

Episode 7: Divine Intervention

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From set *March of the Machine*

Tell her not to follow me. None of you should. Not ever.

The first time Karn tried to solve Mirrodin's Phyrexian problem, he'd left word behind that he wasn't to be pursued. It was a conscious decision. The corruption was taking hold of him. Mirrodin fell because of Karn. In his arrogance, he'd shaped the plane; in his hubris, he'd left one of his own creations in charge of it; in his ignorance, he'd tracked Phyrexian oil throughout the plane. If he'd been more present, he might have realized Memnarch had lost his way. If he'd paid attention, he might have seen the oil dripping in his wake. But he wasn't present, and he wasn't paying attention, and Mirrodin's fall crushed anyone who lived within it. *Don't follow me*, he'd told the others—because all of this was his problem, and solving it was going to kill him.

And he was right. If it wasn't for Venser sacrificing his spark, Karn would be dead. A brilliant inventor, teller of awful jokes, and general thorn in the sides of most who knew him, Venser was part of the group that'd come to find Karn when he was deep in the throes of phyresis. Koth and Elspeth beat back the enemy's legions long enough to buy Venser time to find him deep within Mirrodin's core. Melira had made Venser immune to corruption, and Venser

Time and time again Karn swore that he'd do honor to Venser's memory. Venser had seen something in him, something worth dying for. If Karn let himself die he'd be betraying that hope.

Which makes his current predicament even more painful. Lashed to a floating piece of slag held aloft by Norn's choir, made of the same material that had arrested his planeswalking in the Caves of Koilos what felt like years ago, he has the perfect view to the end of the Multiverse. Most of his body has been taken for scrap. Karn used to wonder why he could feel pain. "People are less likely to hurt something that screams," Urza said. What a shame Phyrexians aren't people. Karn's in agony. He has no choice but to embrace it, reshape it, make it something useful: an anchor that will keep him tied to what remains of this body. So long as he can feel that pain, he is himself.

And surrounded by the triumph of his failures, it only feels appropriate.

This is the end—of his creations, of the Multiverse, of him.

Knowing Norn, it won't come quickly. Between Vorinclex's endless taunts and Jin-Gitaxias's prodding, Karn has no illusions about what's going to be done with him. What *is* being done to him. The Phyrexians have been taking him apart, piece by piece, and repurposing his silver body. Vorinclex and Jin-Gitaxias have different ideas on how best to do that—but the core idea is the same.

And Norn?

Norn wants him to suffer. He sees that in her fang-ridden smile.

“False Patriarch,” she says to Karn, “isn’t this a blessed sight? After all your years of stumbling, to see the heights we’ve climbed without you.”

Karn does not look at her. Cannot. He has precious little power left within him. With whatever remains, he wants to remember his friends. It is the least he can do for them. Koth sits straight-backed even as Jin-Gitaxias advances toward him. Of the captives, he is the only one to meet Karn’s eyes. The others all have their reasons. Chandra is too beaten to kneel upright. And Melira?

Melira can’t bear to look, either.

Though his heart aches, he understands. After all that they’d worked toward, all their time struggling against the impossible, the sacrifices and the dreams, they are all going to die here. Because of his mistakes all that time ago. If he were in her position, he wouldn’t want to look, either.

His Mirran would-be rescuers have lost limbs; some are already being spliced into new monstrosities. When they first arrived, there were dozens of them. Now there’s only a handful left—Koth, Melira, Wrenn, Chandra, and perhaps ten or twenty survivors. One by one the rest of them had been dragged off for experiments. Those that remain here Norn has kept for her own special reasons.

One of the chorus members extends herself, her spine unfolding like an accordion to accommodate her new growth. She takes Karn’s head in hand and holds it in place—forces him to confront Norn’s face.

“Phyrexia has posed you a question. You must answer it. It is no wonder you failed to lead us if you cannot do as much as this.”

Karn is weary. He cannot think of something to say.

In the end, he does not have to.

Jin-Gitaxias raises an arm to strike. In the gleam of his wicked claws, Karn sees the ghosts of his past. Who better to offer him comfort in a time like this? Soon he will be among them, wherever they might have gone.

Will it hurt?

Will it be like falling asleep? He’s always been envious of sleep.

Time to rest.

He closes his eyes—for a flash of gold to blare across his eyelids.

