

Episode 3: The Locked Tower

Langley Hyde

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Art by: Bryan Sola

Karn wished to be alone. He wished to be working on research—if only he could lose himself in a mathematical formula’s crispness, if only he could forget how it felt to have oil and blood drying on his body. But he could not escape. He was locked into New Argive’s watchtower, in a small circular upper room ringed in steel-shuttered windows. The dim yellow glow of the powerstone overhead illuminated a pedestal with a control panel beneath it. Only he had the key that would end the tower’s lockdown, and he would not use it, not until they’d captured the Phyrexian, and not until he knew for certain his companions—Jodah and Jaya, Teferi and Stenn—were free from New Phyrexia’s influence.

“Where’s the sylex?” Jaya asked.

“Safe,” Karn replied.

He turned away so that the others could not see his face. He needed a cloth but could not generate one. He held out his hands and drew particles from the aether, creating a small wire brush, identical to the one he’d used so many years ago, to clean himself after Urza sent him to war. His palms fizzed with magic as metal accrued.

“Why not tell us where it is now?” Jaya asked.

Teferi craned his head as if still searching the ceiling for the Phyrexian spy-creature. “Even Planeswalkers can be corrupted now. Karn’s the only one with immunity to the oil.”

While Karn appreciated that Teferi defended him, he did not like being spoken of as if he weren't in the room, as if he were an object. But he supposed old habits died hard. Teferi had been Urza's student before Karn's birth.

"I'm not a spy." Jaya seemed insulted.

"You wouldn't know if you were," Stenn said.

"I have a plan to find and defeat Sheoldred," Karn said. "I will tell you what it is once we have secured the tower."

Jodah rubbed his temples, looking irritable and drawn. Karn suspected portaling them all had strained the mage's capacity. Jodah said, "I'll trust you. I should have done so sooner, anyway."

"I can't say I like the idea of jumping through hoops to prove myself to you, Karn," Jaya said. "I can understand why you think we have to do it. But I don't like it. My circus days are over, and I was never all that interested in performing tricks."

"We need to find the Phyrexian creature first," Jodah said.

"Splitting up will be the most efficient way to search for the creature," Karn said.

"Jaya and I can take the upper floors," Jodah said. "Teferi and Karn can take the lower."

"That leaves me alone for the basement level," Stenn grimaced. "I suppose that's just as well. It's mostly one big boiler room. I'm liking this plan less and less."

Karn led Teferi down the narrow metal stairs. The grating creaked underfoot, designed to accommodate a light human frame, not a ton of metal.

The hall on the third floor was narrow, the stone gray.

A click, and mechanical lamps flickered into dim life. "The toggle that controls the lights is next to the door," said Teferi, pleased.

"It may have passed this direction," Karn touched his fingers to a blood-and-slime trail on the wall at his shoulder height. "Let us follow it."

The trail terminated at a door labeled "STORAGE: WATERWORKS." Blobs of slime coated the hinge as if the creature had squeezed through the gap. Teferi crouched. He did not touch it, but his hand hovered over the goop. He looked up at Karn. "Should we call the others?"

"Not yet." Karn paused. "We don't know if the creature is still here."

Teferi opened the door a crack, then paused.

When nothing jumped through the gap, Teferi swung it open and stepped through. Karn followed. Tall racks of unused copper pipes loomed to one side. The other side had steel shelving that held wooden crates brimming with gears, flanges, and valves. Karn could see no further sign of the creature's passage.

Nonetheless: "Teferi, let us search the room."

The tight passages between the storage racks were designed to admit humans. Karn felt large and unwieldy. His elbows clanged against pipes, and he jostled boxes when he pressed through the narrow aisles. He paused, then knelt, ducking awkwardly under a low-hanging steam pipe. Blood dripped from the underside of a shelf.

He traced the fluid upward, to its source. It looked as though several pipes were bleeding? A throbbing chunk of meat had attached itself, barnacle-like, to the copper. It released a gout of acid, dissolving the metal, and then it regurgitated a metallic barb from its side. Karn reached out to the fleshy deposit and crushed it.

