

Episode 2: Sand in the Hourglass

Langley Hyde

From set *Dominaria United*



Art by: Julian Kok Joon Wen

Time trickled away more slowly than the grains of sand settling between the rocks. The fine particles sifted into Karn's joints. He didn't know how long he had lain there, pinned in the dark. Was it days or weeks that had passed? What if months had flown away, like a small and startled bird? What if it was longer? Years, decades, eons—

No, he could not think of it.

No one would miss him. No one knew where he had gone. He should have told someone. He should have at least told Jhoira. Or Jaya. If he had told them, they would have known where to search and either freed him or seen the Phyrexians themselves.

What if the Phyrexians were the ones to find him? Would it be worse if no one found him? He might wait alone, forever in the darkness. In the silence.

Sand trickled down. A scrabbling noise. Maybe claws grating on rough stone.

A weight lifted away from his hand, exposing it to the chill air currents. He could move his fingers. Relief shot through him, a pang more powerful than the Blind Eternities. He stretched his fingers, marveling at the freedom of this small movement, the ability to make *any* movement. Something warm and soft touched his fingertips. Organic, impenetrable to his senses. Not Phyrexian. Gentle. Thoughtful.

He was found.

The warmth left his fingertips. Had his rescuer departed?

The scratching quickened. Rocks grated. Pebbles cascaded. Clunks as large rocks tossed away landed. The burden on him lightened. Karn strained. The material around him budged, shifting at the pressure of his enormous strength. Karn exercised the powerful mechanisms in his torso, pushing himself upright. Rocks poured away. He heaved himself up slowly. He wanted to take care not to hurt his rescuer with any stray stones.

As his efforts increased, the scratching noise ended. Footfalls retreated as his rescuer stepped clear. Karn would have to trust that they had moved to a safe distance.

Karn hauled himself to his feet. Stone poured off him, and he was free. The warm air caressed his body. He rolled his shoulders, reveling in their movement. The tumbling rock kicked up a gray haze. He shook the fine particles from his body and wiped clean his eyes.

Ajani stood in the tunnel, his fur a striking white in the torchlight. The pupil of his unscarred pale-blue eye glinted with the nocturnal hue of a nighttime predator. His shoulders had a proud set to them, like he was pleased he'd found Karn. He granted Karn a friendly, close-lipped smile.

Karn nodded, tentative. He'd only met Ajani a few times. For Ajani's species, baring teeth was a hostile action, so this small smile was friendlier than a broad human grin.

"How did you find me?" Karn cleared his throat. It, too, felt dusty. The mechanism inside it clicked uncomfortably. "I told no one I was here."

Ajani coughed, awkward, deep in his chest. "After you didn't answer the letters, Jhoira became worried about you. She asked Raff to place a tracking spell on the letters, one that would only activate when you—and only you—opened the envelope. That's how I located your camp."

Karn stilled, embarrassed. Had Jhoira known every time he'd read a letter and left it unanswered? Every time he'd pushed aside the paper heaps on his worktop to make room for a new project? Had Ajani seen the chaotic clutter that populated his workspace? Karn would have never let his camp descend to such a state if he'd expected a visitor.

He evaded Ajani's gaze and investigated the joints in his body for damage. Ah, the spearhead. He'd forgotten he'd left that lodged in him.

"Every time you moved the letters, Jhoira knew you were alive," Ajani said, "and didn't want to talk. She was determined to give you the time you needed, and not to press you. She knows how private you can be when you are upset."

Karn worked at the spearhead, trying to remove it from his body. The rockfall had jammed it even deeper into him.

"But when you stopped shuffling the letters around," Ajani continued, "she grew concerned. And here I am."

Karn grunted. He wiggled the spearhead back and forth, trying to loosen it from between his torso plates. His blunt fingers, though capable of the most detailed work, couldn't dig deep enough. He still couldn't believe Jhoira had known how often he'd looked at those letters, considered replying, and then set them aside. Too many times. "Jhoira is well?"

"She is in her workshop on the Mana Rig," Ajani shrugged.

"And the *Weatherlight*?"

"She returned the *Weatherlight* to its rightful owner," Ajani said. "Shanna captains it."

“Ah, good. Shanna will rise to the task.” Karn had served with Sisay and was pleased to see the airship in her descendant’s hands. “Do you mind if I ?” Ajani nodded at the spearpoint.

Karn shrugged.

Ajani was not as tall as Karn, but he was tall enough that he had to bend his head to inspect the spearhead. He inserted his claws into Karn’s joints with surprising delicacy. “You know, every Planeswalker goes through phases like this. We withdraw, especially if we have played a role in changing a plane’s fate. I have seen it time and time again. After a great hunt, you feast, and you sleep. It’s natural, and there is no shame in that.”

“I do not feast, and I do not sleep,” Karn said.

