

Chapter 3: Nemesis

Reinhardt Suarez

From set *The Brothers' War*

25. 10. 2022

Blood is foul, the flesh dross. My ascendance thirsts for life itself.

—Crovax, Evincar of Rath

Karn did not speak, did not complain while hooks and razors—the Suture Bishops' preferred exploratory appendages—prodded his mangled body for seams that would facilitate his dissection. The silver golem was still alive, in the fashion that such a unique individual could be considered living, but more importantly, he was still *aware*—aware of where he was, of what was happening to him, and who it was that was carrying out the grim deed of dismantling his body. Detecting Karn's cognizance wasn't an easy matter of checking for breathing or watching for subtle eye movements.

One had to feel for a spark to know it was there.

Tezzeret waited for any kind of movement from Karn. He half-expected, half-hoped the golem would rise from the bone-white slab, tear apart the nearest Phyrexian, and planeswalk away. But Karn gave no resistance to the team of aspirants as they bound him into place with wrist and ankle clamps, careful not to touch the double-bladed axe still embedded into the golem's chest. Once their task was completed, the aspirants stepped away, their heads bowed in supplication, to allow the Suture Bishops to resume their analyses. On Dominaria, Sheoldred had discovered a way to interfere with Karn's planeswalking. Tezzeret supposed that was what kept the golem trapped now as well: the bone-white slab was veined with minerals that made what flesh Tezzeret still had itch, even though he stood a good distance away. Why Karn was so docile, though

A perfect vision.

Tezzeret hated all of this. Hated everything in the Fair Basilica. Hated anything to do with the Machine Orthodoxy. On Esper, the Seekers of Carmot also swathed themselves in sanctimonious claptrap, lording the secrets of etherium forging over all of Vectis. Though he was one of them, he'd also been bamboozled by their ruse. Carmot, the sacred reagent and key to creating etherium, did not exist as anything but an elaborate hokum to keep the unenlightened rabble under the Seekers' heel. So, too, was Elesh Norn's promise of "enlightenment."

Striding into the cold chamber was another familiar face, Ajani Goldmane. He was accompanied by a leader among the priests, a high exarch, who guided a floating assemblage of spider-like arms up to the altar where Karn lay prostrate. The priests, like their aspirants before them, seemed to intrinsically acknowledge rank—to acquiesce to their *betters*—and swayed away from the altar with uncanny grace.

"Rebirth," said Ajani. "The pains of destruction give way to glorious perfection."

Tezzeret didn't respond. Ajani's very presence troubled him greatly, and not only for his proclivity to quote passage and verse from the Argent Etchings, Elesh Norn's paean to her own vanity. No, it was more than that. During the time when he'd served Nicol Bolas, there would be quiet periods when the elder dragon contemplated his next moves. Ajani was never left out of Bolas's plans. He'd devise special

stratagems to occupy the leonin while Bolas's other schemes progressed. To Tezzeret, the truth was evident: Nicol Bolas—Planeswalker, elder dragon, god-pharaoh—was obsessed with Ajani Goldmane. Whatever had happened in their battle during the conflux of Alara had inspired a hesitancy in Bolas that he had for few others.

And yet, the Phyrexians had broken him easily. So easily. Tamiyo had been the first to undergo Jin-Gitaxias's special compleation process, enriching her with glistening oil while retaining the powers of her spark. Buoyed by that breakthrough, the master of the Progress Engine eagerly subjected captive Planeswalkers to ever more effective—and painful—procedures. Now, Tezzeret and some of his most hated adversaries were ostensibly “on the same side.”

Let go of your memories and be reborn.

Like the conductor of a grand symphony, the exarch began to weave patterns in the air with its six arms, the appendages on its dissection platform moving in accordance with the exarch's unspoken commands. Their white chitinous tips split open, revealing implements attuned to the task at hand: saws, blades, pincers, forceps.

As the arms began their work, Karn still said nothing. Even as metal teeth ground into his body and sheared off his limbs, he kept silent.

