

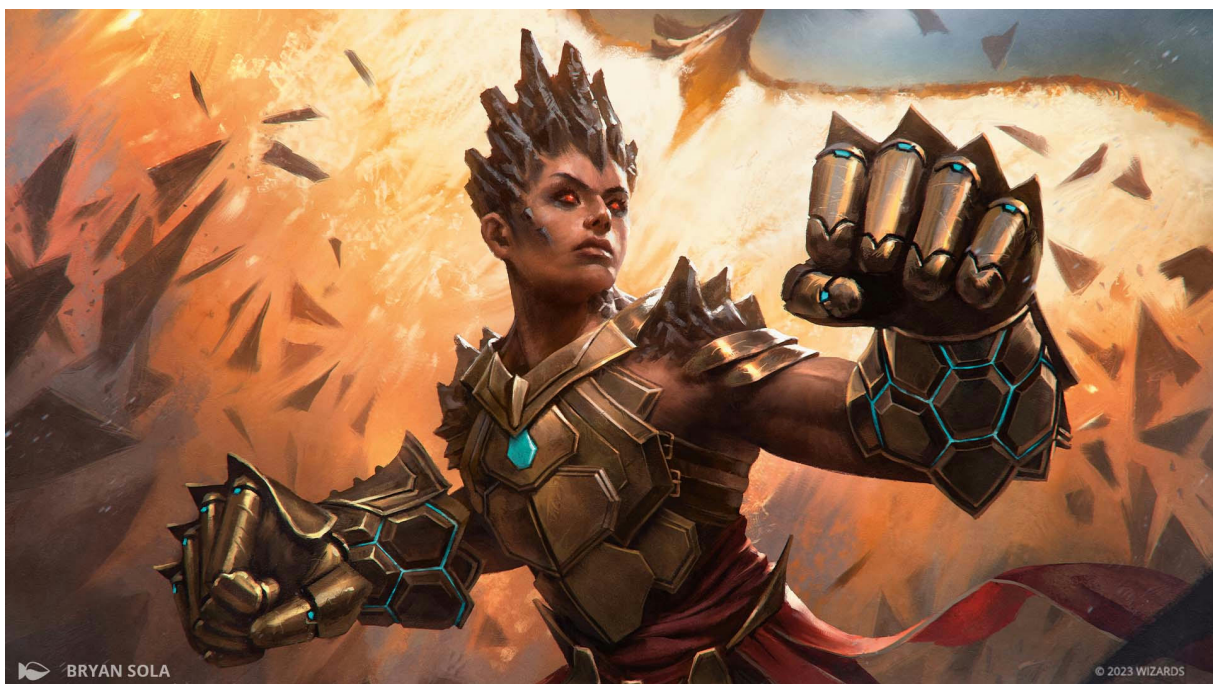
Cinders

Cassandra Khaw

From set *Phyrexia: All Will Be One*

12. 01. 2023

Neyali looked over her resistance cell and took inventory of what she saw. Mentally, she noted whose shields were chipped or dimmed and whose swords were pitted or cracked. As she did, she took stock of her allies, too: which of them limped, which of them could no longer favor their dominant arm, whose breath rattled wetly as they walked through the wasteland on the edges of the Quiet Furnace.



Art by: Bryan Sola

Saheena, an old Vulshok woman, back straight despite age, walked with a stiff pride, a son at each shoulder. She had only one eye now due to a recent skirmish. Dried blood still dappled her throat. Elham, the Auriok woman who had led before Neyali, stomped behind them with more bags than she needed to bear, freeing her comrades to move unencumbered. They had so little resources and what they had, regardless of its form, was shared without reservation. Neyali vowed to herself that she'd do her best to find them what respite she could.

It wasn't long ago when she'd been alone, wandering the ruins of Mirrex with her firebird Otharri, looking for some sign—*any* sign, no matter how small or improbable—that there were others who had survived the Phyrexian massacre of her village. Now, people depended on her. *Trusted* her. Neyali wondered if the honor would ever stop feeling so heavy.

She was startled from her brooding by Otharri's clarion scream.

At the firebird's screech, Neyali's cellmates closed ranks, a perfect synchronous motion, tensing immediately for an ambush. None came. There was no sign of encroaching Phyrexians, no telltale scratch of skitterling claws on stone, no moan of steam from a Goliath. Nothing at all.