A clarion call shatters the chitter-skitter of Phyrexia’s great machine. The gathered forces have only an instant’s warning for what is to come—and no idea what it might be. As golden light swallows the onlookers, Karn hears the clashing of metal. And because he was built to function in the strangest environments, he can see what has appeared in the center of the shockwave now rocking the bridge.

An angel in gleaming armor, a golden blade now raised to counter Jin-Gitaxias’s strike. She descends from on high like the lance of an angry god toward them—and when she lands, she craters the metal beneath her. Her impact sends dozens of Jin-Gitaxias’s legions tumbling into the abyss. The choir’s delicate bodies aren’t meant for an impact like this, either. Soon they plummet into the dark as well, sending Karn’s chunk of slag hurtling to the ground.

Still, he watches.

“You will not strike this man down,” says the angel.

Wait. Doesn’t he ? That voice

Karn isn't the only one to recognize it. Only an arm's length away, Elesh Norn lets out a keening screech. "You?!"



Art by: Denys Tsiperko

When the light fades, Elspeth Tirel stands in the center of the crater. Yet this is Elspeth as Karn has never seen her: flanked by radiant golden wings. The many wounds of her past no longer mark her serene face.



Jin-Gitaxias scrambles backward, his servitors closing ranks to protect his escape. Elspeth lets him go. She's busy elsewhere—placing a hand on Chandra's swollen face. Healing light flows from her into the pyromancer. Flesh knits back together.

Already Norn has shot up from her throne; in her anger, she's thrown it over. Two of her choir are crushed beneath its bulk. To Karn's eye, their deaths don't seem to have bothered her. "You! You were not meant to trouble us anymore!"

Elspeth does not dignify this with a response, does not look up at her; she keeps her attention on Chandra, then on Koth. The shock on his face is plain to see—but there is hope there, too. That in turn kindles some within Karn. When was the last time he saw hope in those eyes?

"We, the might and heart of Phyrexia, address you!" Norn flings a chunk of her throne at Elspeth. Karn braces himself for Elspeth to come tumbling down—but it doesn't seem to bother Elspeth at all when the rock shatters against her wing.

Something ripples through the assembled ranks of Phyrexia, something like fear, something like shock. Whatever it is, they do not like it. Like animals before fire, they begin to pull back, to scatter. The Mirrans see their chance. The moment Koth's healed, he drives his fist into the ground. Magma shoots up from a burning orange crack in the bridge, running all the way to the base of the Invasion Tree. "Mirrodin!" says Koth. "With me!"

But Norn does not seem to hear them. Whatever she can get a hold of will serve as a weapon, it seems: more chunks of her throne, a horn she snaps from a howling Vorinclex, the severed head of an unlucky choir member. She hurls them all through the air at Elspeth. Elspeth dodges, cuts, and parries—none of the blows land true. Norn screeches again.

Jin-Gitaxias crawls up to Norn's side. "The prisoners—"

"You and Nissa deal with them," Norn snaps. "We have something more important to attend to."

"That angel?" Jin-Gitaxias asks. "Preposterous. She's only one among many. My legions can handle them, and Vorinclex will eat whatever we leave behind. It would be wiser for you to retreat and leave the matter—"

Norn grabs him by the throat. "Dissent is a blasphemy, *praetor*. It does not stain the tongue of the faithful. Our will is Phyrexia's will. See it done."

It is ridiculous that they are having this conversation. Norn must be losing control.

Especially if she does not notice Melira running to Karn's platform. A simple wave to Koth and suddenly, Karn is aloft again. "You're going to be okay," Melira says.

So much of this is hard to believe.

Once, long ago, he almost died on New Phyrexia. It was only the intervention of his friends—Venser, Koth, Elspeth, and Melira—that saved him.

Now nearly all of them are here to save him again, and Venser's spark lends him strength.

Don't follow me, he once said to Venser.

But Venser's spark was in him still and followed him all the way here.

He couldn't give up. Not yet.

Wrenn couldn't give up. Not yet.

Though there isn't much of Wrenn left, though their entire fighting force has been reduced to only a few broken survivors, she can't give up. What does it matter if she no longer has legs? The weight of the world is still on her shoulders.

The angel's arrival isn't a surprise to her but a confirmation. Anything else would have been unacceptable because it meant they might all die. Someone came to save them, and it was Elspeth in her new autumn colors, of course. She looks splendid, though there isn't time to appreciate it.

Humans are often distracted by bright, shiny things. She hopes Phyrexians will be the same.