“Only in her grace are we saved,” said Ajani, his voice quivering in exultation. “Our old forms are cages that the Mother melts down and reforges into destiny.”

“We make our own cages,” muttered Tezzeret as he turned to leave. He found his way blocked by one of Elesh Norn's elite angelic guard, its serrated wings curled around its body. He attempted to step around the angel, but it used its staff to bar his way.

“The ritual is not finished,” the angel proclaimed. “Leaving is forbidden.”

“I'm not beholden to you,” said Tezzeret. “Move.”

“You are to bear witness. Then you will receive what has been promised to you.”

Without thinking, Tezzeret placed his hand on his chest, the resting place of the Planar Bridge. Underneath his breastplate, he could feel the creep of the artifact eating him alive. A tiny bit at a time, but inexorably so. If not for periodic cauterizing in the Kuldotha forges, he may have already succumbed to the gate's debilitating energies. But that was only a stopgap. His life depended on him getting what he was promised, what he deserved—a new body made of darksteel, far stronger than etherium and free of the accursed Planar Bridge. Then he could quit this forsaken plane and all it entailed. Forever.

“How do I get my reward? Tell me now.”

“When our deep faithful are finished, you will bring the pieces of Father to our Mother.”

Another damned errand?! He took a breath and calmed himself down. Though he fumed at being relegated to yet another menial task, one final indignity was worth his new body. Plus, if there was anything the Machine Orthodoxy valued above all, it was propriety. He had to play this delicately.

“You would be a more appropriate courier,” he demurred.

“One does not refuse Mother's invitation,” the angel answered. In this, it was correct. It had now been several weeks since Tezzeret had seen the praetor, since she'd quit her throne to reside full time among the Mycosynth. Though he'd enjoyed free rein to visit the innermost layers of the plane during his previous stints on New Phyrexia, that was no longer the case. She'd barred everyone from visiting the lower levels, even the other praetors.

"There must be other tasks that demand my attention," he said, gritting his teeth. "Those with some measure of import?"

"No." The angel unfurled its wings, exposing a suit of mail made of what looked like human teeth. "You have been given your orders."

Tezzeret was suddenly aware that, despite his efforts at ingratiating himself to the angel, he'd become an object of scrutiny. He looked around, first at the angel glowering down upon him with a countenance made up of featureless red sinew, then at the aspirants and the priests momentarily sidetracked by his protests, and finally at Ajani, who stared at him with eyes that glowed a deep, burning red.

Tezzeret forced a grin past his clenched jaw. "My attire is woefully inadequate for such an honor. I am fresh from helping Sheoldred back to her lair, and my armor still bears remnants from carrying her back to the Dross Pits."

"Here," said Ajani, whipping off his white cloak, still stained with blood and soot from the events on Dominaria. "Clean yourself with this."

Tezzeret picked up the cloak, white with gold trim save for faded patches on it, off-color, pink like scar tissue. It hadn't registered with him until now that it was the same cloak once worn by Elspeth Tirel. Interesting. He was aware they'd been allies on Alara, but not of how close they'd been. Tezzeret studied the leonin, knowing that deep inside that compleated body, the spirit of the true Ajani still existed. Suppressed. Was he aware of what was happening? Was the cape some kind of cryptic plea for help from the recesses of the leonin's mind? If so, Ajani was a bigger fool than Tezzeret had thought. This was neither the time nor the place to expose oneself in such an overt manner.

Make no mistakes.

Tezzeret stepped backward and bowed his head to mimic the gesture the aspirants made to their Suture Bishops. Performing such signs of obeisance ate at him to his core, but the opportunity to give voice to his indignation would come soon enough. *Patience, patience.*

"As our Mother wishes," he said. "So shall it be done."

