

A Hollow Body

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The Dross Pits stink.

You stand at the base of the vault, staring up the steaming shaft wall. You can smell the necrogen from here, at the Basilica's summit. Little eddies of it swirl above you, like figures beckoning you up. Movement between the spheres is heavily monitored, but this shaft is far enough on the outer reaches that no one will be watching. At least, no one with a hope of stopping you.



Art by: Campbell White

You spread your wings, relishing the pull in your shoulders as your body does what it is made for. A few flaps are enough to propel you up into the shaft, splitting the necrogen clouds, leaving a trail in your wake. Nothing challenges you, though a couple skitterlings clinging to the slick walls turn to you with rumbling growls that quickly become pathetic screams as you separate their heads from their bodies with a sweep of your spear. You smell the spill of their fluids as it rains down to the sphere below. Back to where your superior waits for news of your success.

"Do you know of the traitor Geth?"

You bow your head and say nothing, the marble cold beneath your knees. It is not a question that needs an answer. Everyone knows of the lich, the tainted Phyrexian with the incomplete head. An unclean mark on spotless linen.

"I want you to seek him out, Ixhel. I want you to end him."

You raise your eyes slowly from the floor.

Above you is the throne, a dais crowned with a coruscating confection of bone and porcelain, pure Phyrexian workmanship. The seat is empty; without the demands of a council meeting, Elesh Norn, Mother of Machines, retires to her contemplation. Instead, you kneel before Atraxa, the Grand Unifier, and the reason for which you draw breath.

"Geth is one of the seven Steel Thanes of the Dross Pits, a sphere that has already caused us considerable annoyance," Atraxa says, her voice as brisk as a whip. "I ask that you boil that number down to six. Bring me his filthy head."

"It will be done," you say, intoning the words. "I foresee no difficulties."

Atraxa makes a slippery noise in the back of her throat. "No," she says. "You wouldn't, would you? You are my most perfect creation."

Atraxa reaches for you, and you quickly drop your eyes back to the bloody red of the carpet. Her fingertips caress your cheek, and you feel a brief flare of something inside you, where a lesser creature's heart might be. It's something beyond loyalty, beyond the just desire to spread the Machine Orthodoxy across the Multiverse.

You ignore it and hope it goes away.

So far, it always has.

You locate a bit of high ground, which is easier said than done—this sphere is called the Dross Pits for a reason. The landscape is shallow, pockmarked with glowing pools of liquid necrogen, shining bright and poisonous. Humped, crude structures of black-gilded bone break up the horizon. You feel your lip curling. You know that every sphere has its purpose in the perfect unity of New Phyrexia, but you can't help your disgust. Not when you have the serenity of the Fair Basilica to compare to the rest.

Fortunately, you expect this will be a short trip. Your words to Atraxa were not hubris—you have felled every creature that has ever stood against you.

You face little opposition as you pick our way across the landscape, breathing in corrosive air as you go, giving the glowing pools a wide berth.

Before long, your advance is halted. Geth's fortress is visible beyond the next rise, but the path is blocked by a sheer cliff of shining black rock. You could climb it, but that would take time. You could fly over it, but that would announce our presence to the entire sphere, which you've been told to avoid, when possible. You are still a long way from a last resort.

Stepping into the shadow of the rock face, you see the outline of a gate. It looks like it could almost be naturally occurring, as if the supersaturated atmosphere has given the rock a mind of its own, like a Dominus. There is no latch, no lock. Instead, you find a row of rounded impressions arrayed in a fan-like shape at shoulder height. You press your palm against one.

A low tone pulses out from within the stone. You take a step back. It fades so quickly you are unsure if you truly heard it. You press the spot again. The same tone comes. You press each impression in turn, and each makes a slightly different sound.

You cock your head and press them again. Something about the sounds itches at the inside of your brain. You don't like it.

“You need to press them in the right order.”

The voice comes from behind you, slippery and slick, all sibilants, but it chokes off at the end when you spin and slam its owner back against the craggy ground, squeezing your fingers down on its neck.

“Please,” it chokes out.

That, combined with the ease with which it folds underneath you, stays your hand for long enough to get a look at it.