"Chandra," she rasps. "Chandra, we need to go."

Gold dances in the pyromancer's eyes—she's as distracted by the goings-on as the others are. It isn't until Wrenn bites Chandra's sleeve and tugs that she looks down.

"I can't walk anymore. I need your help," says Wrenn.

It's all the explanation Chandra needs. Reality seems to set in for her again. She scoops Wrenn up. "You've got it. Let's go."

Together they take off. The Mirrans follow, looking back every other step toward the woman who's saved them all—and the army they'll have to evade.

At least, that's what Wrenn thought they were admiring. "Karn!" shouts Melira. "We have to save him, too."

"Got it!" says Koth. The slab Karn's on is stone like any other—it answers his call the way wood heeds hers. Karn's slab flies out to meet them. A barrage of arrows and spears bounce off the back of the slab. That's Koth's work, too: he's using it to shield their retreat.

Wrenn frowns. The weapons weren't actually hurting Karn, but this still strikes her as a callous thing to do. How long have they been fighting that they make decisions like this?

They deserve peace.

Wrenn wants to bring it to them, but she won't be able to do it alone. Teferi will know what to do, if only she can reach him. And he's gone somewhere she won't be able to reach without the Invasion Tree's help. She can't reach it without Chandra, and Chandra

"Drop the dryad and there's still hope for you, Chandra. You're smart enough to know I'll kill you otherwise."

Chandra had Nissa to deal with.

They all do. No matter how fast they run, none of it is going to mean anything if Nissa catches them. And she means to catch them. The elf's flinging the bodies of the fallen back at them, her steps certain and inevitable. Wrenn wishes she hadn't turned back to get a look. There's no compassion in those eyes, no mercy, no trace of the woman who was once there.

Koth has his hands full keeping the others from getting hurt. Karn's as torn apart as she is. The fleeing resistance—they're doing what they can, but what they can do to a Phyrexianized elven Planeswalker isn't much. Elspeth's distracting Norn. And Chandra? Chandra can't bring herself to hurt Nissa. Wrenn knows that without having to ask.

They need to get to the tree. And they will. Wrenn's sure of it, because if they don't everyone will die, and that can't happen.

What she can't see from here is how.

All she has is faith.

Phyrexia rages, yet it cannot break Elspeth Tirel's peace. It is a peace as certain and solid as her golden armor, as hard won as her battle scars. Chunk after chunk of porcelain comes flying at her; she does not so much as flinch. These are the desperate actions of a person who knows they are going to lose.

Elspeth is above all that now.

Once, she'd found Norn frightening. Once, those needle-like teeth had haunted her. Norn's uncanny voice narrated her nightmares with a false god's bravado. *Remember always your humility, for it was Phyrexia that brought you low.*

Elspeth does not find her frightening anymore. She's no longer brought low. In fact, with a single flap of her wings, Elspeth can soar above her. From here Norn is more of an oversized doll than a threat to the Multiverse. Everything seems smaller now. Further away. All the dross of Elspeth's life has been cut away, leaving only the truth.



Art by: awanqi (Angela Wang)

And the truth is that Phyrexia will not win this day.

Beneath her, the Mirrans flee toward the tree. Koth covers the retreat with Chandra the vanguard, Wrenn in her arms. Strapped to a hunk of slag is Karn—who watches her with naked admiration. Though he is in a pitiful state she nevertheless finds herself smiling at him. After all these years, they're finally going to put everything right.

So long as Elspeth can see them safely there. She has to stop Nissa. Wrenn *must* reach that tree.

But there's a more pressing matter to attend—someone who doesn't want her running off.

Furious, Norn lunges for Elspeth, claws outstretched. She yanks Elspeth from the air by a dangling leg and slams her against the ground. "You shall not ruin our moment of triumph!"

Elspeth's ears ring; her vision blurs. She blinks. Norn towers above her once more.

"We have dedicated ourselves to this cause without reservation. The salvation of the Multiverse is our righteous calling. How dare you stand against it?"

"I have my own calling," Elspeth answers. She stands, dust falling from her cloak. "You won't keep me from it."

Norn's laughter is enough to chill the blood. "Your calling is false," she begins. As she speaks, the bodies of the fallen Phyrexians lift and swarm around her. Pieces fly from their limp forms: shards of metal, shards of bone; blades and razors; teeth and tubes. Warp through weft, Norn weaves herself a hideous new suit of armor. "On all of the planes, there is only one eternal, untarnished truth: all will be one. Any who stand in the way of unity stand in the way of a perfect future."