But Otharri wouldn't have risked giving away their location if it wasn't important. Pulse hammering in her throat, Neyali looked over her people again, desperate to understand what she had missed.

It hit her then.

"Reyana," whispered Neyali.

Neyali launched into motion before any of her cohorts could answer, racing back down the red-lit corridor, Otharri in pursuit overhead. Reyana had taken the role of rear guard as she always did, but she wasn't there. Neyali ran through the possibilities in her head. Had Reyana been jumped by one of the scrapchiefs? If she had, the rest of them should have been enveloped by Phyrexians. It made no sense that they'd have stopped at Reyana, never mind the fact that Urabrask, by all accounts, had insisted the Mirrans be left alone.

Hot steam gusted from the rightmost wall, revealing the presence of a narrow passage she'd missed before: a crack in the metal surface, barely large enough to fit a humanoid figure. Through the gap, Neyali saw a familiar silhouette. It was Reyana, inching backward toward a ledge, an ocean of magma burning orange below. In front of her, an imposing humanoid figure, its left arm transmuted into an oversized scythe, the gold of its original skin almost entirely obscured by iron pleats. It'd been a woman once, Auriok. On the ground, Reyana's weapons: forgotten, abandoned. In her face, an expression Neyali had never seen her childhood friend wear, a desperate hopelessness like her heart had broken irreparably.

"You are finally ready to be made perfect," said the aspirant in a woman's voice, low and halfway familiar. It reached for Reyana then, an arm outstretched: a strange tenderness in the gesture, and to Neyali's surprise, Reyana choked back a sob.

A less impulsive woman might have waited for reinforcement or at the very least, a better understanding of the circumstances. But for better or worse, Neyali was a creature of instinct, as much flame as her firebirds. So forward, she went, hands balled into fists. Her gauntlets shone in that scorching light. She bellowed a challenge, one echoed a heartbeat by Otharri a second later, the firebird rushing past Neyali in a tremor of glowing wings. He tore at the aspirant's face as it turned. The Phyrexian raised its bladed arm to cleave the phoenix in half, and Neyali ducked low and swung up, smashing into where the soft bones of a wrist should have resided.

Metal shattered and rained over her. The aspirant—an older Auriok woman, halfway familiar, no doubt tall when she'd been flesh, taller still after completion—staggered but did not scream, only gazed back at Reyana.

"There will be no more fear when the soft flesh is made perfect."

Neyali did not slow. She gripped the aspirant by its ruined arm, torqued herself into position to ram an elbow into its chest, the whole of her weight thrown into the motion. She ran them both to the edge, letting go at the last second. The Phyrexian fell without so much as a cry.

"Neyali—"

"Are you alright?" Neyali rushed back to her friend and looked her over for injuries. One cut was all the Phyrexians needed. A single drip of glistening oil, and they'd have to race time to return to their encampment, find Reyana the healing she needed before pyresis became irreversible. "Were you contaminated? Did it have oil? Show me—"

"Neyali—"

The Vulshok woman clasped Reyana's head in her hands. "Your eyes. Let me see your eyes."

"I'm fine. I promise you." Reyana closed her hands over Neyali's own. And it was her friend again, not the husk she'd been before, animation returned to her broad expressive features. She smiled, exhausted but warmly. "She did nothing to me."

"Why didn't you fight back? What happened to your weapons?"

The light fled her face again.

"Neyali, she was my mother."

The rookery glistened with the candle-glow light of resting firebirds, their flames dimmed as they crooned and murmured to one another, giving a blue-green cast to the moving shadows. It was a smaller space than Neyali would have wanted for them. Had she the luxury, she would have built them something sturdier, something designed to hold generations of firebirds. It wouldn't be so ramshackle, with platforms and nesting boxes cobbled from better things than scrap metal.

Neyali tickled Otharri under his feathered jaw.

"One day," she promised her friend. His mate slumbered beside him, their chicks nestled into her side. "We will build you a rookery on the cinders of Urabrask's Forge, and your chicks will grow up there, warm and happy, as will their chicks and the generation that follows theirs."

In answer, Otharri flapped his wings and pressed his cheek into Neyali's palm, his neck stretched, his manner pleased and indolent. Neyali scratched his plumage obligingly before turning to regard Reyana as the Auriok woman busied herself with her own birds. They'd been lucky. For all the recent chaos—more and more, there were stories of unrest among the priests, rumors that Urabrask was planning something titanic—that had befallen the resistance of late, the firebirds had had a good mating season. The females were all with clutches, a rarity. If even half the eggs survived, it would change so much.