“N—Now I know what you’re thinking—” the thing stammers. You tighten your hand on its neck, even as you find yourself mildly surprised that it *has* a neck. A face. A midsection. Bare and unsightly hands. It’s an aspirant—a male human, or an elf. Originally from the Hunter Maze, perhaps, a sphere several levels above, judging from its smell and the hue and shape of its compleation.



Art by: Aaron J. Riley

“Mercy!” It’s shouting in your ear. “Mercy!”

You sneer. “Identify yourself, creature.”

“Belaxis!” he pipes up. “I’m Belaxis. You can’t kill me.”

“I can,” you say.

“No! I mean, I believe you, I believe you!” The aspirant shakes. His voice goes slightly nasal with fear.

“I just mean, you shouldn’t kill me! Please don’t kill me!”

Your head tilts. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to die!”

Your head keeps tilting. “Why?”

“Right, that—” The aspirant is breathing heavily, its brittle, defenseless ribcage going up and down. The movement is distasteful, but compelling. “Right, that’s a good question. Philosophical. Why don’t *you* want to die?”

You consider the question. You know the correct answer. The answer that any Phyrexian would be expected to give. Why would anyone fear death when no individual holds any value? Every life in every sphere exists purely to spread the truth of Phyrexia across the Multiverse. There is no other reason to be alive.

Still, the thought unsettles something in the core of you. You try to evaluate why.

"Because I am needed," you decide.

The aspirant snorts air through the disgusting little holes in his face. "Don't you think highly of yourself," he mutters. "Not that you shouldn't!" he adds hastily, as you begin to squeeze down again. Before you can completely compress his voice to nothing, he yells, "You can't kill me! I have a contract with Lord Geth!"

That makes you pause. "What?"

"L—Lord Geth." The aspirant is breathing fast. He reeks of fear. What is a half-completed weakling doing in a place like this? He should have been ripped to shreds in the Hunter Maze within a day. "Lord Geth makes deals. That's why they call him the Thane of Contracts!"

"Who calls him that?" That hadn't been part of your brief.

"Lord Geth saves people. With his deals!" The aspirant's eyes gleam and glisten. They're filling up with some strange clear oil.

"He makes what?"

"Deals! Protection. He can move you between spheres. Well." The aspirant gives you a quick, nervous look. "Not *him*, exactly. He made a contract with me and got me out of the Hunter Maze. He saved me. And now I guard the gate to his holdings."

"If I kill you, this gate opens?"

"Yes. Wait! No!" The aspirant's breath quickens again. "That's not how it works. If you kill me, it will never open! Never ever! Besides, Lord Geth will know and he'll come and find you!"

You sit back, slightly bemused. Are all aspirants so lively? You've never been in the position to find out. "If I kill you, Lord Geth will know?"

"Yes!"

"How will he know?"

"Not sure. Kill me and find out."

You heft your spear.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding! He'll just know!"

You consider this new option. Could you simply kill this aspirant and smoke out the lich that way? Your orders are different. But this might be faster.

No. You cannot stray.

"I can help you!"

"You? Don't speak nonsense, creature."

"I told you, my name is Belaxis!" He does not seem to be seeping from the eyes anymore, at least.

"What's yours?"

"Ixhel," you say. "Of the Fair Basilica."

Belaxis's stares. Perhaps you should not have offered this worthless being your name. But neither are you willing to deny it.

"Ixhel." Belaxis the aspirant rolls it around his strange pink mouth. "Ixhel. I can help you! You want through that door, right? I can help you."

"What?"

"The puzzle! I can help you with the door puzzle."

You stand up sharply. "I can do it myself."

This, you worry, may be hubris.

The sounds make no sense, or not enough for you to decode them. It annoys you. The sounds itch at your brain; you think you should know what they mean, recognize the pattern they build.

Behind you, Belaxis keeps up a steady stream of chattering.

"Hmm, see—you're tall enough to hit all the plates! That's useful for something like this, but your back might start hurting. Oh! Start with the one on the far left—"

"I guess being tall is less useful when you're flying—do those wings work? I bet it's hard for you to stay upright when you're in the air. Can you fight while you fly? Oh, the two in the middle need to be pressed together—!"