“That does not mean you don’t need to recuperate.” Ajani eased the spearhead from Karn’s body.

Karn had never been permitted to “recuperate” when Urza had loosed him as a war machine. Urza had explained it was unnecessary and, indifferent to Karn’s weariness, had turned his attention to other, more interesting projects.

Ajani examined the spearpoint. Its metal glimmered a sickly green in the dimness. “You encountered more than a rockfall. What happened here, my friend?”

Karn didn’t wish to answer the question—not until he knew whether he could trust Ajani. The vision he’d had upon touching Sheoldred still thrummed within him—Phyrexian agents everywhere, hidden across Dominaria. Waiting. “How long have I been buried?”

“A few months,” Ajani admitted. “It took time to locate you.”

Months lost. Months that could have been spent preparing.

Sheoldred’s segmented parts had skittered along his paralyzed arms, down his back; spiderlike, they had poured over him. She would have had ample time to reassemble herself. Rona as well, he was sure.

“You have damaged yourself.” Karn nodded at Ajani, whose claw had torn at the cuticle, a wound that had most likely occurred when he had dug Karn out from the rockslide. “Let us return to my camp for supplies. I must also check the sensitive equipment there to verify that it is still functional.”

Karn did not voice what he feared most: did he still have the sylex and the clay tablet?

In the months Karn had been buried, his campsite had remained undisturbed but not unchanged; the small tents had gone dingy with mildew.

Ajani hunched his shoulders. He had a Planeswalker’s distaste for these caves. Even if one could not directly sense the interplanar technologies, their way of warping time made the space claustrophobic. Karn, too, could feel the pressure.

Karn led Ajani through his cluttered camp, then ducked into his main tent. The box holding the sylex and the tablet remained where he’d left it and appeared to be locked. Karn ignored it, conscious of Ajani’s eyes on him.

Karn located a barrel with water—potable, though he normally used it for cleaning purposes—and a rag. He handed the rag to Ajani, to wash and wrap his wound.

“Why were you here, Karn?” Ajani rinsed his hand, working out the grit that had lodged in his wound.

Karn inventoried his equipment for damage as he replied. “Searching for artifacts. Due to the unique properties of the Caves of Koilos, not even the most entrepreneurial archeologists or enthusiastic researchers have plundered them.” He made his way in a circuit around the tent, toward the box where

he'd hidden the sylex and its tablet. Casually. The box seemed intact, but he dared not open it. He reached out with his special senses. The tablet felt like mere clay, a combination of aluminum, silicon, magnesium, sodium, and other trace elements. The sylex buzzed at him: present but indecipherable due to its powerful magic.

Karn set the box aside. He faced Ajani and related all he had seen.

"Sheoldred escaped?" Ajani paced in the tent's confines. "Karn, we must warn—"

"I have tried," Karn said. "Many times."

"Now you have seen Sheoldred."

Karn wished he could trust Ajani, but he shook his head. "The caves where I discovered the Phyrexian staging ground are no longer accessible. I have no proof that the Phyrexians have returned to Dominaria."

"Don't we?" Ajani held out the spearhead. "Karn, there is a peace summit between the Keldons and the Benalish. If any nations will take the Phyrexian return seriously, it's those two. I propose we speak to their leaders."

Ajani was right. Of all the nations in Dominaria, Keld and New Benalia were likeliest to listen to Karn's warning. Radha, the leader of the Keldons, had reforged that rugged nation of warriors into a devastating military force. Aron Capashen led New Benalia's knights, whose passion for justice made each one worth a dozen fighters. "Let me gather my finds and sensitive equipment before we go."

Ajani tapped an amulet hanging from his belt. "Jhoira gave me a summoning device for the *Weatherlight* before she sent me. Shanna will honor it."

"The *Weatherlight* may be a speedy ship, but she is not quick enough." Karn stacked several devices on the chest that held the sylex and the tablet and loaded everything into a rucksack. "I propose that we planeswalk."

Karn did not know how other Planeswalkers perceived the Blind Eternities, but to him the interminable space felt like crushed velvet, its lukewarm prickle sometimes verging on pain. The vertigo plunging through Karn contrasted with the sense that he wasn't moving at all, which was at odds with the feeling that he pulled himself along a cord to an unknown destination. He burst through a silken gash into cool air.

Karn stood knee-deep in wild grasses, orange poppies, and purple-flowering thistles. Inland, the farms seemed young, recently cleared land holding fields yellow with blooming canola. The homesteads bled into mountains, the misty temperate rainforests punctuated with emerald alpine meadows.

If he had been human, he would have taken a single shuddering breath.

To his other side, a large stone statue protected a seaport whose buildings and streets were carved into white chalk cliffs. Eons ago, a Phyrexian portal ship must have decapitated the statue, and the decrepit hulk lay atop the statue's neck. Overgrown with honeysuckle, it shadowed the city's colorful awnings. In the center of the bay, a worn-smooth island protruded from the water—the statue's head, now home to seabirds.