“Karn, I need you to come over here.”

Karn traced Teferi’s voice and found Teferi standing in the corner near a wooden rack with tubs of sealant stacked upon it. Teferi pressed his fingers to his lips and tilted his head in a “listening” gesture.

“I don’t like this.” Jodah’s voice carried through the pipes, clear.

“Don’t like what?” said Jaya.

Karn frowned at Teferi. Teferi pointed at a vent.

“That Karn is having us search before telling us his plan.” Jodah sounded bothered. “Shouldn’t we talk this through together, work out the details as a team?”

Karn traced the vent with his gaze. The pipes disappeared into the ceiling.

Despite Jaya’s earlier objection to jumping through hoops, Karn heard her low laugh. “Oh, so you’re assuming *your* way is the only way to do this? Remind you of anyone?”

“Jaya, it’s not like—”

“Go on.” Jaya’s laugh rang. “Protest some more. That’ll really make your case.”

The voices faded.

Karn contemplated the overhead vent. “It seems possible that the Phyrexian spy can use these vents to travel between floors.”

Teferi pointed, without touching, at black oil on the vent’s corner, then down to a vent on the floor. Karn crouched to view it. It looked as though the metal had been cannibalized, or possibly transformed, into an eyeball, ringed with small vicious teeth rather than lashes. Small additional eyes nestled beside it, opening and closing. Overhead, a skittering noise, then the click of metal claws ringing along the vents.

Teferi craned. “What do you think we should do?”

Karn pivoted, seeking the noise’s source. It stopped. He’d lost it. “Unlike the others, you don’t seem to take issue with my unilateral creation of a plan.”

“Urza used you like a tool,” Teferi said. “I never questioned it. I should have, and recently Niambi got me thinking. I wish I’d been more thoughtful when I was younger. More observant. And that I’d treated you better.”

Karn traced a *ting-ting-ting* along the pipes. He pursued it into the storeroom’s corner and then located a small vent in the floor. Slime and blood slid down between the metal slots, thick and clotting. “We must proceed back to the stairs, then down to the second floor.”

Karn led Teferi back into the stairwell. The metal creaked under his weight but did not bend. The bolts fixing it to the stone held.

Teferi’s words had fallen short of an apology but had been heartfelt. Karn understood that what he was about to do was manipulative given their current conversation. But he felt he had little choice. “Thank you, Teferi. I need your help. Even I cannot watch the sylex continuously using the sryer. I have hidden it in a sea cave by Tolaria West.”

Teferi nodded, solemn. “I honor your trust in me. I can help you guard it.”

A shout reverberated down the stairwell: Jodah.

Karn reversed course. He sprinted up the stairs, the grate rattling under his footsteps. Teferi ran after him, a touch slower due to his human limitations.

Karn located Jodah and Jaya on the fourth floor in a small office located off the main corridor. Jodah flung the squid-like Phyrexian off him, and it splatted into a wall. Jaya pressed her hands together and blasted it with white-hot flame—and the creature split into halves, avoiding the fire. Each half sprouted multiple multijointed legs from its gory insides. Hungry mouths bloomed along its carapace, ringed in tiny razor-sharp teeth.

Jaya parted her hands, dividing her flame, to pursue each half. The creature split again, this time into four small chittering beasts with dozens of legs growing from central gobs of flesh twined around with cables. The creatures scattered, each going in a differing direction.



Art by: Justyna Dura

Karn stomped on one that attempted to squeak past him out the door.

Jaya brought her hands together, trapping one between sizzling gouts of flame. “I wouldn’t eat them,” she said, “but they sure do fry up nice.”

The creature cried out as it died, a high-pitched noise that subsided into a bubbling whine. Jodah gathered more white energy between his hands, but the other creatures had skittered away.

Teferi arrived, panting, at the door, hands held at the ready—just in time to see the creatures squeeze themselves through the cracks in the stone, leaving behind nothing but glistening oil and mucus as a sign of their escape.