"Wow, the Fair Basilica, I've never seen it. Right, where would I have seen it, huh? Is it as pretty as you are? There, on the right!"

You grind your teeth together, but you take the advice, using the hints to string the sounds together. Phyrexians all operate toward a common goal. Disregarding help because the one offering it has an abrasive, reedy voice would be counterproductive.

"Ah, there you go, there you go!"

The door flashes with a thin blue light, and the gate grinds open. You feel a thrill of warm victory most often associated with rending a creature in half. It almost makes you want to turn around and bury your spear in the aspirant's throat.

You turn to find him standing upright, looking off into the distance. The cool, radioactive light of the pits gleams off the green and silver armor plating his torso and thighs. The bare, not yet compleated parts of his body are soft, almost obscene. Surely, you'd never looked so very frail.

He just sits here all day, waiting for someone like you to come along and try the gate. What would that be like? How does he stay still with all that clamoring going on inside his head? He must enjoy the time he spends here if he is so intent on staying alive. Curious.

You turn back to the open gate, the tunnel lit only by a thin stream of necrogen trailing down the middle. You wrinkle your nose, but you pick your way inside.

"Goodbye, Lady Ixhel!" Belaxis calls after you. "Give Lord Geth my regards!"

You don't meet anyone quite as odd or talkative on your way through Lord Geth's holding, but you do see more aspirants than you have in a long time. Creatures from across New Phyrexia. From all spheres. Some halfway through compleation, some whose compleation had gone wrong. They should have been scrapped before they even took their first breath; had Geth made deals with them as well?

Strange. Strange how these half-creatures' minds work. Binding themselves to a monstrous, blasphemous creature for nothing but the promise of the continuity of their own worthless lives? You can't fathom it. The only reason to exist is to spread perfection across the Multiverse. If you can't do that, why wouldn't you allow yourself to be taken apart, to be compleated into something that can?

You meet no great resistance on your journey, save for a few more skitterlings that try their luck, as they always do. You locate Geth's fortress easily enough—it is a blight on the horizon. A colossal structure of black bone and red sinew, grown from the burning earth of the sphere's necrogen-consecrated ground.

This gate is not guarded, nor does it have a silly little puzzle. The door stands open before you. No one challenges you on the stairs, and no one challenges you as you pass into the grand hall. It's as still as a grave.

Stepping through a low, black arch, rage begins to fill you. This is a throne room. A tall, towering imitation of Elesh Norn's throne stands between guttering torches. It is empty.

How dare he? How dare he compare himself to the Mother of Machines? The impertinence is unbelievable.

"Fool." Your voice echoes through the wide hall. "Lich. Abomination! Where are you?"

"You're smaller than I thought you'd be," says a voice in your ear. "Curious."

This is the second time some creeping thing has managed to catch you by surprise. This time you heft your spear, twisting in midair. The clash is hard enough to send shocks all the way down to your core. Very narrowly, you keep your feet.

"Good. Seems you aren't all bravado."

Before you stands Lord Geth.



Art by: Martin de Diego Sádaba

His heaving, many-limbed body looms above you, arachnid legs planted in the marble floor. His hideous face peers down. He possesses none of Belaxis's energy or lithe grace, but for some reason,

you can't help thinking of him as you look into Lord Geth's eyes. He holds your spear between two of his pincers.

"I assume the Mother has finally sent you for my head," he says. "She does so hate it."

You grip your sword and widen your stance. Geth is larger than you'd been expecting, his body more fully compleated. In fact, it is only his head that is still organic. An ugly, rotting thing in the center of an otherwise serviceable body. You hate it more than you'd hated Belaxis, because at least that wasn't his fault. Geth, you know, had insisted on this, refused to ever fully submit.

"It's disgusting," you sneer. "It becomes you."

Geth laughs. His eyes burn. "How low I have fallen in her notice, that she sends me a foot soldier, rather than a praetor. Not even the Unifier. How is Atraxa, then?"

You glow with rage. A *foot soldier*? You? How many corpses have you retrieved for completion?