When New Phyrexia was still Mirrodin, an informal network of lacunae connected all parts of the plane to the very heart where the Mycosynth grew. Some of these passageways had been extant ever since Karn created them, while others—more diseased arteries than intentional thoroughfares—formed much later as a result of the Phyrexian blight. At one time, Tezzeret could navigate his way to a destination through feel and smell alone.

There was no longer a need. Led by the angel, he trudged across the open courtyards of the Fair Basilica to the grand, spine-covered bridge leading into the innermost layers of New Phyrexia. Such opulent constructions were one of many ways that Elesh Norn asserted her dominance. Though she allowed her fellow praetors to customize their resident layers, this graciousness had a limit. Order would rule—devotion, duty, and unity would be held paramount over ruthless scientific analysis or the feral laws of predator and prey. Harmony would replace the madness that had gripped the plane under previous masters—*her* harmony.

Twin regiments of aspirants waited for Tezzeret at the foot of the bridge, all mumbling the same prayer. Their eyes—a few embedded in heads, but more as sanguine, light-sensitive organs implanted onto the tips of femurs sharpened into horns or in columns bordering vertebrae erupting through paper-thin skin—were trained upward to the perpetually gray sky. No light from New Phyrexia's white mana sun penetrated the compounded layers above. Instead, the structures of the layer itself provided illumina-

tion. The walls of the basilica, composed of ossified Phyrexian corpses honored in death, shed pale white light; crimson capillaries etched into the marble-esque floor oozed a blood-red glow.

Move ever forward.

Tezzeret walked toward the waiting crowd pushing his valuable tribute: a floating platform containing Karn's disassembled parts. Even though he'd draped Ajani's cloak to hide the silver golem, the aspirants still jabbered at the presence of their fallen Father, parting to make way or falling to their knees in reverence.

Feeble-minded buffoons, he thought as he approached a lone Phyrexian waiting for him on the bridge, spreading its six arms as if inviting Tezzeret into its embrace. "Who are you?"

"Your guide," it voiced despite having no mouth. "The underworld can be treacherous."

"I am familiar. I need no guide."

"It is our Mother's decree."

Tezzeret grimaced, but once again stayed his temper. "Get on with it, then."

The guide turned and led the way across the bridge, the miasma surrounding them darkening as they ventured further into the bowels of the plane. Tezzeret followed, Karn's platform hovering between them. Soon, the Fair Basilica was out of sight, the monuments of tendon and bone defining the Machine Orthodoxy replaced by the towering columns of the Mycosynth, the unique growth that ran rampant over the core of the plane. Tezzeret viewed the Mycosynth with equal measures of awe and wariness. In a way, it was the ultimate organism—alive and abundant, its metallic lattice as perfect a crystalline structure as any artificer could render. But the Mycosynth hid a danger: prolonged exposure to it rendered metal into flesh and vice versa, explaining the partially metallic natures of the few remaining Mirrans as well as the inability of Phyrexians to attain wholly metal forms.

Once they stepped off the bridge and into the Mycosynth Garden itself, Tezzeret became acutely aware of the sound—or rather, the lack of it. It was eerily quiet on this lower level, no doubt due to how Elesh Norn had locked down the center layers that lay below the basilica.

"Do you speak with the Mother?" Tezzeret called out to the guide. His voice careened off the high ceilings and far walls of the core, echoing in all directions. He lowered his volume and spoke again: "Do you know how often she ascends from the plane's core?"

"The Mother of Machines acts without account. It is not my station to know."

"When was the last time she received a visitor?"

"Obey and learn," said the guide. "That is the whole of my existence."

Tezzeret didn't like this at all. So much pomp for what amounted to a menial delivery task. A sudden thought sent a shudder through his body. Why was *he* getting an audience, and why now? Ever since aligning himself with Urabrask—a loose partnership to be sure, but one where both sides knew where the other stood—Tezzeret had been surreptitiously conveying information to Jace's little outfit on Ravnica. He had even managed to anonymously hire the ghost mage to track Vorinclex, for all the good it did. Had Elesh Norn learned of their treachery? Was Tezzeret marching into a trap? There was one way to find out. It was not without risk, but it was dwarfed by the risk of inaction, of accepting Elesh Norn's terms of engagement.