Ajani led Karn down narrow paths past modest homes carved into the chalk. These seemed small and well worn in contrast to the newly sculpted city hall, which had large but chunky dimensions, wide windows, and balconies framed with ornate columns.

"Do you know where the peace talks are occurring?" Karn asked.

Ajani paused and cocked his head. "Follow the sound of arguing, I suppose."

Karn could hear nothing. The leonin's senses had to be spectacular.

Ajani led Karn through a grand but empty reception area, then up a narrow set of stairs. The corridors linking the rooms felt claustrophobic, lit only by torches. They pushed between brass-bound double doors into a light-filled room dominated by a long granite table. A broad balcony overlooked the sea, and a male varied thrush—orange breast with a black collar, black mask, and black cap, a beautiful creature—perched on its railing.

To one side sat the representatives of House Capashen of Benalia. The nobleman at the table—Aron Capashen, a middle-aged man with light ochre skin—had a proud tower with seven colored windows embroidered onto his silks. The knights arrayed behind him, their silver armor chased with gold, their stained-glass shields held at the ready, possessed the same gilded motif on their breastplates.

To the other side lounged the large, gray-skinned Keldon warriors with their heavy leather armor and their heavier weapons. Their warlord—Radha—sat opposite the Capashen nobleman. She had a Keldon's ash-colored skin, black mane, and bulky muscles, but the pointed ears and blue markings of a Skyshroud elf.

Other officials, led by a man from New Argive who had fair skin and a black goatee, lined the sides of the granite negotiation table between the two conflicting parties.

Ajani and Karn must have arrived as the negotiations were set to begin, because only a moment later both Jodah and Jaya arrived. Jodah portaled in, stepping through a door his magic sliced into the air. His office, cluttered with books and bric-a-brac, vanished when the portal slid closed. Jaya planeswalked into the room, appearing with a flash and the smell of charcoal.

"It's been a while, old man." Jaya gave Jodah a friendly embrace.

With his boyish features and shaggy brunette hair, Jodah could have been Jaya's grandson, even though he was thousands of years her senior. "Come for the family silver?"

"Oh, there's nothing silver here that I like enough to keep—except for my hair. I've already checked your pockets. Thought about taking up lint farming?"

Jodah smiled. "I'm not worried. Your tongue is quicker than your fingertips."

Jaya's gaze fell on Karn and Ajani. "Well, this is a surprise. Are you two here to work on the negotiations as well?"

Ajani regarded Jaya, solemn. "We must speak to you regarding what Karn has seen in the Caves of Koilos. The Phyrexians have returned to Dominaria."

The idle small talk at the negotiation table dropped into shocked silence. Jodah and Jaya exchanged looks, then turned their attention to Karn. The Keldons, Benalish, and Argivians broke into argument, the overlapping dialects and accents turning their fears into babble. Only the Benalish knights remained at their posts, their rigid posture a testament to their discipline.

Jaya had paled. "It hardly seems possible."

"I have walked this plane for millennia," Jodah said, "and I have read the stories, examined the histories. I have visited the ruins: I tell you this not to boast but so that you know I speak the truth—the Phyrexians cannot traverse the Blind Eternities."

"Sheoldred has traveled between planes—" Karn said.

"Only Planeswalkers can do that now." Jodah pinched the bridge of his nose. "If I recall, Karn, that is a reality you helped usher in." His age—similar to Urza's, when Urza had created Karn—overwrote

his young features with exhaustion. Karn could not believe Jodah would deny the truth, not when Karn had seen Sheoldred. Perhaps most Phyrexians could not survive the journey through the Blind Eternities, but Sheoldred had: even if it had burned away her organic materials, even if it had damaged and weakened her, somehow she had succeeded.

Aron Capashen stood and paced. He seemed agitated. “The Phyrexians are ancient history. I cannot see what you would have to gain by asserting this.”

“I located a staging ground for a new invasion,” Karn said, “led by one of New Phyrexia’s leaders, a praetor named Sheoldred. The Society of Mishra serves her, and the Phyrexians are completing dozens of ordinary citizens. We cannot know how many Phyrexians are stationed throughout Dominaria’s nations. They may even be among us now.”

“Have I not been warning you of this?” The young nobleman from New Argive stood. Based on his gold-embroidered and fur-lined finery, he had to be an important official. “Phyrexian sleeper agents will permeate every layer of society if we do not act now. For all we know, they already have!”



Art by: Mila Pesic

“Stenn, your alarmist tendencies are not helping,” Jodah said. “Karn, where are the Phyrexians now?”

The varied thrush fixed a beady eye on him as if curious about his answer.

Karn did not have an answer. “They evacuated while I was incapacitated. I do not know.”