That doesn't matter, you tell yourself. It doesn't matter what he thinks of you. You don't matter at all.

"You don't have the right to even say her name," you hiss. "To even think it."

Geth laughs again. He meets your next attack with a lazy swipe of a claw, deflecting with seemingly no strength at all. The blow still rattles through you. You grit your teeth so as not to let him see your shock.

Stupid. Stupid of you to assume he wouldn't put up a fight. You've gotten too used to fighting the incompleat, worthless little organics who don't stand a chance against the might of a true Phyrexian.

"You're rusty, I see," Geth says. "You've been fighting creatures who can't fight back." He reads you like he has access to your thoughts. "Picking your teeth on my contract-holders, were you?"

"As if I'd dent my blade on such a worthless enemy," you sneer.

"Yes, you would say that, wouldn't you?" Geth's strikes grow more powerful as he speaks. You hear the whistle of air as they narrowly miss you. "But that's what you and your ilk will never understand. The only true loyalty is that which can be bought."

"Foolish." Nonsense. He's speaking the same drivel Belaxis did, trying to trick you. Pathetic, that a thane would share an affliction with a half-compleated runt. No wonder your commanders want him dead.

And yet, his power is undeniable.

"You doubt me? For what reason do you fight then, child of the Machine Orthodoxy?"

"My name is Ixhel," you grit out.

Geth grins. The elasticity of his face is disgusting. You aren't used to seeing such things. "Ixhel. A good name for another Phyrexian doll."

You spit. "You think you insult me?"

"An audience's disinterest does not make the joke any less amusing."

Jokes. Hah. You'll tell *him* what a joke is. Especially now that you are beginning to realize that it makes far more sense to avoid his blows than try to parry them. He is right about one thing—fighting nobodies has made you soft. You weren't prepared for someone with his kind of strength.

"And now you're scurrying around like a rat," Geth says in that deep, sonorous voice. "Are you afraid to stand and fight?" He takes another broad swing, forcing you to hop back in an ungainly scramble.

The bone marble is unfamiliar beneath your feet; you keep sliding. You should have forced him to come out and fight you under the sky.

“No wonder you’re weak,” Geth says with another laugh. “None of you understand the victory born out of true struggle. The struggle to survive.”

“You know nothing!”

“I know more than you think.” Geth’s ugly face is smiling at you now, a hideous rictus. “I know that what really makes a warrior is the knowledge that if you lose, you die. Not that if you lose, there will be thousands of faceless others to take your place. Your ubiquity makes you weak.”

“You’re wrong,” you shout back.

“Am I?” The flames of the torches burnish Geth’s hard, armored back. “Then why don’t you lay down your arms and die? Surely your commander can simply send the next version of you.”

Belaxis had said much the same thing, if not in so many words. You worry, for a split second, that they have been in communication. That Belaxis is a direct report to the thane, instead of just a worthless underling. You dismiss it. It doesn’t matter.

Geth has stopped attacking, so you stop, too, doing everything you can to hide that you are already exhausted.

Somehow, Geth is still talking. “When you win, what will hold your people to you? When you spread yourselves across the Multiverse?”

You wish you could cover your ears. You howl, brandishing your spear. Geth, in an explosion of speed beyond anything he’s displayed previously, bursts through your guard, catching you around the throat with a pincer. You freeze.

He hauls you close, breath hot and fetid. “What about you, little emissary? When you have burned down the rest of the plane, what will you have to sustain you beyond your orthodoxy? The love of that strange, harsh mother?”

The question reverberates inside you. *What do you have to live for? Why do you exist?*

With a hard scream of rage, you drag your throat along the blade, opening it up in a wash of hot blood and oil. Wrenching yourself out of Geth’s grasp, you bring down your blade in a single stroke, parting his head from his body. You catch it, your voice gurgling in your ruined throat.

“Rot in the ground, you worthless creature. Your contracts were as valuable as your pathetic life, in the end.”

The pain is searing, but it is nothing when compared to the ecstasy of your victory. And as that ecstasy grows, so does a desire. It is overpowering. It drives you to your knees.