"Stop," he called out, but the guide paid no heed. Tezzeret let go of the platform and held out his etherium arm, unspooling it away from him like a mass of tentacles that he then wrapped around the guide's neck. "I gave you an order."

"I am not your thrall," the guide squealed.

"No." Tezzeret reformed his hand into a blade and held it to the guide's neck. "But you do fear, do you not?"

"There is no fear in our Mother's embrace." The guide's shoulders swiveled, sending two of its arms backward to bat Tezzeret's blade away. Fortunately for him, he'd at this point seen many Phyrexians in battle. Their power was in shock and surprise—limbs twisting in impossible ways, mandibles erupting from odd places on the body. Distraction, all of it. Tezzeret kicked the floating platform to knock the guide to the ground. Then he circled around to stand over the prone Phyrexian, and with a single well-placed thrust, ran it through.

After rolling the body into a patch of low growth, Tezzeret took hold of the platform, turned off the path he'd been following, and headed into the Mycosynth.

Wrath conquers wrath.

It had been several years since Tezzeret ventured through the Mycosynth Garden of New Phyrexia. He'd assumed that it had been shielded from more recent environmental shifts evident in other parts of the plane; the Mycosynth Lattice had always been left to spread of its own accord, with occasional operations to mine the growths for material to build new structures. Sadly for him, things had changed. The landscape was different. Reorganized.

"Where the hell is it?" Tezzeret grumbled. In every direction, all he could see were the spires that spanned the entire height of the layer like massive trees with sprawling canopies. He made his way through the garden's barely navigable spaces, taking pains to stay vigilant. Making actual physical contact with the growths could transmit the Phyrexian taint due to the lattice merging with glistening oil.

Creation breeds destruction enables creation.

Squeezing the platform through an opening between two columns growing into one another, Tezzeret emerged at one end of a flat expanse. There he caught view of a lone tower that could have been mistaken for yet another part of the lattice except for its golden sheen.

"At last," said Tezzeret.

He made his way to the tower, a defunct fortress used by a previous lord of the plane, a deity the Vedalkens called "Memnarch." He had never gotten a satisfactory explanation for who or what this Memnarch was from either contacts in Lumengrid or any of the current Phyrexian leadership. Surprisingly, Jin-Gitaxias had been the most forthright when he described Memnarch as "a mistake, but a valuable one for our purposes." Whatever this Memnarch's nature, its former haven was still intact. In fact, it looked in far better condition than the toppled wreck Tezzeret remembered.

So much the better, Tezzeret thought. *If the tower has been repaired, perhaps what I seek inside has also been fully restored.* When he reached the base of the tower, he at first didn't see any way of entering. He set aside the platform he'd been pushing and began to feel around on all sides of the tower base, finding only solid metal—darksteel, as a matter of fact. He cast a spell to spray a fine mist of luminescent dust onto the base of the tower, highlighting the outline of a door, one with no handle, no method of access.

Forming a claw with his etherium arm, he attempted to pry the doorway open. But the darksteel resisted all attempts to bite into it, to bend it, to wrench it free from its position.

"This is madness!"

"It is," a voice called out, echoing off the metallic surfaces of the Mycosynth, "a vestige of the most treacherous madness."

Tezzeret whirled around, his claw out and ready to strike at any sign of movement. But there was only him and the shrouded platform he'd brought with him. He elongated his arm into a pincer and pulled the cape off the platform, revealing the disassembled limbs and torso of Karn held in place with gold-tinged darksteel clasps. Tezzeret stepped up to the platform, where he saw Karn's silvery eyes open and glowing softly.

"Father of Machines," said Tezzeret. "I'm strangely pleased your demise has been overstated."

"Hello, Tezzeret," Karn answered. "I am not pleased with any of these circumstances."