Jodah sighed. “The diplomatic situation is too sensitive to halt negotiations now. If you knew where they were, this would be a different matter, but without stronger information, like a location, how could we act to root them out?”

“And even if the Phyrexians were on Dominaria,” Jaya said, “historically they’ve divided before they conquered. If we leave this conflict between Benalia and the Keldons unresolved, we’d play right into their hands.”

The thrush hopped along the railing.

“Karn, are you listening to me?” Jodah asked.

Karn returned his attention to Jodah. He placed the spearhead on the table. “I am.”

“I have seen weapons from the Society of Mishra before,” Jodah said, mild.

“When has Karn ever lied?” Ajani growled. “If he says he saw Sheoldred compleating people, then we are in danger.”

“I believe you,” Aron said. “But I cannot send my soldiers chasing whispers and rumors across Dominaria. Between the hostilities with the Keldons and fighting off the Cabal’s resurgence, I don’t have the fighters.”

“His troops have the same engagements as mine.” Radha laughed, a short bark. “I suppose we have found common ground in that.”

Jodah glanced between Radha and Aron. “The Phyrexians haven’t been a threat for centuries. I know that your memory is long, Karn. As is mine. If we address today’s issue—the conflict between the Capashens and the Keldons—we can then discuss redeploying those same soldiers to fight the Phyrexians.”

So many people had screamed in Sheoldred’s lair, their voices thin and their pain sharp beneath the ecstatic orisons to her glory. “What of the lives Sheoldred now takes?”

Jodah placed his hand on Karn’s shoulder. “We may not be talking about something as grand as an interplanar invasion, but lives are being lost to this conflict. They matter, too.”

“We will go with you, Karn,” said Jaya. “We will search for them. But now? Let us focus on the task at hand.”

Karn could feel the room’s attention swing back to the table, and the negotiations.

The thrush flew away.

“Stenn,” Jaya said, “have someone show Karn and Ajani to the guest quarters.”

Karn’s room was simple, its furniture basic but well crafted: a bed, a large table with two chairs, and a washstand with a porcelain basin in it. Karn pushed the bed to one side and moved the table into the room’s center. He unloaded his backpack, taking care to ensure the sylex, still in its case, was secure.

“The most coherent argument Jodah and Jaya had against assisting us,” Karn said, “was that we do not know where the Phyrexians are. If we can determine their location, then we will be able to persuade Jodah and Jaya to help.”

“And perhaps the others as well.” Ajani paused, his powerful body coiled. “How?”

“A scrying device.” Karn lifted his hand above the tabletop. He generated first the viewing plane, a copper sheet covered in crystal. He filled the narrow layer between the two materials with liquid. The device’s remainder, a complex assemblage of mechanical parts, required his concentration. His body buzzed with the magic coursing through him.

Ajani watched him, the pale blue of his unscarred eye attentive. “What is that?”

“It is for viewing remote locations.” Karn let pride seep into his voice. He’d developed the plan for it himself, and he knew of no other device that could perform similarly. Karn focused on Jhoira. Not on her face. Not on her physical presence, but on her essence, the qualities that made her *Jhoira*. How she always saw through a person’s circumstances to their essence. How she was willing to give everyone the benefit of a doubt.

The Mana Rig resolved within the crystal. At first fuzzy, the image filled with depth, then color. Perched upon a cliff's edge in Shiv's brutal desert, the metal structure had the size and complexity of a small city. The image tightened into a single location, a workshop with Jhoira in it. She sat at a workbench, her head bent, bronze hair bound and falling between her shoulder blades. She flipped a disconnected toggle back and forth as if thinking.

"Can you view Sheoldred?" Ajani asked.

All too easily could Karn visualize Sheoldred: her humanoid torso rising from her scorpion-like body; her voice, intimate and resonant inside his head. *Karn such plans.*

The scryer's image dissolved into mistiness. Karn leaned back on his heels. Ajani glanced at Karn. "They must have protections in place to prevent us from scrying them."

"A sensible precaution." Unfortunately.

Ajani pulled the amulet from his belt that could summon the *Weatherlight*. He placed it in Karn's palm. "You'll need this."

Karn examined the amulet. It seemed a straightforward device. "I can twin this."

Ajani smiled, his lips closed. "Even better."

Karn extended his senses into the amulet. He reproduced it, the metal coiling up from his fingertips to form an identical amulet. Ajani clipped the original to his belt while Karn manufactured a chain for his copy. Karn hung the amulet from his neck, feeling odd about the adornment. Normally he eschewed such things.

A varied thrush perched on Karn's windowsill, behind Ajani's shoulder.

If Karn could draw the Phyrexians out, he would not need to find them. He'd know where they were. The Phyrexians wanted to neutralize Dominaria's most powerful weapons. That included the sylex. He would use news of its presence to lure them into the open. But first he had to hide the sylex somewhere safe.

"Perhaps if we could speak to Jaya alone," Ajani suggested, "we could persuade her. She is no diplomat at heart."