The four of them stared at the destroyed office: the smoldering papers, the shattered chair. Stenn arrived, dripping with sweat. He tried to peer around Teferi, then stepped back, bending over. He wiped his forehead against his sleeve.

“Too many stairs,” he huffed.

“If they split like that,” Teferi said, “then we can’t know how many are in the building.”

Karn lifted his foot to examine the pulp beneath it. “Interesting.”

“While some people might find fighting an unknown number of opponents that can seep through walls and attack at any time *interesting*,” Jaya said, “I can think of a good hundred other ways I’d like to spend the evening.”

“Karn,” Jodah said, “please just tell us your plan—and the sylex’s location.”

Teferi, carefully, didn’t look at Karn. “After all these years, Karn,” Jodah said, “can you trust none of us?”

“No.”

“Wise,” Stenn said. “If Sheoldred knew the sylex’s location, she would stop at nothing to attain it. Since any of us could be a sleeper agent, we can’t risk having that become common knowledge—and we don’t know how well that *that thing* can listen.”

“You must be the most stubborn, inflexible—” Jodah said.

“Just like some people I know.” Jaya sighed. “The least we can do is develop a way to locate the creature. It’s doing us no good searching for it blindly.”

“We have biological samples,” Karn said.

Jodah knelt to examine the goop and sighed. “If I developed a tracker, of sorts, using that material, it could follow organisms with similar tissue. But it wouldn’t be some Phyrexian detector. It would only be able to locate that one creature and whatever it’s split into.”

“Sounds better than nothing,” Jaya said.

Jodah looked up at Karn. “Could you generate impenetrable metal shells around the material? I don’t want to risk handling it, but we’ll need to have the organic matter with us to guide and power the spell.”

“Yes,” Karn said. “Do you have further guidance regarding the object’s construction?”

Jodah considered, then added, “Put a needle on it. I’ll enchant that directly to guide us.”

“Similar to a compass,” Karn said.

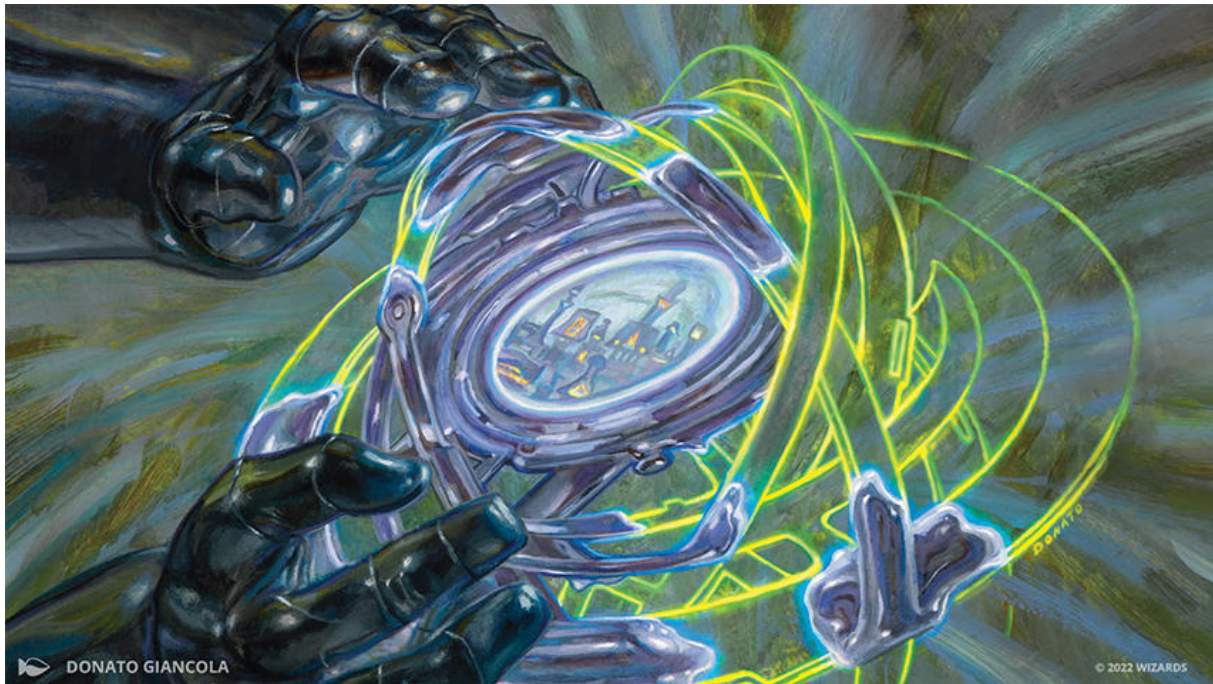
Jodah nodded.