"Escape, then. You still have your mind. Rebuild your body on another plane."

"I have tried, but the Phyrexians have bonded some kind of material to me, impeding interplanar travel. I am tethered here."

So, his guess was correct: the slab restrained Karn's planeswalking. Tezzeret grimaced at the possibility that Elesh Norn could dampen *his* ability to escape the plane, though he doubted she could hamper both his own abilities and the function of the Planar Bridge at the same time. Even so, he appreciated being made aware of the possibilities.

"So, we are trapped together, as it were."

"Why do you wish to enter the Panopticon?" Karn asked.

"That is my business alone." Tezzeret gazed upward to the top of the tower, where it flared out into a large pentagonal chamber, each side with a set of viewing ports. "Unless you'd like to tell me how I may gain access."

Karn closed his eyes and remained quiet for a time. Then, opening his eyes, he said, "I can take you inside. This was my realm once, after all."

"You're hardly in a position to go anywhere," Tezzeret said with a laugh.

"Only a piece is necessary," said Karn. "My head—it can be separated from my body."

Tezzeret leaned over and grasped the sides of Karn's neck. He felt around, and sure enough, his fingers located a rather simple locking mechanism not unlike a buckle that held the golem's head in place. Undoing the latch, he gave Karn's head a half twist, freeing it from the rest of his torso. Tezzeret held the head up for him to look at.

"Not a design choice I would have made," he said. "A magical bond is more secure."

"My creator trusted his skill in artifice more than any spell."

He had never given thought to the individual who created Karn. To have constructed such a being, his creator must have been someone of talent and import—not like his own father, a worthless dreg who manipulated Tezzeret into scrapping for etherium without sharing the profits.

"Let's get on with this." Tezzeret scooped up the cape and draped it back over the rest of Karn's body. Then, as Karn instructed, he touched the golem's head to the darksteel door. Tezzeret began to feel an odd tingling in his fingers, an odd pressure that spread up his arm.

"Don't be alarmed," said Karn. "I am redirecting the natural energies of the metal in your body to attune with the door. Only a few more moments." True to his word, Karn's efforts caused the door to slide open. Tezzeret tucked Karn's head under one arm, and with the other, he pulled himself into the doorway. Once inside, Tezzeret cast a spell causing his metal arm to glow a cool electric blue, illuminating his way up the curving steps to the chamber at the very top.

Tezzeret noted the differences from the last time he was here. Gone were the burn marks on the walls, as were the clockwork throne and cracked floating orbs. Everything was clean. Upon two of the walls hung what looked like metal racks sized perfectly for restraining humans, and in the center of the room stood the object of Tezzeret's journey—an elongated, diamond-shaped monolith that would allow him to see into any part of New Phyrexia.

"The Darksteel Eye," he said to Karn. "I was only able to use it a handful of times when I was spying for Nicol Bolas. But when I did, even half-broken, it proved quite insightful."

"If Elesh Norn has restored the eye," Karn warned, "it will only show what she wants you to see."

"I'll be the judge of that." Tezzeret set Karn's head onto the floor and touched the surface of the Darksteel Eye. One of the facets opened, and he stepped inside. Like the Panopticon, the eye had been restored to full functionality. Each of its mirror-like viewscreens was pristine, and when he touched the control panel, they lit up, inundating him with visions of the various layers of New Phyrexia.

Seek only certitude.

Tezzeret gazed at images from every layer of the plane. Legions were being assembled and outfitted for war. He'd known the scale of operations. The praetors were not shy about boasting. But as he witnessed the sheer size of the forces being gathered, he began to wonder about how such an army would be deployed onto other planes. He'd assumed that the Planar Bridge would be key to Elesh Norn's invasion efforts, but he could never transport this huge a force, one that far outsized Bolas's army of eternals.