Elspeth looks over her shoulder. The others are fleeing, and Nissa has broken off to stalk toward them. She can't afford to stay here and listen to Norn's grandstanding. Elspeth concentrates on her blade: the crackling, golden Godsend. This is only a facsimile of the real thing—but it's her facsimile. She knows it'll work for her. A little focus is all it takes to send a searing beam of light at Norn. Chunks of armor fall away, incinerated by the sword's purifying rays. A smoking pit rises from the praetor's shoulder. This time, Norn doesn't scream. Instead, she raises a clawed hand. The bodies of the fallen soldiers around them—those already shucked of their useful parts—rise anew to encircle the two fighters.

"Phyrexia shall never fall," Norn says. "Look around you. There is no death, Elspeth Tirel, only Phyrexia."

She won't have long to act. Before the risen ranks can pin her down, Elspeth takes to the air once more. Yet as she turns toward the fleeing Mirrans, walls shoot up from the ground to block her path—ones that rise to the endless heights of the sanctuary's ceiling.

"You cannot run from us," Norn says. "We are the ground beneath your feet, the air in your lungs. Everything that you lay eyes upon is Phyrexia, and Phyrexia is us. We are whole."

Elspeth strikes at the wall. Sparks are the only sign of progress: the porcelain plating does not yield to her blade. Up ahead, Nissa is closing on the Mirrans. Chandra is with them—the two of them were close, weren't they? Would Chandra be able to strike her down? Elspeth hesitates. If Chandra falters, Nissa will stop them.

They need Elspeth. This fight is a distraction. She needs to get through that wall. If the others can hold out for just a few seconds

Once more she concentrates on the blade, every breath setting it more brightly aglow. An aurora gleams across her armor. Behind and beneath her, the risen legions of Vorinclex and Jin-Gitaxias are on the attack. Lashes close around her wings. As one, they pull back. Her muscles strain under the pressure.

"Why must you struggle so?" Norn asks. "You've always struggled against us. What is it you desire? If you have longed for a home, find home with us. If you have need of friends or lovers, there are numberless legions of them among our ranks. You can still join us, if you submit."

Elspeth looks over her shoulder. Norn's standing taller than ever, the added plates from the bridge and the fallen serving to stretch her even further. Bright viscera shines beneath the surface: the flayed flesh of which she's so proud. From the size of her, the cruel shapes of her armor, and the casque-like grill of her new carapace, she looks nothing like home. Elesh Norn is war and death.

A second set of lashes shoots from Norn's outstretched hand. Elspeth doesn't have any other choice: if she wants to stay aloft, she's going to have to get through Norn. A single chop of her blade severs both sets of lashes; momentum topples the Gitaxians onto their backs.

Elspeth flies toward Norn. "You don't understand me."

Another slash comes her way; she dodges and repays Norn with a slice across the arm. Smoke rises from the wound. The smell of burning flesh sticks to the top of Elspeth's mouth. "I'm nothing like you."

Norn grabs one of Elspeth's wings. In a foul parody of a child holding a bird, she dangles Elspeth aloft. "You longed for a purpose—for something greater than yourself. Your dearest heart's desire is a place where you might belong, a place of endless peace, where those you value are never far. A bright future. A *Phyrexian* future."

Norn's voice is joyously sick, and sickly joyous. Elspeth cuts at Norn's grasping fingers, but though she draws blood, the praetor does not let go.

"What does this form offer you that Phyrexia cannot? Peace. Purpose. Unity. Yet they cannot grant you the last, not in truth. Skin still binds you together. Weakens you. To be Phyrexian is to be free from all such boundaries. What you've gained is a pale imitation of what we've perfected. Look around you!"

She does.

And though she is loath to admit it, there is truth to what Norn is saying. The eyes that stare back at her from the army's ranks are all the same. Those that breathe do so in unison—and with those breaths, the sanctuary clicks and whirrs, a machine keyed to the lives of its denizens. Nissa, Nahiri, Ajani none of them seemed upset with their new states. On every one of them she'd seen nothing but ecstasy.

Home could be whatever you made it and whomever you made it with. If she joined, she wouldn't be short of friends. She and Ajani could forge Theros into its best possible form. Even Daxos could join them. Undying, ageless, all one—forever.