Karn created the metal items to Jodah’s specification. He created each one to be the size of a clamshell, small enough to fit human hands, and built it up around a gob of Phyrexian flesh. He handed them to Jodah.

While Jodah grasped them and muttered, weaving his radiant spells, Karn stepped off to the side. In a small nook between crates, he kept his back to the others and generated a miniature scrying device, similar to the one he had made in Oyster Bay but smaller. When he was done, he intended to hang it on the chain around his neck alongside the *Weatherlight* beacon. He missed Ajani and wished the leonin was here to help him.

A haze filled the amulet’s crystalline surface. Karn frowned. Ajani—where was he? The scryer stuttered, then resolved. Ajani seemed to be fighting. Karn could not make out the shadowed forms that Ajani exchanged blows with, but he suspected them to be Phyrexian, which explained the scryer’s difficulty focusing on them. The image clarified, and Karn saw Ajani speaking with a young Capashen knight, a woman with a brash set to her shoulders.

He sought the sea caves by Tolaria West. No Phyrexians searched the coast; the area seemed serene. If Teferi was a spy, he had not yet reported to Sheoldred. Karn frowned.



Art by: Donato Giancola

“Karn, I—” Jaya stopped. Frustration clouded her face. “What’s that?”

Stenn peered around her. “Yes, what *is* that?”

Karn hung it from the necklace. “It is not of concern.”

“Jodah finished your amulet.” Jaya handed it to him. “He’s almost done.”

Karn inspected it. Its locator needle swung, bobbing between two points as if confused.

Jodah pocketed his. “I’m going to return to checking the upper floors.”

Jaya moved to go after him, but Karn lifted a hand to stop her. “Your long-standing friendship aside, I do not think your quick tongue has a calming effect.”

“True,” Jaya conceded. “Stenn, given this creature can ooze through walls, are there maintenance areas we should be checking for infestation? Crawl spaces?”

“Yes, actually,” Stenn said. “There’s an elaborate venting system to allow air to escape from the lower levels, should the city need to retreat into the earth for defensive reasons.”

Teferi whistled, clearly impressed. “I’ll go with Jodah.”

“Then I shall take the basement alone,” Karn said.

“Better you than me,” Stenn said, fervent. “That room is disconcerting. There’s so much noise from the boilers that you’d never be able to hear something sneaking up on you.”

Karn waited until Stenn, Jaya, and Teferi had left the room. He headed down into basement level, the locator in his palm.

If Jodah were compromised, would the enchantment even work?

The basement level consisted of a short but broad corridor edged with pipes. Unlike the pipes in storage above, these were live: hissing with steam, their shutoffs cranked open, their valves leaking. The

rooms held boilers and hydraulics constructed with intricate beauty from copper and steel, each rivet lovingly set and integrated with Thran technology.

“Ah, Karn!” Jodah entered the boiler room, shouting to be heard over the din. Teferi followed him. “I’ve been looking for you. I think I need to recalibrate the locators so that the needle only points toward the nearest creature. It’s also having a hard time differentiating up from down. If you could—”

Jaya and Stenn opened the door.

“Just who I was looking for,” Jaya said. “This thing you made isn’t working, Jodah. It’s useless. Keeps on pointing, then moving, like it can’t make up its mind.”