Then how is she going to do it? he wondered. As he turned the knobs on the control panel to change the views and angles visible on screen, he discovered that two locations managed to defy the eye's intrusion. One, he deduced, was Urabrask's domain. It was no surprise that the ill-tempered praetor of the Quiet Furnace had taken pains to thwart outside monitoring. The other elusive location was Elesh Norn's sanctum.

Tezzeret slammed his fist onto the control panel, causing the screens to shut off and the door to open again. Karn was right. It would have been foolish for Elesh Norn to allow any device—especially her own—to betray her secrets. A sensible precaution, but no less infuriating. He stepped back out into the main chamber of the Panopticon.

"Did you see what you desired?" asked Karn.

Tezzeret scowled at Karn's insolence, suppressing the urge to strike the once mighty Planeswalker. "I saw annihilation," he said, pressing his back to the Darksteel Eye and sinking to the ground. "The fate that awaits us all."

"The fate you helped construct."

"Don't lecture me," said Tezzeret. "I was there, remember? When the oil had you in its grip? Babbling incoherently one second and ordering the execution of Mirran prisoners the next. This is your folly!"

"What you say is not untrue," said Karn in a penitent tone. "Once, I believed that my responsibility—the responsibility of all Planeswalkers—was to create, to welcome new voices into being and guide them. I wanted Argentum to be a refuge free from war and pain."

"They would find you eventually," said Tezzeret. "War and pain. They are insatiable. Unstoppable. With a thousand faces and a thousand names."

"Like Nicol Bolas."

"I hated him, you know," Tezzeret said, touching the horn-shaped tattoos on his forehead—brands meant to remind him where his loyalties were supposed to lie. "He never let me forget the debt I owed to him—the life that he restored to me after Beleren left me a hollow, mindless shell. Let me officially thank you for ridding me of him."

"We had no choice," said Karn. "He threatened the entire Multiverse."

At that, Tezzeret roared with laughter. "Oh, Father of Machines, that is good! You know, after you left this plane, I returned to Bolas. He wanted to know if the Phyrexians had attained interplanar travel, and I told him the truth: They had not. But, if they ever did, they'd be a force of chaos, a danger to any who would seek to rule. I suggested that your precious plane be eliminated before that happened, and to my surprise, he agreed. His first act as god-emperor would have been to obliterate New Phyrexia from existence."

"And in exchange, all we needed to do is die, leaving everyone else to be his loyal subjects."

"It's always so simple to you—all of you simpering fools pretending your hands are so clean! The shining heroes come to eradicate the foul, the profane, the *evil*!" Tezzeret felt his mask of congeniality burn away. "You speak of our responsibilities? You could have taken responsibility for your choices—embraced your position as lord over New Phyrexia. Surely, it would have been better than the 'paradise' promised by Elesh Norn!" He stumbled to his feet and picked up Karn's head. "Every day that I live is one more that I have fought for! Every breath I draw is one closer to "

"To what?"

Freedom. That's what he wanted to say. But in the same breath, another word edged onto his lips. *Compleation.* His mind raced from one fleeting idea to the next. Ever since his initial arrival on New Phyrexia, he'd been protected from the influence of the glistening oil thanks to an inoculation furnished by Nicol Bolas. But what if? What if the protection had waned without the dragon alive to bolster it? Or worse, what if the treatments in the Kuldotha forges had introduced something worse than the Planar Bridge into his body? Something more insidious?

Skin is the prison of the blessed.

"You hear them, don't you?" said Karn. "*Pay attention. Do not question. Follow. Become and belong.* The same voices I heard when the oil had command of my heart."

"Shut up!" Tezzeret drew his hand back, transforming it into a spear point, and with his arm shaking with rage, held its tip to Karn's forehead. He stared into Karn's face, the golem's expression as placid as when Elesh Norn's priests tore him apart. "Do you fear your own end, Karn?"

"Yes," he said. "I did all I could to prevent it. But it wasn't enough. Not enough."

Tezzeret lowered his hand. "She'll suspect something if you're harmed." He made his way back down through the tower, reattached Karn's head to his body, and set out to find Elesh Norn.