Karn stared at the varied thrush, so still, so attentive. "Perhaps."



Art by: Allen Williams

Karn let himself into the negotiations. Stenn was setting an inkwell on the granite table as Jodah and Jaya gave both Radha and Aron Capashen quill pens. He did not wish to interrupt before they signed. The sea breeze poured over the balcony, cool with springtime's edge.

"You are an impressive leader," Aron said. "I am proud to enter this new era with you."

Radha smiled. "You do like to talk fancy."

"And you like to be mistaken for a brute," Aron Capashen said. "Anyone who takes you for a simple warrior must soon regret it."

Jodah smiled. "Radha, Aron will bring this agreement to the other houses to present for ratification. I will accompany him to ensure that this process is accomplished within the next few months, during which all hostilities in the Ice Rime Hills will cease."

Radha put up her hands, conceding. "Yes, yes. The sacred sites aren't worth any more war—no matter what artifacts they might contain."

A breeze stirred the room as a pale-blue bead of light formed midair. The light whorled outward into a disc that brightened into azure as Teferi stepped through the vortex. He'd aged well: his shoulders had broadened with middle age, gray threaded his hair, and his umber skin had health's warm blush to it.

"Another Planeswalker?" Aron sat back in his chair, exasperated.

"It must be a sign of interesting times," Radha said.

Jodah stood. "What's happened?"

"It's the Phyrexians—they were on Kamigawa." Teferi closed his eyes and shook his head. "Given what Kaya told me of what she saw on Kaldheim—"

"They can travel between planes," Jaya said, lips drawn tight.

After a moment, Jodah said, "That is alarming, to say the least."

Had not Karn explained this to both Jaya and Jodah? He had seen this, with his own eyes. He felt She-oldred's touch on his body, in his mind. Yet Teferi had arrived, bearing secondhand news, and Jodah and Jaya believed his assertions? Where were their requests for "proof of a location" now?

Karn might as well have been a statue for all the regard they had given him. And the threat Teferi had warned them of wasn't even *on* Dominaria.

But none of that mattered. Only one fact remained relevant: "If the Phyrexians have traveled between multiple planes, then their invasion plans are much more widespread and well-coordinated than we anticipated."

Radha tensed. "Then we must fight."

Aron shook his head. His knights seemed restless, hands twitching toward their swords as if they expected to launch into action. "I never would have thought I'd live to see another Phyrexian invasion."

"The true Twilight has come," one of Radha's warriors hissed. "How can we battle such creatures?"

"However bad it is," Stenn said, "what will come is worse."

Jodah gave Jaya his calmest "help me" expression. Jaya flapped her hand at Karn and Ajani, as if asking them to remove Teferi, the origin of this disruption. Radha and Aron had not signed—and this made it seem like they wouldn't. Jodah looked like he'd bitten down on a charged piece of aluminum.

"I have the feeling that my timing was less than immaculate," Teferi said.

"You don't say," Jaya said, and gave them a meaningful look.

"I am not certain about this mutual protection clause—" Aron began.

"It might be best to look to our own shores, our own peoples—" Radha said.

Karn ushered Teferi away toward the door. Teferi let him.

As planeswalking had exhausted Teferi, Karn and Ajani led him to the suite adjacent to theirs.

Outside, spring rain pattered down against the cliffside. The rosemary plants growing from cracks in the stone scented the air that wafted through the unglazed windows. Did rosemary's scent please Karn because *he* liked it? Or because Urza had designed him to like it? Karn would never know.

Teferi always made Karn consider his origins. Not always comfortably.

"How is Niambi?" Karn asked.

"She's providing medical aid to the nomadic tribes in Jamuraa." Teferi's pride in his daughter radiated from him. "And Jhoira?"

"I have not spoken to Jhoira in some time." Karn wished that Urza had made his face with a human's mobility and its subtlety in micro-expressions so that it would be easier for him to signal to Teferi that he did not wish to speak about this.

Ajani glanced between Teferi and Karn as if the awkward silence stretching between them were visible, a piece of string tight enough to twang. "Something else is troubling you."

"I did not wish to say this before the Keldons and Benalish," Teferi admitted, "but they took Tamiyo. Even Planeswalkers might be vulnerable to them now. We waited too long, Ajani."

Ajani froze, shock plain across his face. "Tamiyo?"

Teferi nodded wearily. "We can discuss it after I've gotten some rest."

Karn watched as Ajani's hands curled into tight fists, anger and sorrow crossing his friend's face. He hadn't known they were close.

"I should rest as well," said the leonin after a moment.

Karn accepted this as his cue to depart. Back in his room, he opened the case with the sylex and the tablet in it. He removed the tablet, relocked the case, and set it on the table. He'd keep this here, to research it. But the sylex—that he needed to rehome.

Somewhere safe. And he knew just the place.