But Jodah stared at her. “Are you bleeding?”

Jaya clutched her arm. Her eyes narrowed. “Never seen a flesh wound before?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jodah asked. He glanced over at Karn, meaningfully.

Karn handed Jodah his locator.

“Why would I? I’m not five years old.” Jaya sounded insulted. “It’s just a scrape.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Jodah stretched his fingers over the locator, pulling up a meshed spell network from the device and tweaking it. He flicked his fingers down, and the spell settled back into the metal. Jodah returned the locator to Karn. “What if glistening oil has gotten inside you?”

“It didn’t,” Jaya said, icy.

“If that’s true,” Jodah said, “then why hide it?”

“I wasn’t hiding it,” Jaya said. “It just wasn’t important.”

In the floors above, a rattling—then a boom. It sounded like something had overturned one of the racks filled with pipes. Karn calculated that several dozen pipes must be rolling on the floor to create such a din. “It must be upstairs. Teferi, Stenn, you investigate with Jaya.”

Teferi nodded, his face solemn and his eyes on Jaya. Perhaps he thought Karn intended for him to watch Jaya, due to her wound. Karn did not think glistening oil could infect so quickly, and yet how could he be sure?

Jodah handed a locator to Karn. “Could you change the needle so it rests on a bearing? Or at least something that can pivot? I think it should be able to point up and down as well as in a circular motion.”

Karn nodded and set to work at altering the mechanisms. Jodah leaned over the locators. He drew his hands over them, pulling up the spells so they hovered midair in delicate glowing magical networks. He tinkered, altering how the nodes and colors connected.

Normally Karn enjoyed working at someone’s shoulder on a mechanical task. It was peaceful. But not so with Jodah.

Jodah leaned back on his heels and pushed his unkempt hair back from his face. He wore a rueful expression, its ageless quality at odds with his apparent youth. “You’ve seemed different since your return from New Phyrexia.”

When Karn had returned to find that Jodah and Jhoira had been involved while he was away, he’d been startled. And uncomfortable. Even though Jodah and Jhoira’s relationship had not continued, its aftereffects had. Karn considered responding more tactfully. But who knew what a moment of honesty might reveal here? “Recently, the way you offer advice has reminded me of Urza.”

“Ah, and I, the ancient, wise, and powerful wizard may have grown arrogant over the eras.” Jodah pressed his hands into the spells, pushing the magic back into the metal. “Jhoira sees you as vulnerable. It made me feel like I had to look out for you, for her sake.”

The needles in the locators quivered. Each swung wildly, spinning in differing directions.

“I would prefer to be your partner in this venture,” Karn said.

“Partners confide in each other,” Jodah said.

Karn pretended to hesitate. He nodded, slowly. “If you were compromised, I don’t believe that you would be so obvious in your anger and impatience. The sylex is located in a warehouse in Estark.”

Jodah laughed at that. “Well. Thanks for that, I suppose.”

The needles pointed in different directions. All directions.

Jodah stared at the locators, dismayed. “How could I get this wrong twice?”

“You did not,” Karn said.

The walls rustled with sudden movement.

Creatures flung themselves at Karn and Jodah, cables outstretched and mouths seeking. Jodah attempted to ready his magic, but the light around his hands was dim, flickering. He had exhausted himself from portaling them to the tower, then again from creating the locators.

A half-dozen more creatures launched themselves at Jodah, wet and fluttering. Karn adjusted his stance to defend Jodah. He seized a creature from the air and ripped it in half. He flung it outward at the other creatures. He swiped another from the air. But there were too many—some got through.

Jodah seared one with a blast of pale light, then fell to his knees in exhaustion. Creatures had started to climb up his body, their probing mouths searching for his skin. Even though Karn’s instincts cried out for him to watch the walls, he turned to Jodah. He peeled off the creatures, ripping clinging tentacles in the process, and flung them aside. The disconnected tentacles bound to Jodah in clots. The clusters began to grow sucking mouths.