Tezzeret wound about the Mycosynth Garden following the grade of the land as it decreased, figuring that he was looking for the lowest point possible on the plane. His bet proved right, as he came across a newly constructed staircase right in the very center of the garden. He neither remembered the staircase nor the odd, spiky shoots that superseded the Mycosynth from his previous visits this far into the plane.

Tezzeret did remember what was underneath his feet. The very heart of New Phyrexia. Karn's old throne room. Proceeding down the steps and into a dark tunnel, he readied a spell in case of attack. If memory served, he'd eventually come to a metal door the width and height of a giant, festooned with gears and cogs. But there was no such door. Instead, the mouth of the tunnel let out into what had been the chasm-like chamber where Karn's throne sat. Only, the throne was no longer visible underneath a tangle of thick, armored cables that coiled around it, spiraling up to the ceiling of the chamber. The scene was bathed in a pulsating red glow.

A heartbeat.

Tezzeret followed the roots of the tree-like structure to its base, next to which stood a peristyle, in the center of which was a reflecting pool. Sitting beside the pool was Elesh Norn, her porcelain body cloaked in a cowl the color of blood.

The Mother of Machines looked up at his approach.

"Tezzeret," she said, her gentle voice cutting through the thick air. "Your journey here was pleasant, we trust."

"Without incident," said Tezzeret. She seemed to be in a good mood. *A bad sign overall*, he surmised. But in the short term, it boded well for him. He was ready—ready to receive his darksteel body and let the Phyrexians slaughter each other. The Multiverse was a nigh-infinite place. There were places to hide, to disappear into. To survive in. "I have done as you asked." He pulled the cape off the pieces of Karn's body, causing Elesh Norn to rise to her feet and bow.

"Father," she said. The darksteel braces released at her touch, letting her take Karn's torso into her hands. "We welcome you to our great work."

Karn said nothing.

"Things have been difficult between us," she said. "But when you learn how we have been carrying forward your dream, you will understand why we did what we did to you—what we will do to you. Not as a punishment, no. But as penance, to show that none, not even our beloved patriarch, is above reproach."

"Your work is indeed great, Mother," said Tezzeret. "But I believe we also have unfinished business. My reward."

"For faithful service, yes," she said. "You have shown us such grace, Tezzeret. We could not have our Realmbreaker without you."

Tezzeret remembered standing in Elesh Norn's throne room in the Fair Basilica when she signaled him to open a portal to Kaldheim. The energy matrix of the Planar Bridge burst from his chest, bathing his body in a vortex of electric fire. Spilling out of the red portal was the scalding hot endoskeleton of Vorinclex, one claw scraping the floor and the other clutching a bottle, which one of Elesh Norn's aspirants carried away. That bottle—it must have contained the essence of Kaldheim's World Tree. And now, the Phyrexians had their own.

Realmbreaker. This was his doing. He was directly responsible.

Elesh Norn smiled. "We have decided that you shall be our herald on Dominaria. There remain interlopers on the plane scheming against us—Planeswalkers of your acquaintance. You will lead the effort to enlighten them on the error of their ways."

"Back to Dominaria?"

"Patience, patience."

Patience? How often had he heard that word passed off to him in lieu of what he deserved? It was then that he understood—Elesh Norn had no intention of fulfilling her promise. Her plan for him was to use him until he couldn't be used anymore, then cast him aside or worse, flay and rebuild him to be another lapdog like Ajani. Whether the Seekers, Nicol Bolas, or the praetors of Phyrexia, none who betrayed him in this manner would ever be spared his wrath. Not now. Not ever.

He locked his eyes on Elesh Norn, pouring all his scorn, all his rage, all his hate into her image so that he would never forget this moment—this moment when everything became clear. If it was a war Urabrask wanted, he would get such a war. Tezzeret would make sure of it.

