly.

Blood-red eyes fixed on him. The man’s crescent smile grew somehow sharper. “Of course.”

Over sand stained in blood and pocked with soot, the two fighters walked. Ixidor reached out to take his partner’s hand. Nivea squeezed fondly. They spoke to each other in tones no one else could have heard.

“Why did it take you so long?” Nivea hissed.

Ixidor sniffed. “It was like you said, the serpent could smell a deception. I had to wait until it was gone before I could cast the false death.”

“What about the ones killed first?” Nivea asked.

“None of them were killed. That was a minor illusion, and a bit of acting on their parts. No, my dear, they’re quite fine. Look.” He nodded gently past the black mage, toward the wall of the arena. Shadowy figures shifted across the cut stone. Ixidor’s remaining disks, lying in an arc behind the mage, had set up an illusory curtain of magic, behind which the avens and Order warriors advanced. No one in the crowd or the arena could have seen them. Even to Ixidor they seemed only wavering air, like a desert mirage. “They’re all alive and ready.”

Nivea gritted her teeth. “I hate the killing.”

Ixidor smiled tightly. “We don’t kill, and none of our people get killed.”

“So far. . . .” They had reached the marionette man.

He towered above them, preternaturally tall. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest. The black shocks from his fingers still whirled, flinging his cloak back behind him. “Well? Will you bow, or will you die?”

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Ixidor's eyes blazed. "Before we bow, I must remove one final illusion." He lifted his hand, and before the mage could counter, simply snapped.

In a tight circle around the man, a shimmering curtain of force dropped to the sand, revealing twenty warriors of the Northern Order and the full contingent of avens. Four men grasped the mage's burly arms and forced them up beside his head. A fifth man rammed a squelching helm down on the mage's head and cinched the arm loops tight. The largest aven grasped the wizard's belt and hoisted him high on flapping wings. The once-fearsome necromancer now seemed no more than a trout in the claws of an eagle.

It all had happened in a breath of time—the gasp drawn by the crowd when they saw the living warriors. Now those full throats bellowed in joy. It was a strange sound. The crowd was unanimous for Ixidor and Nivea. Even those who had lost a fortune knew a good show when they saw one. Noble warriors and ignoble illusion—what better show could there be?

Ixidor beamed, clutching Nivea's hand and lifting it high in triumph. Side by side, they bowed to their adoring fans.

All the while, their foe wriggled impotently in the grasp of the bird-man.

"One of the things that's great about not killing them," Ixidor said through his fierce smile, "is it takes the judge awhile to declare a victory, and we get all that time for bows."

Nivea wore a sideways grin. "You enjoy this too much."

"You do too."

Only then did the death bell toll—a symbolic death for the necromancer, but a real victory for Nivea and Ixidor. The crowd's shouts grew to an ovation that rattled the rock walls of the pit. The best sound of all, though, was the roar of coin—gold and silver and electrum—from the coffers of the Cabal into Ixidor's own lock box.

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“Enough to quit the pit?” asked Nivea hopefully.

Looking around at the two contingents, Ixidor said, “Not with all these mouths to feed. Next time we fight, it’ll be enough. I’ll make sure of it.”