Flame roared throughout the room. The roar deafened Karn. Heat rushed through the room, sterilizing it, and poured over his body in sheets. It felt pleasant, warm and ticklish. The flames poured forward and licked at Jodah, gently. The creatures lodged on his body bubbled.

Karn reached forward, and this time was able to remove the remaining clinging creatures one at a time. The limbs drooped free. He pulled the rest from Jodah’s prone body, then turned to face their rescuer: Jaya. Her fire centered around her, white-hot, and illuminated her face. Its light cast the lines worn into her skin into relief, and the heat rippling the air caused her white hair to lash around her. Her eyes reflected the firelight. She smiled, her lips tight.

Stenn ran into the room. Jaya’s blast wrapped around him, not touching him, but repelling his Phyrexian attackers. He stabbed a small creature crab-skittering around the floor, pinning it. It writhed, legs outstretched and twitching, and he used a dagger to bisect it.

“He okay?” Jaya nodded at Jodah.

“Yes,” Karn said. “The good news is that your locators appear to be working correctly.”

Karn peered over at the locators. They pointed upward, but their needles did not quiver with tension as they had in the moments before the attack. He picked up his locator, then turned to the walls to see how the Phyrexian creatures had crept up on them. He could find no hints as to how so many had

approached undetected. Inside the walls, Thran technology glistened gold. It probably connected to the powerstone and powered the hydraulics.

“What a relief.” Jodah’s laugh turned into a cough.

“Where’s Teferi?” Stenn asked. “You’d think he would have heard the commotion.”

The silence descended into discomfort. What if this mass attack had been but a distraction so that Teferi could try to transmit the sylex’s location to the Phyrexians? What if the Phyrexians even now searched Tolaria West, laying waste to its coast? Karn wished to look in his scryer but dared not give his advantage away.

“I’ll go look for him,” Jaya said.

Karn moved to join her, placing himself at her side. Perhaps he would have an opportunity to examine his scryer. “And I as well.”

Stenn crouched near Jodah. “I’ll stay here. He’s not looking so great.”

Jodah waved Stenn away, weakly. “I need a minute to recoup my strength. Go on. If Teferi is alone, and he suffers an attack like the one we just suffered, the results could be dire. He could be compleated. Or killed.”

“And you’re too weak to fight off a second attack alone,” Stenn said, reasonably.

“You’re too proud, old man,” Jaya said. “Learn how to accept help.”

From how Jodah’s face pinched, Karn guessed this was an old argument between him and Jaya, one that he had not been privy to. Jaya waved Karn along with her, and the two left the basement, returning to the rattling staircase. They climbed upward in silence. Karn’s footsteps, despite his care, seemed loud, metal against metal. Jaya ascended spritely as a cat.

“Your magic is extremely effective against the Phyrexian creatures,” Karn said.

Though Karn could not see Jaya’s face, he could hear the grin in her voice. “Have to say, controlled pyromania is the best part of being a fire mage. You do get a feeling for what burns.”

“Your fire seems to sterilize them,” Karn said. “As if it is inimical.”

Jaya held up her hand, gesturing for silence. Karn fell still. Jaya’s shoulders tensed. He could hear nothing. Jaya shook her head and continued upward.

“I cannot believe that anyone with such magic would be a Phyrexian spy,” Karn said, though he could, indeed, believe it. A Phyrexian would be capable of any subterfuge. “You have killed more of those creatures than the rest of us combined. If something happens to me, someone must know where the sylex is, so it can be deployed.”

“You finally decided you could trust me?” Jaya laughed. “I’m flattered.”

“Yes,” Karn said. “It is hidden in Suq’Ata.”

Jaya didn’t pause. “About time you told me that. Keeping the sylex’s location in one mind is dangerous. Venser’s spark or not, no one is invulnerable. Not even you.”

She had a point.

In the upper stories, Teferi shouted, and both of them took off at a sprint. They found Teferi pinned to floor by a Phyrexian monstrosity that loomed over him like a hungry spider. Blood soaked his robes from a slash in his gut.