At the far end of the reflecting pool, Elesh Norn placed Karn's torso onto a pedestal wreathed in porcelain white vines of ivy. She tilted her head.

"Do you truly have nothing to say? After all this time? We are family, after all."

That's when Karn finally spoke: "Jhoira Jhoira is my friend my best friend. We met in the original academy, before the accident drove us from Tolaria. She named me. Karn from an old Thran name. She said She said it meant—"

"Enough," she snapped. "It is obvious that the stresses of this day have left you addled."

Well played, Karn, thought Tezzeret. *In a weakened position, yes, but remaining on the board.*

"Rest your mind, Father." Elesh Norn stroked Karn's face as a mother would an ailing child. "When our great work is achieved, you will bask in the joy of perfection with the rest of the Multiverse." Then she glanced up at Tezzeret. Gone was the facade of amiability, replaced by the frigid tenor of her voice. "You're still here. Why?"

With a growl, Tezzeret turned and walked away.



Art by: Camille Alquier

Tezzeret entered the cave complex hidden deep inside Shiv's Comestia Crater. Before the attack on the Mana Rig, these tunnels teemed with Phyrexian troops. Now, no more than a small company of centurions and negators remained in any kind of fighting shape. A good number among them suffered egregious injuries—sliced off appendages, whole sections of their bodies burned away or battered into jelly—requiring them to scavenge bodies from the battle site to use as organic material. As damaging as those losses had been, the real cost to the Phyrexians was the dearth of leadership left by the detonation of the Mana Rig. Tezzeret understood that such setbacks were the true death of a pursuit, noble or otherwise.

Waste not, want not.

"Rona," Tezzeret said to the new head of operations on Shiv. "Status report."

"I don't answer to you," said Rona. "Sheoldred left me in charge."

"Do you see Sheoldred here?" His patience for discourse long depleted, Tezzeret immediately lashed out with his metal arm and skewered her shoulder with a long, thin barb. Rona grabbed hold of him, forcing Tezzeret away. He stumbled back, impressed. Rona had implemented her own augmentations since they'd last met. Good to know. Instead of pressing forward on the attack, Rona called for her lieutenants—one a centurion fitted with a pair of scaly wings, and the other a fleshier design with coils of knotted cables for arms—to intervene in the battle. That was her mistake. Under the Steel Thanes, shows of strength and power were the whole of the law. Her lieutenants weren't going to interfere.

She called for them again, and Tezzeret used that momentary distraction to cast a spell multiplying the mass of the metal in her body, crumpling her to the ground. He placed his hand—his organic one—palm up on her shoulder. "I've been told that unprotected flesh takes a few seconds to vaporize in the Blind Eternities. In that small amount of time, I imagine that one would feel indescribable pain. But, as I said, it's over quickly. Supposedly. Care to see?"

"No."

Tezzeret leaned in close to her face. "Status report," he snarled, then dispelled his magic.

Rona glared at Tezzeret while she regained her footing. "We suffered losses."

"That is highly obvious. Have you called for reinforcements?"

"Yes, but our cadres are already deployed into their positions. Enemy armies have assembled in Bena-lia, Corondor, and Krosa. There are few forces left to spare."

"Hmph. How long will it take for our troops to be fully restored?"

"A few weeks. A month at the longest."

Well, well, Tezzeret thought. He furrowed his brow, pretending to be concerned. *We shall see which one of us is more patient, beloved Mother.*

"Your spies. Have they maintained watch over the Planeswalkers?"

"Yes. They have left Shiv," said Rona. "But we have been able to track them back to New Argive."

New Argive? What would bring them back there? As far as he knew, New Argive had been fully infested by Phyrexian forces. It would have been suicide to seek refuge within the walls of Argivia or any of the other major settlements. Unless they weren't trying to get help from their former allies. Curious.

"What of the special troops left in your care? Mother's elite?"

A smile cracked across Rona's face. "Newly whole and waiting for their orders."

"Excellent," said Tezzeret. "One big happy family."