

Onslaught: The Making of a Story (Part 2 of 3)

By Jess Lebow

The next morning I got up early so I could get to the grocery store right as they were putting out the maple bars. There's nothing quite as nice as a fresh, hot doughnut. (Remember, when this author summit took place, there wasn't yet a Krispy Kreme in Washington state. We had to get the warm goodness where we could.) When I got to the office, Rob was waiting for me. He'd hardly slept because he was kept up by visions of what we would do with the new story.

"I've got some really good ideas," he blurted out as soon as he saw me.

I still hadn't had my coffee yet, so I was proud of myself when my reply came out as something slightly more articulate than a grunt. "Morning, Rob. Doughnut?"

We headed up the stairs, and Rob told me about the epiphany he'd had last night. I tried to listen, but I was having a hard enough time making sure I didn't trip and drop my precious cargo. I held the doughnuts in my open palm, and I could feel their warmth through the bottom of the box. When we got to our meeting room and I'd had several large pulls from my mug of coffee, I was ready to get to work.

"Okay, tell me again what you'd said on the way up here. I missed most of it." I shrugged. "I have a caffeinated attention span."

Another thing I really like about Rob is that he's very down to earth. He's not easily offended and doesn't get upset when he has to repeat or explain himself to the weak minded (like me).

He started again. "Well, I think the key to our conflict is in Jeska."

"Go on," I said, taking another sip.

"Well, Kamahl came all the way from his mountain home to the Krosan Forest to save his sister's life. And when *Judgment* ends, Kamahl isn't completely certain whether Jeska is alive or not."

"Right. So he goes back to find her and . . ."

"And not only has he changed, but so has she."

The transformation of Jeska into Phage was admittedly a surprise for me. We had spent the previous day discussing ways to have Kamahl grow and his metamorphosis as a character, but I hadn't given much thought to his sister -- the woman he'd come down from the mountains to save. Actually, I wasn't surprised that Rob had thought of it. I was surprised we hadn't thought of it earlier.

It made perfect sense. Like her brother, Jeska was a barbarian. She lived by the sword, and Kamahl's Mirrari-enhanced sword nearly killed her. She was comatose and fighting to stay alive during the last third or more of the *Judgment* story. After a near-death experience, of course Jeska would have a different outlook.

But Rob took it one step further.

It was a sunny day (a rarity in the early spring in Washington), and after we got back from lunch the two of us lit up cigars and stood outside, continuing to talk about Jeska.

"What if the process that healed her was the very thing that changed her?" Rob asked between puffs on his cigar. It wasn't really a question. He already knew the answer; he just wanted me to follow him down the rabbit hole.

"You mean like a mana infusion or something?" I asked.

"Well, sort of." He blew a smoke ring. "But more like the way a heart transplant changes the patient's temperament. A fundamental part of the person becomes irrevocably different during the healing process, and his personality changes with it."

He was right. We weren't going to slap a bandage on Jeska's belly and send her home with a lollipop. We were talking about major, invasive, emergency healing procedures to repair the damage Kamahl had done. To make matters worse, Jeska was in the middle of the forest.

In **Magic: The Gathering**, when you think of healing, you think of white. It's the color of clerics, healing salves, divine favors, and damage prevention. But white civilizations don't build hospitals in the middle of a forest, and you'd never catch a Serra Angel soiling her wings in the deep of the jungle.

We had to find a way to heal Jeska in a nontraditional, nonwhite manner.

You could argue that green has some minor healing properties, but that's really only true if you're talking about players. There are ways to boost your life total with green spells, and the arcane energies of the forest can even pump up a creature's toughness and certainly its power. Those things -- in game terms -- can approximate healing and might even be called reasonable facsimiles, but when it comes to *actually repairing damage*, green just can't do it.

Black, however, can.

Now it's true that black healing isn't exactly the same as white. There is always a price to pay, and something (or someone) has to suffer should you heal someone in the swamps. But, if you're willing to pay the necromancer, anything is possible.

With that in mind, we set out to heal Jeska with black mana. What we found when we got there was that it worked out better than we had hoped. While Kamahl had shifted from red to green, his sister would go in the exact opposite direction, moving only one color to the right but in the process transforming from a friend and ally into her brother's polar opposite. She would be firmly ensconced in the enemy's camp.

Jeska's drastic transformation would be represented easily on cards by changing her dress and coloration from red barbarian to black Cabal minion. Later, while Rob was writing the book, he discovered that her pendulum had swung so far away from who she had been that he renamed her Phage to call attention to the change and help ease the transition. If you've followed the story this far -- and I'm assuming you have -- you know that the Cabal First's power is based partially on his knowledge of all his minions' secret names. Giving her a new name was like a rite of passage, and it fit well into the existing story. Jeska embraced the dark side, and it returned her affection.

As Rob had suggested, the healing process had become the catalyst for change, and now, not only did we have growth in both of our main characters, but we also had a fantastic conflict. What could be more perfect than a pair of siblings, each with their own personality, who are constantly at odds? If you have a brother or sister you know that that alone is enough to cause conflict for a lifetime. But add to that the fact that Kamahl had been the one to nearly fatally wound Jeska in the first place. Then throw in a dash of the **Magic** color wheel and move these characters in opposite directions -- just one step puts them in direct conflict. The guilt of his crimes weighs heavily on Kamahl, and Phage is driven forward by a burning desire for revenge.

Back in the conference room, with the day was coming to a close, I picked up the now-empty box of doughnuts and folded it over before stuffing it in the garbage can.

"You know, maybe tomorrow you should try to get some Boston cremes," said Rob, shutting the clasps on his briefcase and heading for the door.

"I don't think they even make them out here," I said, picking up my papers and smearing a sticky gob of maple frosting on my meeting agenda. "Aren't they like Champagne in France or Tequila in Mexico? You just can't call them Boston cremes if they aren't from Boston, can you?"

"Well, I don't know," said Rob. "We have French fries that weren't made in France."

"True," I replied, "but the French will tell you the fry was invented in Belgium."

"What does that have to do with our Boston cremes?"

"Nothing, I guess." I shrugged. "I'll see what I can do."

Check back next month for the third part of this three-part series, watch for J. Robert King's May **Magicbook** *Scourge*, and check out his current book [Legions](#). Available everywhere fine fantasy fiction is sold.

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