Karn tore the creature from Teferi's body—even though its claws, hooked into his flesh, took muscle with it. He slammed it against the wall, pulverizing it.

Jaya ran into the room. "Get down!"

Karn pivoted and hunched his body over Teferi to protect him.

Jaya bathed the room in fire. Phyrexian monstrosities—dozens of them, too many—screeched in agony. The cries died into despairing bubbling, into whimpering, then silence. The flames roasted Karn's back, scorching the blood and guts onto his metal body.

"Clear," Jaya said.

Karn lifted himself to his feet.

"Karn, thank you." Teferi patted the top of his hair and found it unsinged.

Jodah, his arm slung over Stenn's neck, joined them. Jodah seemed drained. He scanned the debris in the room—it had once been an office, complete with filing cabinets.

"This involves far, far more than one creature," Jodah said.

"You're right." Stenn slunk out from under Jodah's arm. "We use a lot of Thran technology in Argivia, and it looks like the Phyrexians have co-opted it somehow. Integrated into it. The thing's tendrils have spread throughout the entire watchtower."

Karn examined Teferi's wound. He needed medical attention. "Perhaps we must consider lowering the barrier in order to obtain a physician for Teferi. He is gravely wounded."

"Have you determined that we're all safe?" Teferi asked.

"Can he afford to?" Jodah said. "He could wait. He could second-guess himself forever. He could test us all a thousand times. How could he ever know? How could anyone?"

Jaya said, "I think we should eradicate any Phyrexians within the tower before lowering the barrier. If that creature so easily integrated itself into a single tower, what might it do to a city?"

"What do you think we should do?" Stenn asked.

"Go to the powerstone," Jaya said. "Let's root this out. At its source."

Teferi grimaced. "If someone can get me up there, I'm game to follow Jaya's plan. We might as well try."

"I can carry you," Karn said.

Teferi gave him a long look, then sighed.

"It's decided," Jodah said.

Jaya cackled. "Oh, you've been waiting all night to be the one to say that, haven't you?"

Jodah still had enough energy left in him to look annoyed. Karn shook his head at their exchange and knelt to lift Teferi—carefully.

In the uppermost chamber, the powerstone's glow dominated the claustrophobic space, shining directly down into the central pedestal's control panel and filling the small circular room with its sickly yellow light. The arched windows ringing the room were still tightly shuttered with steel. Karn wished he could open one and feel the night's cool air on his body. He found a metal access panel and popped it open. The powerstone seemed integrated into a wire nest, which no doubt connected to the lockdown system, the boiler room, the vents, and everything else in the tower. Stenn pressed himself close to the panel to look. "It's worse than I thought."

Karn glanced at Stenn. He had told each Planeswalker a false location for the sylex, but he had not yet tested Stenn. He spoke, low enough that the others would not hear. "I need to confide the sylex's location. If I am damaged and cannot reach it, the knowledge cannot be lost."

"I understand," Stenn said, solemn. He did not seem at all perturbed. His focus lay on the wires in the walls.

"Should that happen," Karn said, "you are to determine which among the Planeswalkers you can trust so that the sylex can be brought to New Phyrexia in order to destroy the Phyrexians at their center. I hesitate to ask this, as it would involve asking a Planeswalker to sacrifice themselves to repair my mistake "

"It would be an immense responsibility," Stenn said.

Karn pretended reluctance, then spoke. "I concealed it in the ruins of Trokair, on Sarpadia."

"That's all I needed," Stenn said. His voice, a sudden hiss, sounded horribly familiar.

Stenn threw his robes from his shoulders. Surgery lines, previously invisible, deepened in his skin. The buttons on his shirt popped free as his chest seemed to swell and swell—only to burst, butterflying open, ribs splayed. Iron cords poured from his torso's cavity rather than intestines, weeping mucus and blood. His face, before all this horror, seemed ecstatic—as if he had finally found his purpose and fulfilled it. He raised his head, his eyes focused upward, his lips moving as in prayer. Hand-like claws emerged from his eyes and reached around his skull, to grip it. His metallic intestines slithered across the floor, hooking into the Thran powerstone, and his entire body stiffened. The powerstone's light throbbed, then dimmed, as Stenn consumed its energy. His mouth gaped, frozen in a voiceless whisper.