"How are your charges?" said Neyali, picking her way past the dozing firebirds to Reyana's side.

"Childless," said Reyana, her tone flat.

She stepped aside then to reveal what her tall frame had been hiding: a nest of shattered eggs, oozing a phosphorescent yolk. It was a mercy that there were no traces of the lost chick, and that the mother was young enough to be indifferent to her offspring, more preoccupied with courting the attention of a neighboring male.

"What happened?" said Neyali, wincing. The last thing she wanted for her friend was another tragedy.

"Skitterlings, maybe," said Reyana, still with that hollow tone of voice as she sifted through the shards. "Wouldn't be surprised if it were rats. Regardless, it doesn't matter. The clutch is dead. Just like my mother."

Neyali swallowed. "If I had known—"

"You couldn't have. I didn't know. Not until she was there, asking me to join her."

"I could have asked you," said Neyali, unable to shake the certainty that she had failed horrifically and a terrible price would need to be paid. "I could have thought first before acting. We might have been able to save her. We might have been able to do *something*."

Her voice cracked at the last word.

“She wouldn’t have been happy,” said Reyana, making eye contact with Neyali. Her voice softened. “My mother—she was a timid woman. Glass rather than steel. Everything frightened her. Everything was a portent of death or worse. You could see it in her eyes: how much she wanted it all to just *stop*.”

Reyana swallowed audibly.

“I used to wish she’d just die,” said Reyana, with a terrible dignity. “Not because I was tired of her wailing, or even that I resented the fact she beat me. I wanted—”

Neyali gaped at her friend. “She *beat* you?”

“Not with any malice. I think it was because she needed an outlet. Some way to mitigate the enormous pressures she was facing. It needed *expression*, or she would have exploded.”

“Still, it was cruel—”

“I loved her, you understand,” said Reyana and Neyali heard a rebuke in those quietly spoken words. “I still do. Anyway, I thought it’d be easier for her to simply not exist in this world. I wanted her torment to end. Does that make me a bad daughter?”

“No,” said Neyali, hands closing and reopening, like she could wring the right words from the air. “You’re not. I understand completely. The Phyrexians have taken so much from us. It’s why we fight. What befell your mother, we can make sure it won’t happen to anyone else.”

Reyana inhaled, her breath shivering. “What if Phyrexia is right?”

“Don’t joke like that,” said Neyali.

“I know we say what they’ve done is a sin, a violation of the soul. But you should have seen my mother, Neyali. She was calm. She has never been calm. I’ve never seen her enjoy a day of peace. Even in her sleep, she would mumble and weep and moan. The version that I met today—she was at rest. I think—”

Horror flowed through Neyali. She could see where the end of the sentence laid and the thought of it being spoken aloud, of Reyana giving breath to those words, made Neyali want to scream. For one guilty moment, she found herself wishing Reyana *had* been infected by glistening oil, so she could blame this terrifying perspective on Phyrexian corruption. Because the alternative was so much worse: this thought Reyana had arrived at such conclusions all on her own. “The peace,” said Neyali very carefully, “that the Phyrexians feel is a false one. Born of a loss of self. That thing wasn’t your mother. Not any longer. At best, it was a puppet. A lie made steel and flesh.”

“Is that so?”

Neyali nodded.

“Each of their aspirants are a lure. Meant to entice, meant to convince those who remain that phyresis is the only logical option. They’re there to break our hearts and spirits. And for whatever it’s worth,” her voice gentled, “I think you endured that encounter with more grace than I could have. Personally, I’d have gone mad with grief.”

“Who says I haven’t?”

Neyali clapped a hand around her friend’s right shoulder. “If you have, know you’ll have company as we go laughing in the dark. I made you a promise when we met. I won’t abandon you. No matter what happens, I’ll always be at your side.”

Only later, as Neyali crawled into her cot, did she realize that Reyana had not spoken her half of their usual call and response, and fell asleep worrying about what that meant.