"Angels are a pale shadow of divinity. We are its true light. From the heights of this sanctum, we see all things exactly as they are. After this battle you will no longer exist as your self—you will become one of them. All those years you looked with horror on phyresis, and here you are, embracing it by another name."

"It isn't the same!" Elspeth answers.

Norn holds Elspeth upside down in front of her. They are eye to porcelain, Elspeth dangling meters over the ground. Norn's teeth gleam with the refracted light from Elspeth's blade. "Then name a single difference."

"My purpose is divine."

"My evangels act as the swords of our divinity. Try again."

"This transformation hasn't changed anything about me." The lie stains her tongue the second she's told it.

"Those new wings of yours tell a different truth. Is this so difficult for you to understand?"

"I " Elspeth starts.

Another voice from behind—a familiar one. Jin-Gitaxias calls out to his liege. "Haven't we spent enough time on this? Compleat her and let us be on our way."

"Quiet!" Norn shouts. At once her mood drops to furious rage. She turns toward Jin-Gitaxias. A clash of metal, the sound of tearing flesh. Jin-Gitaxias gurgles behind Elspeth. She realizes he was right: they've spent enough time bickering like children. Her purpose is greater than this. And Norn's reaction to insubordination tells Elspeth all she needs to know about their differences.

She drives her sword into Norn's wounded shoulder—the only place she can reach from here. A spurt of blood slicks Elspeth's armor as Norn, at last, lets go. Elspeth takes to the air again. Jin-Gitaxias's arm lays in a pool of oil not far from Norn. If she hadn't escaped, it might have been hers. Instead, Elspeth concentrates her power on her sword. Golden light floods the platform.



Art by: Livia Prima

“You’re right, Norn,” she says. “We aren’t so different. We argue. We make mistakes. We have our own wants, dreams, and desires.”

Norn’s mouth wrenches in confusion and disgust. “What blasphemy is this? We speak only Phyrexia’s will—”

Norn swings, but Elspeth ducks out of the way. “You disagreed with Jin-Gitaxias, didn’t you? Phyrexia wants you to ignore me, but *you* want differently.”

A shout peels from Norn’s throat. Shards of fallen soldiers slice through the air, blades of the dead, each aimed at Elspeth. “You! You understand nothing of Phyrexia!”

“No, the problem is I understand you far too well,” says Elspeth. The blade hums with power. She raises it high overhead. This is it. After all these years and all these dead—it is finally time to strike down Elesh Norn. Jin-Gitaxias will do nothing to help her. Already his legions are charging

Toward the tree. Thousands of them for only a handful of Mirrans. Spears land like hail across the bridge’s surface. That person crumpling to the ground—is that Melira? Born without a trace of metal in her body, immune to the horrors of phytosis, the girl once represented hope to the entire plane. Is that her crumpling to the ground?

Koth’s scream confirms it.

It is not right to linger.

Elspeth looks down on the praetor before her. A storm of blades swirl around Norn like the petals of a porcelain flower. “We are beyond your comprehension, beyond your reach! When we have conquered the Multiverse you’ve held so dear, you will kneel at our feet and bask in the glory of our creation! *You* will not ruin everything we’ve achieved. Eons from now you will be forgotten, and we will remain the eternal hierophant, Elesh Norn!”

“That’s just what I mean. You want people to worship *Elesh Norn*, don’t you? Phyrexia doesn’t matter to you. It never has. Power’s the only thing you care about.”

The swords around Elesh Norn hang still and silent. A sanguine glow of rage builds from behind them. “You I hate you!” Like the arrows of an army, the swords flying toward her—shards pulled now from the bridge, from the walls, from the very body of Phyrexia.

So she’s finally learned to speak for herself, has she? Well, that’s no longer Elspeth’s concern. The swords, however

Only one shot at this. If Elspeth aligns everything right

She flies straight for the wall. At the very last moment she pulls back. Momentum turns her stomach, holds her in a vise, but she makes the turn up and away. The blades don’t have the space. With all her problems concentrated in one place, Elspeth at last unleashes a ray of light.

When the light fades, she’s already halfway down the bridge, toward the tree. The hopes of the Multiverse rest on her plumed shoulders.

She does not hear Jin-Gitaxias get to his feet—but she does hear Norn’s scream.

“Come back here! I wasn’t finished with you!”

She’s dawdled too long. It is time to do the right thing.

Wrenn and Chandra are almost to the tree. Elspeth’s got to make sure they make it.