He had converted his entire body into an antenna, Karn realized, and transmitted his hard-won knowledge to Sheoldred, confiding in her the sylex's location.

Its false location.

"Stop him," Teferi grunted. He clutched at his gut wound, and his eyes brightened with anger. "Don't let him—"

Jaya lunged forward, her hands outthrust. Fire blazed.

Stenn did not spare her a glance. His bloody wires reared up from the ground, debris sticking to their gore, and wrapped themselves around her like anacondas, binding her hands and pinning them to her sides. Jaya, unable to use her magic without searing herself, struggled against Stenn to free her hands. But she couldn't breathe. Her face blued.

Karn charged toward her. Fast as he tore fibers away from her body, more writhed into place. Small tight lines threaded themselves between his fingers, defying him. Jaya's eyes seemed so wide, so panicked.

Teferi sat up and readied his magic, but his spell, cast in such a weakened state, did little more than flicker into a nebulous blue haze before fading. Teferi moaned and sagged back onto the floor. The blood soaking his garments deepened in color as it wicked through the cloth. Jodah ran to Teferi's side, muttering a healing spell under his breath.

"We have to get out of here!" Jodah shouted.

Karn agreed. The control panel had a straightforward layout. He inserted the key Stenn had given him into the pedestal. He opened up a metal lid, then flipped the toggle. The steel shutters jolted upward, the chain within the walls rattled, and gears ground. Cool night air poured into the tower. But along with that fresh air came noises: gibbering and shrieks, from the city below.

Karn could not free Jaya from the cables writhing around her, so he turned. He dismembered Stenn—no, not Stenn, the Phyrexian who had killed Stenn, who had compleated him and taken his place—with efficiency. He tried not to think about his actions: he removed bones from sockets, and tossed the pieces aside, as easily as stripping a chicken at a banquet.

Jaya inhaled, her breath a rasp that carried through the dark, and then blasted not-Stenn with a gout of scarlet flame. The fire poured over Karn and sizzled across not-Stenn's flesh, frying his organic components.

The Phyrexian sagged to the floor, a collection of blackened metal and crisped organics. Jodah looked up at Jaya. His hands lay outstretched over Teferi's stomach. "I'm too exhausted to heal him. I can keep him from bleeding out, but that's about it. We need help."

"It is time that I call the *Weatherlight*," Karn said.

"Why don't we give it a few more minutes? Until things are really desperate?" Jaya said.

Karn opened the summoning amulet like a locket. He flipped the toggle inside.

Shanna's voice, quiet and tinny, piped up. "What is it, Ajani?"

"This is Karn. Jodah, Teferi, Jaya, and I need to be brought to safety. Teferi is wounded."

There was a pause from the other end. "Your location?"

"Argivia. In the watchtower. Under attack by Phyrexians."

"Phyrexians?" Karn could hear the *Weatherlight* creaking in the winds. When she spoke again, her voice sounded calm and determined: "You're in luck—we're not far. If the winds favor us, we'll be there soon."

"Understood."

"See you soon. Shanna out."

The Phyrexian noises seemed to be getting closer; echoing through the vents, between the walls, squeaks and burbles punctuated mechanical clicks and fleshy rustles. The entire tower was infested—perhaps even the entire city. Stenn had overseen rooting out Phyrexian agents in Argivia. It was fair to assume he had done the exact opposite.

"Teferi is too wounded to move. We must hold out until Shanna arrives," said Karn. "Jaya, you seem to be in the best shape among us. You will lead. I will take up a central position as I must defend Teferi. Jodah, keep watch at the rear."

Jodah opened his mouth. Jaya lit two fireballs in her hands. She weighed them and raised her eyebrows at Jodah. Jodah, abashed, closed his mouth.

After a moment, he spoke, mild: "I was going to say that this is an excellent plan."