Neyali woke the next morning to a young Vulshok boy—the oldest of Saheena’s sons, he had her eyes and the build, Neyali was told, of a father long vanished—clearing his throat. She jerked upright into a sitting position, rubbing the heel of a palm into her right eye. Either age was catching up, or she was getting too comfortable with the idea that there were people she could trust. Neyali fervently hoped it was the former. Complacency meant death.

“What is it?”

The wretchedness in the boy’s expression grew. He handed her a note.

“It’s Reyana,” he said miserably. “She’s gone.”

Gone, as it turned out, meant a note in her cot and her belongings untouched. It was as if she had simply chosen to walk away for a moment. None of their rations had been touched. Were it not for the note and were Neyali a more optimistic person, she might have chosen to believe Reyana was somewhere close. But Neyali knew enough of their world that she could not allow herself that illusion.

She turned the note over, hoping for clues.

Meet me at the Salvage Complex.

Why would Reyana go there?

Neyali wondered if it was a trap, if Reyana had been taken against her will then forced to write the note, enticing Neyali to her own capture. But for such a possibility to be true, there would need to have been more signs of conflict, some indication that Phyrexians had broken through the camp’s defenses.

Neyali pushed down on the little voice that whispered, *maybe, she went willingly.*

“The goblin rules there, doesn’t he?” said Elham, the white of her hair made even more incandescent by the white-gold flecks in her skin.

“I think so,” said Neyali, the note pocketed again. She restlessly checked her equipment: her armor for faults, her gloves for rust. Otharri watched from his perch. Neyali had seen Slobad once before, but only from afar: a monstrously large goblin, his limbs swollen with black steel.

“Is he a Furnace Boss?” asked Saheena’s youngest. What was his *name*? To Neyali’s shame, she could not remember it, not with the panic hammering at her ribs.

“No,” said Elham. “He’s waste disposal. Urabrask sends obsolete Phyrexians to him for repurposing.”

Nothing went to waste in the Furnace Layer. What could not be used was reduced to components, taken apart and rebuilt so it could be of worth again.

“What would he want with Reyana then?” Neyali demanded in frustration.

“Labor?” said the Auriok woman. Saheena and her youngest came around the corner, the blood gone, her eye bandaged. “He can’t run his complex alone.”

Neyali nodded. Easier this than introspection. Simpler to name your adversary and then go straight into looking for a fight. She slammed her fist into her open palm, grinned toothily at her cellmates.

“Right,” said Neyali. “I’m going to find Reyana. No one is obligated to join me on this mission. Reyana is my friend, and—”

“She is family to us, too,” said Elham, slinging her battleax on her shoulder, her stance allowing no objection. Her calf shone with polished gold; a simple enough prosthetic, well-articulated and better made.

"I might be making a mistake."

"We've all lost someone," said Saheena, voice tightening. Her sons looked away, their expressions clouding. Everyone in the cell knew the story: they were the last remnants of a massive family, teeming with aunts and uncles. "If we're lucky, we can be sure that Reyana won't be in their number."

The cell mobilized within an hour. Most headed eastward, bearing the main bulk of their supplies away to a neighboring camp, the firebirds in accompaniment. Only Otharri remained with Neyali, unwilling to be parted from his friend.

After stiff farewells, what remained of Neyali's cell, whittled to the bravest and most stubborn, set off in the direction of the Salvage Complex. The route there was not as treacherous as some: the tunnels leading to the compound were far from the main arteries of the Furnace Layer, wrapping around its very edges. Though it didn't intersect with any of the forges, the road was long, and that alone brought risks of unwanted encounters.

But none materialized.

The road stayed empty, and unnervingly so.

Almost as if the way had been cleared on purpose. Like something waited for them. Their nerve might have broken if not for the Mirran encampments they found enroute: one nestled in what might have once been the ruins of a factory, or the disemboweled belly of an overgrown Goliath, twisted spires of black steel rising like broken ribs; one at the back of a mezzanine teeming with unused assembly lines; the last in a graveyard of bizarre crumbling structures. In each camp, Neyali and her crew learned the same thing: that loved ones had gone missing, with no signs that they'd been taken by force.

She went willingly, insisted that little voice again, which Neyali found growingly difficult to ignore, but before she could reconsider her loyalties, they arrived at the outcropping above the Salvage Complex.