This fool, this monster. He doesn’t deserve the ease of death. You hate him, you hate him! And yet, as your throat knits itself closed, you feel the give of the flesh beneath your fingertips, the dully glowing eyes going cloudy. They are almost beautiful now, beautiful like the gleam of green and silver around vulnerable flesh.

Geth’s head gibbers with words you deem as little more than nonsense. What could he have been if he’d only submitted? If he’d only realized the truth.

Maybe, in this, you can help him.

The Dross Pits are a filthy, disreputable hole, to be sure, but they do have their moments.

Dominating the landscape, more imposing even than Lord Geth's tower, is the Dominus of Pain. When Phyrexians first settled this plane and the glistening oil, in all its glory, began transforming it to its right and true state, parts of the land awoke. They moved, shook themselves, and began to wander.

No one truly knows what the Domini are, whether they think and desire the same way other Phyrexians do. If they wish, as is right, to bring everything under the dominion of the Machine Orthodoxy.

But you know what this Dominus craves, and a towering, razor-edged monolith standing against the sky is fully equipped to harvest it. It is a short flight away from Geth's tower, and you no longer care who sees you. But Geth's words still shiver inside you, pulsing and strange.

The Dominus is at rest. It doesn't look at you. It shifts and murmurs, burnished bones whispering in the wind. Rot perfumes the air. Bodies—all sorts, from skitterlings to aspirants to a single ragged priest—hang fluttering in the breeze, impaled through with the Dominus's vicious spines. Each of them will have been chosen and placed with care, their screams and twitches drunk down with rapt attention.

You don't understand the Dominus, but you'll make use of it.

A piercing wail rings out across the wastes as you pin the writhing body in your arms down onto a razor-tipped spoke on the Dominus's east side. Bright blood gleams dark in the cold necrogen light. It's impossibly warm on your hands.

"Why?" croaks Belaxis. The aspirant's back arches in a perfect, clean line. The bone spur protrudes from his abdomen, whiter than even his incomplete flesh.

"Why?" His voice cracks. "I helped you."

Your fingers move down to cup his chin, pulling him up. His face is twisting, eloquent with pain, shaking with it. His body, covered in soft, violable skin, feels so much more than yours.

"I know," you say, as you watch him writhe. "And I'm grateful."

After the darkness of the higher spheres, the pure white of the Fair Basilica is almost blinding. Standing in the throne room, gazing up at the seat of the Mother of Machines, the grandeur nearly sends you to your knees.

You've spent the last few days in the poisonous chill of the Surgical Bay, sitting and watching as your creation is made manifest. That sphere belongs to Jin-Gitaxias, an inventor and visionary, but if you want to use the equipment, who would stop you? Nobody was foolish enough to try.

At the end of the process, you stood looking at your creation, a strange feeling welling up inside you, not dissimilar to the experience of tearing an enemy limb from limb. Except this time, you have made something.

You have made something, and you bring it home with you.

"Ixhel." Atraxa is elegant and upright, the ideal Phyrexian. The Grand Unifier, the perfect weapon in battle. She brings life to the Machine Orthodoxy. She spreads the glistening oil across the Multiverse. She is the only true voice you will ever answer to.

And now she looks upon what you have brought her with such disdain you feel like the plane has cracked open.



Art by: Marta Nael

“Ixhel. What have you done?”

Silence thunders around you. In the distance, chanting rises like a sinister wind through hanging bones. Your breaths feel like knives.

“Commander—”

“Answer me.”

You fall to your knees. “I only, I only wanted to make something.” You risk a glance up, your body burning. “Like you made me.”

Atraxa stares down at you. “I fashioned a weapon. That’s what you are.”

“I know, I know. I just thought—”

Atraxa lets out a harsh laugh you’ve only heard her use with enemies. To the incomplete. “*You thought?*”

The word barks through the hall, breaking the serenity like a glass window. It claws at the center of you. In the face of certainty, there is no need for thought. You know this. You don’t need to hear the things she is saying to you.

“Get rid of it, it is a—”

“Vishgraz.” A voice says the name. After a moment, you realize it must be yours. No one else knows it.

“What?” The word cracks over you like a blow.