Karn pressed his palms to the scryer's crystal-covered copper. Jhoira's image appeared. She was no longer in her workshop but sleeping, her face crunched into her pillow, her reddish-brown hair lying in a messy braid across one cheek. Karn let her image fade.

Evading the Oyster Bay guards was simple: the people here may have once made great pirates, but they had not adopted the organized banality of guard duty. Karn, large in the shadows, avoided any light that would glint from his body. He slipped through the town's carved streets, sticking to the darkness, up and around to the top of the cliff.

He hiked along the Phyrexian portal ship's spine, its degraded metal softened with wildflowers like purple asters and goldenrod, toward a hill blanketed in young vine maples. Ferns rustled at Karn's shins, and the damp air condensed on his body.

Now a sufficient distance to avoid tweaking Jaya and Jodah's senses, Karn stepped through the searing Blind Eternities, tearing a wound in it. The edges fluttered against his body. He passed through it to Shiv and the Mana Rig, straight into Jhoira's workshop. It held a breathless silence, like every instrument in it waited for Jhoira to wake.

Karn located a supply closet. He stowed the sylex and its case on the lowest shelf behind lengths of pipe whose dust promised that Jhoira had not needed them recently. He generated two devices: one alarm that would register if the pipes moved, and another weight-sensitive alarm that would notify him if anyone moved the box itself. There. The sylex was safe. Or as safe as it could be. Karn stepped back into the Blind Eternities.



Art by: Adam Paquette

Back on the forest hill, Karn wound his way downhill toward Oyster Bay. A light glimmered between the pale slender-trunked birch trees. A silhouetted person held aloft a lamp. Karn paused, but the lamp had glinted from his body. He had been seen. The figure moved closer. Stenn, the New Argvian noble from the negotiation table.

A nightjar called, its low warble traveling between the trees.

What if his precautions had not been enough?

“Out for a walk?” Stenn called.

“Yes,” Karn said. “I do not sleep. You are awake late?”

“No, up early.” As Stenn neared, his features grew clearer. His beard was trimmed and his hair tidy. “Dawn is the only time I truly feel safe. At peace. With the smell of baking bread wafting over the city, with the citizens starting to wake, I can imagine we aren’t at war.”

Morning had begun to whiten the sky. The air tasted like dew and cinnamon.

“I overheard the other Planeswalkers saying that you’re immune to Phyrexian influence?”

“Yes.”

“This means you may be the only Planeswalker who can be trusted.” Stenn’s sable mantle beaded with water. “You aren’t the only one who can read the signs of invasion. King Darien has tasked me with discovering Phyrexian agents. Obviously, this is not common knowledge.”

“What will you do after you discover such an agent?” Karn asked.

“What must be done,” Stenn said. “The only thing that can be done. Once someone is compleated—they are lost, whether they know it or not.”

“They don’t know themselves?”

“No,” Stenn said. “I think they are more useful to the Phyrexians—and harder to discover—if they themselves do not know.”

It made sense that those forced to act against their own interests, their families, and their very plane, would be kept oblivious of their own actions. The Phyrexians had to be inserting these unknowing sleeper agents everywhere. Yet to kill such people, people who had already been so wronged King Darien must've selected Stenn for his ruthlessness.

"Have you ever caught such an agent?" Karn asked.

"No. Not yet." Stenn gazed at the dawn-glazed sea. Fishing boats skidded along the waves, tan sails belling. "Teferi's news frightened them."

Karn nodded. "They should be frightened. Do you think Benalia and Keld will unify?"

"I don't know," Stenn admitted, "but I do know that I can promise this: New Argive will mobilize. We will stand with you in defense of Dominaria."

Karn nodded, relieved that someone had taken him as a credible source. He had found his first ally willing to provide military support. "We can discuss the details later."

In town, few seemed wakeful—only bakers tucking yeasty loaves into ovens and children milking goats and feeding chickens. Sometimes, Karn imagined their pains: losing a pet rooster to the dining table, spilling a much-needed bucket of milk. Long after these people had died, Karn would continue to ponder their lives.

He felt old. Old, and tired. And the children's beautiful brevity seemed an unbearable tragedy in this still morning.

When Karn reached the city hall, Ajani was awake, pacing between banks of ropey wisteria vines. Ajani paused, his body quivering with tension, and his tail lashed once. Karn suspected this was not a voluntary gesture. He had seen how the leonin seemed to smother his non-human mannerisms when near humans. Ajani's blue eye caught the light in the dimness, pupil glinting a predator's green.

"Karn. Do you think the humans are awake yet?" Ajani asked. "Jodah and Jaya will sit the representatives down at the negotiation table once more today."

Karn could summon no patience for how Jodah continued to prioritize this small human conflict before the Phyrexian threat. "Some are. I encountered Stenn this morning, and he has pledged New Argive's forces."