Once, it might have been a prison compound. Deformed cages rose in unsteady towers, the bars mangled, bulging in places, as if whatever had been inside was desperate to escape. Many were occupied by slumped figures: captured Mirrans, waiting their anointment with glistening oil. Machinery snaked in between the enclosures, coiling over them in a parody of vegetal life. What had Neyali's attention was the pit at the very center of the Salvage Complex, an inverted ziggurat veined with enormous black pipes. Each level teemed with impossible contraptions, moving parts whose purpose Neyali couldn't decipher.

And bodies, she realized.

Countless Phyrexian bodies, made to kneel before they were husked of their metal, the flesh left behind. There were rows upon rows of them, like a silent audience staring down at the platform at the very base. A single figure occupied the narrow wedge of metal. Neyali felt her heart jump: it was Reyana, shackled and prone.

"Watch the skies for me, beloved," whispered Neyali, pressing a kiss to Otharri's cheek. With a twitch of her arm, she sent the firebird in the air. Neyali turned her attention then to her comrades. "There's every chance in the world that this is a trap and I am a fool, but Reyana is my friend. I promised us I would not abandon her. I intend to keep that promise. But none of you made the same foolish vow. There will be no judgment, no censure if you choose to leave. If you walk away now, you walk away with honor."

The gathered Mirrans exchanged looks, but no one spoke until Saheena at last said in a bored voice:

"Do you want to waste time or should we begin checking the perimeter?"



Art by: Marta Nael

They made three full circuits of the Salvage Complex before Neyali gave up. For all intents and purposes, the location was unguarded. Their air-purity detector revealed no telltale increase in toxic particles: the usual sign of hidden Phyrexians. It was empty, save for Reyana and that assembly of corpses.

“What now?” said Elham after they returned to their original vantage point.

She stared down at where Reyana was, distraught. *I don’t know*, Neyali wanted to say, only she could not. They were relying on her. *Elham* was looking to her, waiting for her orders. The woman had been a hero, a mentor, and she had trusted Neyali to take over when she stepped down.

Neyali swallowed hard.

“I’m going down on my own.”

That startled Elham. “It’s reckless.”

“It’s strategic,” Neyali countered. “If we missed something, if this really is a trap, the focus will be on me, giving the rest of you time to retaliate.”

“What if it turns out that we’re outnumbered?”

“Then you run.”

“*Neyali* —”

“You have my orders,” said Neyali, hoping they would only hear her authority, not the tremble in her voice. She knew what her bravado might mean. Completion. Often Neyali wondered how much of the original remained after phyresis had set in. If enough of a mind remained to scream endlessly at what the body was made to do.

If she would scream, too.

“An honor guard,” snarled Saheena, coming up from her right, stubborn as iron.

“Fine.” Neyali snapped. “Three of you. With me. The rest of you. To your stations.”

The Mirrans saluted her, dispersing save for the Vulshok matriarch and her two sons, who looked so agonizingly young in the wash of red light. In tight formation, they followed her down to the pit: Saheena serving as vanguard, her sons flanking Neyali.

Much like their journey to the Salvage Complex, their expedition to Reyana was without incident. The dead Phyrexians remained inert, statue-like, for all that Neyali was certain that at any minute, they would leap at the four of them, a howling mass of maimed flesh. Nothing came.

They stepped onto the platform. It swayed under their weight, though not enough to raise concern. Reyana did not respond. She laid there instead, faced away, her breathing shallow and irregular.

“Reyana,” whispered Neyali, coming to her knees beside her friend.

With care, she turned Reyana over onto her back. The Auriok, despite her stillness, was awake: eyes open, fixed on nothing, expression clouded with the same misery Neyali had seen that night before her friend walked away into the dark.

“Reyana,” said Neyali again, like her friend’s name was a spell. “It’s me. We’re going to get you out of this.”

The Auriok woman blinked once, lashes long and black as oil. Her gaze focused. The agony in her expression strengthened. “I’m sorry, Neyali. I was just so exhausted.”



Art by: Josh Hass

Neyali shook her head.

“Nothing to be forgiven. We’re *family* —” said Neyali, the first time she had ever put the sentiment to words, her voice thick with emotion. Her attention was riveted by the chains knotted around Reyana’s wrists and arms: they were of unusual design, sleeker than what the Phyrexians often used, less like oxidized sinew, more beautiful. “And family stays together.”

“I’m sorry,” Reyana said again in lieu of an answer, her fingers brushing Neyali’s, running up her fore-arms: something contemplative in the movements, as though she was evaluating her friend or more precisely, a decision she represented. “I truly am.”