“His name.” You are about to drop through the floor. Never have you felt anything like this choking guilt. You’ve never done anything to merit it. A thing that follows orders is a thing that can never disappoint. “His name is Vishgraz.”

Atraxa doesn’t respond for such a long time that you think she’s left. You look up. She’s still here, but she isn’t looking at you. “Get rid of it,” she bites out.

She leaves you kneeling on the floor, staring up at an empty throne.

Beside you, a familiar voice begins to laugh. A light, musical chuckle. It suits this bright place, but it scrapes at your insides.

“Did you expect anything different?”

For the first time since you dropped your eyes in the face of your commander, you look at him.

That face, once enraging, now fills you with a mysterious fondness. It’s unrecognizable, covered by the hard plating of compleation, but you know what lurks beneath it. The traitor’s head you held in your hands. Arachnid legs sprout from a bulbous body, made powerful with silver and green plating. The piercing green of his eyes hold none of their previous owner’s liveliness, and none of the anguish.

Two of those limbs were once delicate wings of white and red bone. The place where you took it from your own back still flares with a hot ache.

“What are you talking about?” Your voice comes out harsh.

Vishgraz offers you a hand with a slightly ironic flourish. You let him pull you to your feet.

“You think they will thank you for making something like me?”

“She made something like *me*,” you insist, even as you know how little this means. What is a claim of hypocrisy in the face of the Machine Orthodoxy? Elesh Norn decides what is true, and Atraxa speaks with her voice.

“I wanted—” You don’t finish. That’s the crux—you feel it before it leaves your teeth. You *wanted*, and in wanting, you failed.

You meant to say you wanted to save them, to give them what you have, what *everyone* will soon have—to lay Geth’s foolishness low and raise Belaxis’s nervous attentiveness, but that would be a lie, at least in part.

You hated Geth, the things he said clanging in your head like discordant bells. You liked Belaxis, or you liked the elegant lines of his incomplete flesh, the way the light glinted off his bright eyes and pale body.

You don’t know why. You just didn’t want either of them to disappear. You wanted to bring them with you. You are a wretched creature.

“I wanted to save you,” is all you say aloud.

When Vishgraz responds with that same musical laugh, you both expect it and can’t stand it. You jerk away from him. “Silence!”

“Save me?”

You raise a hand. “I told you, be quiet!” He doesn’t wince, doesn’t try to stop you. This is what stays your hand. It’s not like you could do him any real damage, not anymore.

“Saved?” He steps in closer to you, limbs clicking, eyes gleaming. “Inside me, I can feel this body aching to tear itself apart. I feel the disparate parts of all the things that I used to be.”

He looms over you, body so huge he blots out the light. He could crush you if he tried.

“I don’t remember what I used to be,” you say. You lean against him in a parody of an embrace. You shiver. It feels like you have been run through, like Belaxis on the spike.

You turn from him, swiftly. “Come with me.”

Vishgraz is quiet for a moment. “Where are we going?”

You look back. “To get rid of you.”

The Dross Pits stink. You stand beneath the same shaft and look up, through the swirling mist of necrogen. The same spot, but you feel miles away. It is not the plane that has changed.

Beside you, Vishgraz makes a questioning noise, like he is expecting a blow.

“Go,” you say.

Nothing.

“Go!”

A slow exhalation of breath. “You should come with me.”

That makes you look up. You laugh. “No.”



Art by: Andrew Mar

Vishgraz takes an unsteady step toward you. “You know, Ixhel. I know that you do. They claim to read the stars, to know that the Multiverse is meant to come under Phyrexian rule. The harmony of completion will spread and spread and that is good and right.” Another step. “But you know all of that is ashes. You, your people, everything you have set yourselves to do—all of it exists at the whim of a tyrant.”

You should deny it.

You say nothing.

“Your Machine Orthodoxy means as much as my contracts.”

“You aren’t him,” you growl.

“Then what am I?”

You stare at the fractured ground. "You are my first defiance. Now go."

He is silent for a long time, and when he does respond, it is with nothing but the quiet creak of his limbs, the ones you gave him.

You stand at the base of the shaft long after he has vanished into the dark. Deep in the center of you is an ache that wishes to follow him.

But you don't.

Not yet.