"Then let us speak to Jaya," Ajani said, "before negotiations recommence."

"You two would be much more compassionate toward me right now if you had heard of this substance called 'caffeine,'" Jaya muttered.

"I have heard of it," Karn said.

"It is vile," Ajani said.

Teferi entered the room and opened the doors to the balcony. The chilly sea breeze freshened the room, bringing with it springtime's rising birdsong. A seagull landed on the balcony and cocked its head, looking at Teferi's bread roll in a meaningful way. A varied thrush landed on the rail, then jumped along it. Could it be the same bird as yesterday? How could such a shy woodland bird, with its orange breast, tolerate a seagull?

"It isn't important who can charge what taxes at which border," Ajani said. "We should be prioritizing the fight against the Phyrexians."

"Correct." Karn eyed the thrush. "And keeping the sylex from Phyrexian hands."

“The sylex?” Ajani started. “You have it with you?”

“I had it in my possession,” Karn said, “as I planned to deploy it on New Phyrexia and eradicate the Phyrexian threat at its source once I determined its workings.”

“Karn, we agreed to handle that together. You can’t go there alone,” said Teferi, serious.

“You said yourself that we waited too long. All of you promised me your help, and then you told me to be patient. No longer,” said Karn.

The thrush was not even pretending to peck at invisible crumbs.

Karn seized the bird. “I know what you are.”

“Karn—” Jaya said.

The bird’s chest peeled open and cables shot out. The cables, slick with blood and slime, wrapped themselves around Karn’s head. Goo slipped down his skin and a maw at the tentacle’s core searched along Karn’s cheek for purchase, its teeth scraping down the smooth metal. Karn readjusted his grip around the creature’s slippery body, trying to pull it from his face. But its wires had wrapped all the way around his head, locking together in a thick tangle at the nape of his neck. The creature’s teeth caught on Karn’s lip. It jabbed needle-like protuberances into him, like it wanted to inject him with some substance, and the needles snapped.

“It’s too close to Karn,” Jaya shouted. “I can’t blast it.”

“Let me—” Ajani said.

Slime sloughed off the creature and sizzled on Karn’s skin, corroding his metal. It hurt. The creature snaked its tentacles between the joints on Karn’s neck and around his collar, as if trying to prize him apart. Karn grunted and squeezed his fingers between the creature’s slippery body and his face. He forced it off him, flinging it across the room where it smacked against the opposite wall and slid down. The creature caterpillar-crawled toward the door.

Teferi raised his hands, slowing the creature within a blurring field to prevent its rapid escape. Ajani lunged forward and pierced the creature with his claws, pinning it to the floor. It shrieked and writhed. Acid spurted from the wound.

Karn, face still steaming from the creature’s corrosive slime, held out both hands, one over the other. He generated a bird cage, building it upwards until the bars united into a dome. Ajani ripped the monstrosity from the floor and flung it into the cage.

It rattled the bars, screeching.

Jaya crossed her arms. “Turns out Jodah has bigger things to worry about than taxes.”

Karn placed the Phyrexian bird on the granite negotiation table. Jodah leaned toward it, his eyes widening. The creature in the cage hissed at him. Aron Capashen looked sick. His Benalish knights had not moved, their discipline ironclad. Radha stared at it, eyes glittering. Her warriors had broken out into muttered prayers. Stenn’s lips had thinned in satisfaction that his point was made.

“They’re here,” Jodah murmured. “Among us.”

“I told you—” Stenn said.

Three of the Benalish knights exploded outward from their armor. Their eyes burst open in a shower of glistening black oil and their jaws distended, metal teeth emerging from their flesh to stud their gaping maws. Metallic fibers wriggled out from between the gaps in their armor. One of the creatures

swung toward the granite table, his clawed hands drawn together in a double fist. It slammed its hands down on the granite table, cracking it in two.

“The negotiations are over,” it said.

Its comrade seized Aron with its writhing tentacles, bundling him up like a spider would a fly.

Karn strode forward, Teferi and Ajani flanking him. Jaya held up her hands, summoning fire into her palms. Jodah gathered energy, distorting the air around him with ribbons of color, and then solidified it into a forcefield to protect the unchanged Benalish soldiers from the Phyrexians.



Art by: Dominik Mayer

“For Gerrard,” one woman bellowed, lifting her sword. She dodged past Jodah’s barrier to charge her ex-comrades. The Phyrexian knight avoided her blow by splitting itself in two: it slid apart into two meaty pieces, legs sprouting from what had once been glistening internal organs. Both halves attacked.

“The first wind of ascension is Forger,” Radha called, backing toward the door. She—like Aron—had come to the negotiation table unarmed.

“Burning away impurity!” Her warriors bellowed, forming up around her to protect her. They fought off the lashing tentacles that reached to seize her, chopping off the Phyrexians’ limbs. But any appendage that hit the ground seemed to gain life of its own, sprouting legs and teeth, squirming toward the retreating Keldons.