The air quickened. A sheen of red-orange light traveled up Reyana's arms, over her restraints, up and across Neyali's knuckles. The latter jerked backward, instinctive. A split second later, the light darkened and corporealized into a knot of chains, landing on the platform with a thunk. Reyana, no longer bound, sat up placidly, blinking at her cellmates like they were strangers.

"I knew it," snarled the matriarch. "*Traitor*."

"What did they promise you, Reyana?" Neyali bayed, furious that her fears—that little voice, the one that had whispered time and again, *she went willingly*—were proven right. Neyali scanned her surroundings. Too late for them to run, but the four of them could still buy the rest of their cell time. She just had to give the signal, make sure the rest knew to eschew last-minute heroics. Her gaze rose to the smoke-choked sky; Otharri was nowhere to be seen.

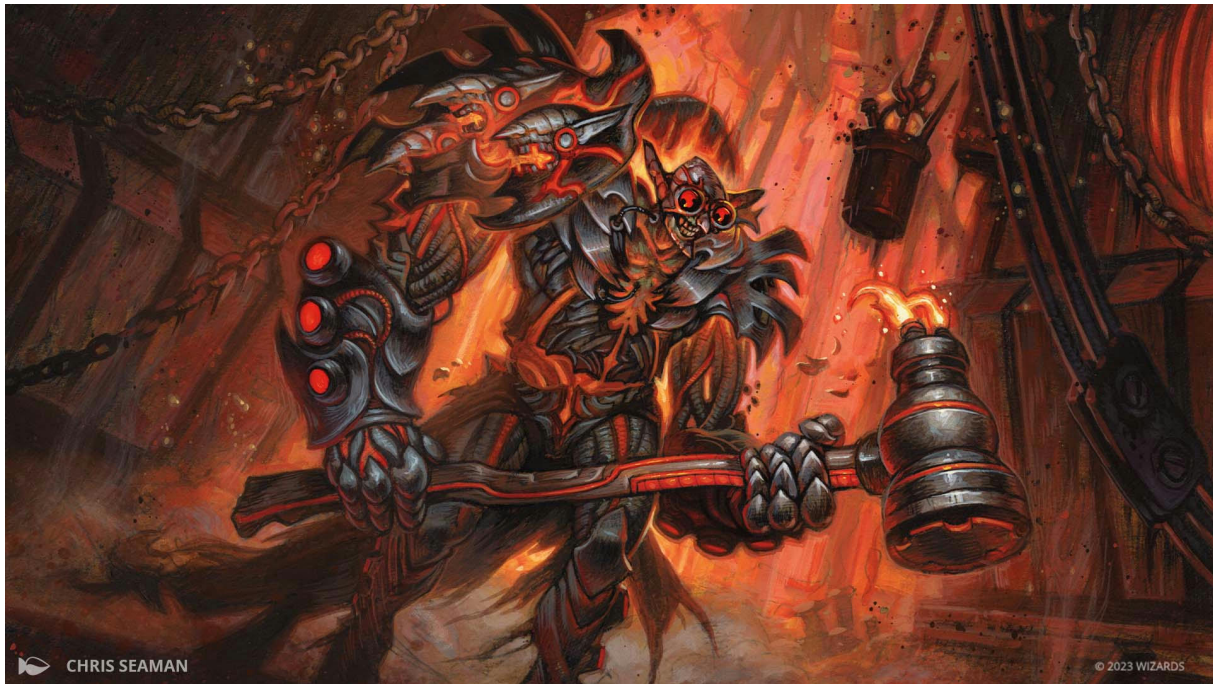
Had he been caught?

No. Impossible. The only way Phyrexia would have Otharri was as a corpse, and that wasn't going to happen without a fight that'd echo through the Furnace Layer. There was a reason the Mirrans saw phoenixes as a symbol of hope, and the Phyrexians saw phoenixes as an omen of death. He was there somewhere in the smog, Neyali was sure. *Go far*, she willed the firebird. *Run. Lead the others to safety. Don't let them get you.*

"Peace!" shrieked Reyana, tottering onto her feet. She wept as she spoke, each word sobbed. "We're not all like you. I don't want to die afraid, Neyali. I don't want a life like my mother's. I want it to stop. Don't you understand? I want this to end. I want the perfect peace that my mother was given. Slobad—he promised me that there will be peace. That I will be reunited with the people I love and long for and miss."

"And you will be," came a new voice from behind Neyali, a voice surprisingly normal given its origins.

She whirled around to see Slobad on the edge of the pit. Neyali had seen him once before, but only from afar, and thought little of him then: just another Phyrexian horror in an army of millions. Now, she was close enough to wince at the full truth of him. His small, goblin form was embedded in a massive construct of cables and sheafs of metal plating, one shoulder bearing an epaulet adorned with a triptych of shrieking goblin heads, and Neyali could see where Slobad's limbs had been shorn off, where they'd been amputated at the joint and soldered to the exoskeleton of his golem-like Phyrexian body.



Art by: Chris Seaman

“We’re not your enemy,” he said. “Out there, the world is hard and cold and it takes everything. Friends, family. But here? We’re safe. We’re family. We have all the people who we love, huh?”

Slobad looked down at his massive hand and then at the quartet.

“You’re Neyali.”

Her companions took position, weapons at the ready. *Death before compleation* , Neyali thought. “I have no fear of you.”

“Why should you? Nothing cruel here, huh? We don’t want to hurt any of you. We just want you to be reunited with the ones you loved,” said Slobad softly. “The Mirrans look to you for leadership. Will you not guide them home to those who love them?”

“Father?” whimpered one of the younger Vulshok, his spear clattering from his hands.

An aspirant stood beside Slobad: a Vulshok man, antlered, almost entirely robed in steel.

“Stay focused,” she warned her allies. “Don’t falter.”

“I offer you a choice. You four,” said Slobad. “For the rest of the Mirrans in hiding.”

Neyali felt her heart sink.

Slobad *knew* .

“We’re with you, no matter what you decide,” said Saheena quietly. “Tell us to die with you, and we shall. To the end, Neyali.” There was a hairline crack in her voice’s calm, and Neyali wondered if she had vowed those same words to the partner she thought dead, who stood there now above them, or at least, the shell of him. “We’re with you to the end.”

Neyali looked back to where Reyana was. She was on her knees, hands twisted together in prayer, rocking in place. She was weeping: tears, not oil, and it was so much worse than if Reyana had been corrupted. Knowing Reyana had *chosen* this. Knowing she had elected to be bait.

Neyali, the damn fool that she was, had walked straight into the trap, even though every instinct had begged her to do otherwise. But she could salvage this.

“Why should we trust you?” said Neyali. “How do I know you won’t take all of us, anyway? Urabrask gave his orders. Aren’t you supposed to have better things to do than harm us?”

“Harm? Why would I harm you, huh? I don’t want to. I only want to help you.”

Neyali swallowed hard, glancing at those she had led to ruin.

“Let these three go then, if you believe that.”

“Done.”

“Neyali—”

“Go.” said Neyali. “Before he changes his mind.”

She could feel the Vulshok elder tense, her sons tremble: a whimper bitten back by one, a hiss of frustration swallowed by the other. Then, Saheena nodded, almost imperceptibly. The three filed past Neyali. True to his word, Slobad and his minions did nothing, only watched with their foundry-bright eyes.

It was a mercy on Slobad’s part, Neyali decided, that she was placed in a cage far above where Reyana would accept the glistening oil. From this vantage, Neyali could almost pretend her friend was a stranger, a traitor whom she shared no ties with. *At least the rest of the cell is safe*, Neyali thought to herself, holding to the words like a lifeline. *At least Otharri is safe.*

She would hold onto that for as long as she could. With luck, when the time came, it’d be what slowed her enough for a resistance fighter to cut her down.

To Neyali’s surprise, it was not a priest who came to begin Reyana’s transformation but Slobad himself. There was a tenderness in how the goblin bade Neyali’s friend to go to her knees, a grace in how she sank down, the bronze circle of her face raised as though to receive a blessing.

Neyali averted her eyes, unable to bear the sight.

At least the rest of the cell is safe, Neyali said to herself again. *At least Otharri is safe.*

She heard a gentle click then: talons coming to rest on the bars above her head. The firebird trilled a series of low notes in greeting, beak nudged through the slats.

“What are you doing here?” whispered Neyali, trying and failing to keep the relief from her voice. “You have to go.”

The firebird fixed one incredulous eye on her and inhaled.