The Argivians fell back, joining the Keldons, fighting with their rapiers, the weapons of nobles who had never seen battle and never expected to. Stenn himself only wielded a dagger. Separated from his people, he backed away between the shards of the broken table until he reached Jaya’s wreath of protective flame. Karn had almost reached Aron.

The Phyrexian holding him released a low laugh like an opening steam valve. It rolled its body around Aron and bounded onto a neighboring balcony. Ajani snarled with frustration and launched himself after it.

Ajani! Karn could not follow—the balconies would break under his weight if he tried to leap after light-footed Ajani. Karn made a noise, low in his chest, with frustration, and took a step back. Teferi cursed.

"I can't jump that distance," Teferi said.

The Keldons had reached the door.

"I do not wish to leave you, Archmage," Radha shouted. "Keld stands with Dominaria—for Dominarians. We will battle this blasphemy alongside you, to defend all peoples."

"Go," Jodah shouted. "We will fight together another day!"

"There are too many of them," Karn said. "Blockade them in this room!"

Radha nodded once.

The brass double doors slammed shut, locking the Planeswalkers and the mage into the room with the Phyrexians.

Jaya swirled her hands up and around, blocking off the Phyrexians from Jodah, protecting him. Her flame burned white with a vicious heat. Karn had no doubt that Jaya's magic could defeat even this. He pushed himself through the heat. It seared the tentacles trying to wriggle into the joints of his body, ending them.

"Much as I'd love to do this all day," Jaya said, throwing a fireball at a writhing hunk of metal and flesh, "Jodah?"

"I have summoned the energy." Jodah's eyes were aglow with it, his skin incandescent. "But I need to know where to direct it to create the portal. A secure location."

"Argivia," Stenn gasped. He flicked a piece of tentacle off him with his blade and stomped on it. Blood and oil spurted beneath his boot, and he turned toward the next encroaching tentacle and speared it through. "New Argive's watchtower."

"It is as safe a place as any." Karn retreated toward Jodah, Teferi at his side.

Jodah's portal spun into existence behind him. It opened like a doorway cut into the air itself, revealing a small circular room.

Jodah retreated through it to sustain it from the other side.

"I'll hold them off," Jaya said, searing the writhing cables with her fire. "If you can get through the portal, I'll blast this room with such fire that not a single piece of Phyrexian will remain. Go!"

"My thanks," Stenn said. He backed through the portal as well.

"And mine as well," Teferi said, and vanished through the whirling vortex.

Jaya grinned in triumph as she raised her hands in a blaze of fire and set the whole room alight. The screams of the Phyrexians, wet and unnatural, whistled.

Karn stepped through the portal. The magic tingled across his skin and swallowed him, depositing him on the other side. A shape, airborne, flicked past him. Karn turned to search for it. He couldn't see any movement in the small room but for those who had arrived with him: Stenn, Jodah, Jaya, Teferi, and himself.

Jaya, last through the portal, joined Karn at his side.

Jodah closed the portal and collapsed, sagging to the ground. Transporting so many people was no easy feat—even for Jodah.

The humans all sat on the floor, sweating, panting, and bleeding, while Karn remained standing. He searched the room for the flickering shadow. The tower room had tiny arched windows ringing it and

was empty but for a pedestal in the center, which seemed to have a control panel on it. Overhead a golden light shimmered through a crystal—no, not a crystal: a powerstone.

A shadow flitted across the powerstone's face.

"One followed us," Karn said.

"We must not let it escape. It could wreak havoc on the city." Stenn flipped a toggle on the central control panel. The watchtower thumped as gears ground to life. The walls' interiors echoed with the rattle of moving chains. Steel shutters and blast doors slammed shut, blocking out all light. The room instantly felt stuffier, more claustrophobic. Stenn handed Karn the key. "You are the only one who's incorruptible, so it's only right that you have it."

Jaya bumped her shoulder into Jodah's. "You never get tired of being right, do you?"

"The millennia may wear on, but no. No, I do not." Jodah's smile faded, and he turned to Karn.

"Nothing and no one may leave while the tower is in lockdown," Stenn said.

Teferi eyed the steel shutters. "We must capture and destroy the Phyrexian trapped here. And we must determine if any among us has been compromised. We need to know who we can trust before we can plan how to defeat them."

"Agreed," Jodah said.

The group checked the room. The small Phyrexian thing that had come with them had escaped the chamber. Karn surmised it must have squirreled itself away through some crack in the stone. He strung the key from the same chain he used to hang the scryer and the beacon to summon the *Weatherlight* and turned to face his companions. A frisson of unease traveled through his body, as if an electric current arced through him. Jodah, Jaya, Teferi, Stenn How could he determine who he could trust?

If the Phyrexians were already on Dominaria, who could anyone trust?