“I am one person. It’s not worth it. You—”

Neyali laughed deliriously, unable to stop herself, struck by her own hypocrisy. All this happened because of one person. She had given everything to save Reyana, believing that yes, that one life could be that important.

Otharri breathed out.

The sulfurous air went from filthy orange to an incandescent white-blue as the firebird’s flames incinerated the bars. Ash, still limned in gold, flaked away in the breeze. He dove away to the next cage, doing the same over and over, while an alarm rose through the Salvage Complex. Otharri sang a defiant call to arms.

And Neyali answered with a glad cry of her own.

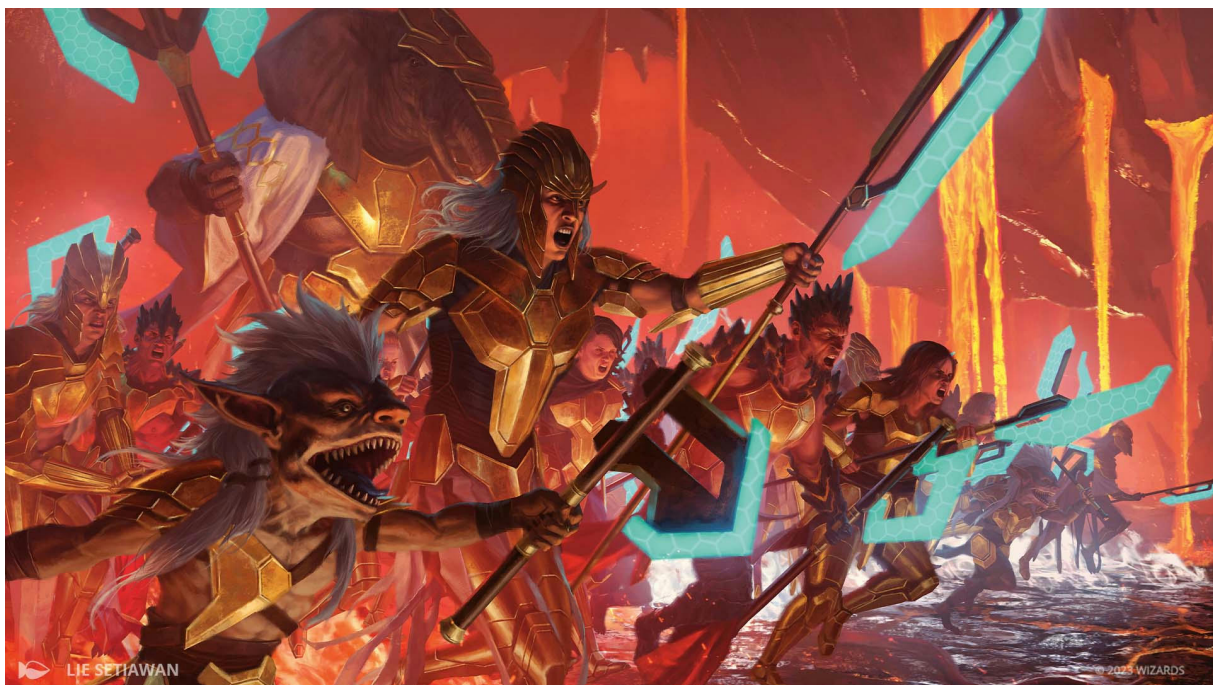
“This—” she boomed. Magic leaped from her to each Mirran Otharri freed, a slick of fire that clung to their skin. Neyali looked down to where Slobad waited, his sledgehammer in hand. “Is not where we die.”

If they moved quickly enough across the towering structures, there would be no chance that the Phyrexians would catch up. What few were crawling up the cages were kept at bay by Otharri’s fire. Neyali searched for Reyana amid the chaos and found her behind, looking up at the clamor. Despite everything, she still reached out a hand, a final attempt.

Reyana turned away.

That was that then. Neyali swallowed. What she would have given for time to argue with Reyana, time to insist there was no reason to surrender, that Reyana had to fight. But they’d each made their decisions. Their paths were now separate. Neyali saluted her once friend. In the distance, she could see her cell—not just those who had chosen to follow Neyali on this quixotic mission, but all of them—charging into the Salvage Complex to clear a path for their escape. Later, she would have time to grieve.

Now, she had to lead her people away.



Art by: Lie Setiawan