

Episode 9: The Old Sins of New Phyrexia

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *March of the Machine*

Centuries ago, the angels staved off the oil of unlife on New Capenna. For centuries, the people on New Capenna have been safe from the encroachment of the enemy. They lent this knowledge of the enemy to their sisters on other planes—thus, the Multiverse remained vigilant about the coming threat. It was good.

It is no longer enough. Their safeguards have failed.

Now, the Multiverse cries out for help.

Another angel—corrupted and dark—has come to New Capenna to reap the rewards sown by its people's sin. She cuts her way through the city's defenses as a farmer threshing wheat. Buildings that stood for generations collapsed in moments; glass and blood line the gutters; war machines rumble through streets that once bustled with cars.

Stone springs to life. Angels that have waited centuries to serve again hear the clarion call to battle. What have they waited for, if not this? Radiant weapons slice through the hulls of towering monstrosities. Wings shield those fleeing from the porcelain onslaught of the enemy. For hours they lend their strength. Those shattered by Phyrexian weaponry dematerialize at the last—as Halo, that glimmering angelic essence, they may still serve.

But Phyrexia's armies are teeming ten thousand, and there are far fewer angels on New Capenna than there once were.

Fortunate that they are not its only protectors.

Where angels beat back the enemy and shield the Capennan forces, there are demons and devils to take the offensive. Here a seraph infuses a tower with Halo; there, a demon severs the heads of those climbing it. Few things are more repugnant than demons, and there will be a price for all this later—but it is a price the angels of New Capenna are willing to pay if it keeps their charges safe.

The youngest among those angels, Giada, wants to help. But she's too small to join the melee, too newly formed for the battlefield. All she can do is watch from the towers and shout to the others where they're most needed. Despite this, she can't help but feel there's something she's missing.

She's certain she'll know it when she sees it. Angels are all about certainty, her older siblings told her.

Deeper into the city goes Atraxa, her army in her wake. The intricate workings of Park Heights do not impede the swing of her scythe.

Riveteers slicked with sweat hide in whatever rafters they can find. Their quick hands disassemble the work of their forefathers. Tools used to forge connections are now used to sever them violently in gouts of flame.

The corrupted angel does not see them at this work—they are too small, too many, too disparate. They are beneath her notice.

In the end, that is her undoing.

An explosion rips through the structures of the city. Deep within the structure of the Mezzio as she is, she does not notice that it's begun to topple until it's already too late. In the end it is not the shield of the angels that kills her, nor the machinations of the demons: it is the city itself. The gleaming glass and steel tower of New Capenna collapses atop her, cut free from its mighty pylons and suspension systems. From their perch, the angels watch centuries of mortal work crash into the earth.

Giada's essence fizzles with excitement, but it isn't yet right for her to intervene. There's someone she's waiting to hear from.

The others waste no time. The defenses of New Capenna must not be confined to the city alone. If the Multiverse is to survive, the angels must watch over it and fight against Phyrexia with all they have.

Atraxa's death has changed New Phyrexia—and the Invasion Tree is changing with it. The angels feel it as the mortals might feel the earth trembling beneath their feet. The barbs are retracting back to their home, leaving the pathway open for attack.

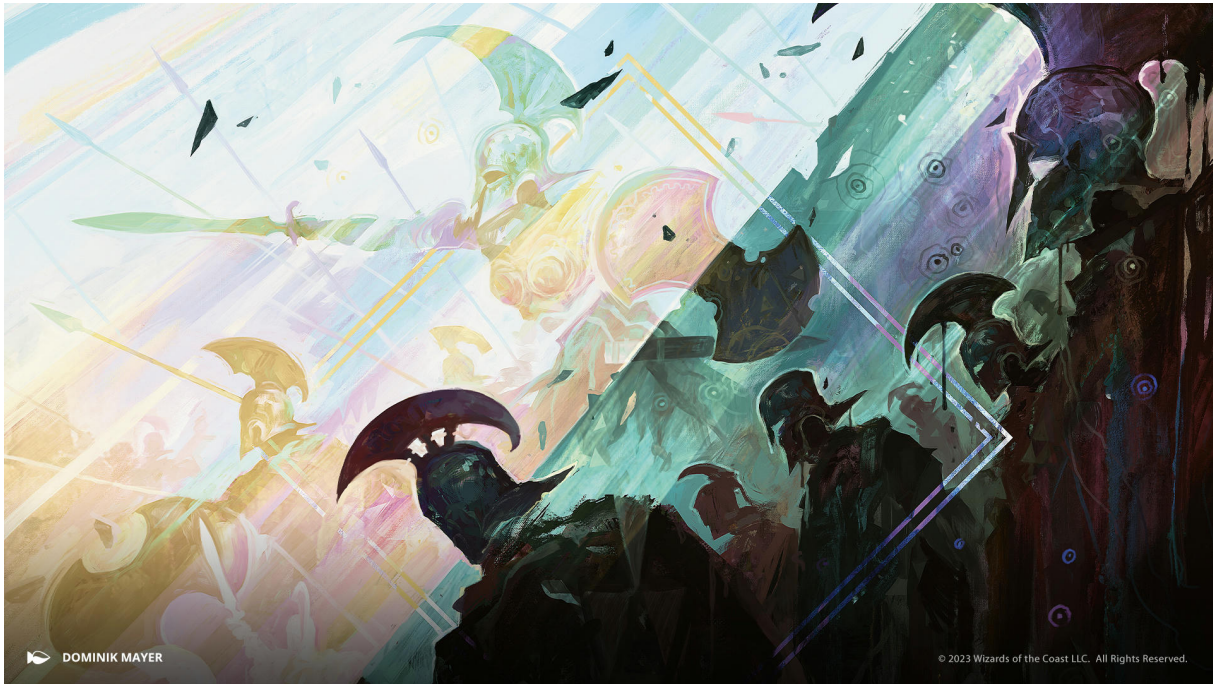
Their view of New Phyrexia beyond the portals changes to a view of somewhere else—a place with a wine-dark sea, a place where the sky shimmers with the beliefs of its people. And though there are no angels on Theros, they can't deny it's desperately in need of help. To do the just thing without regard for your own safety, to see beyond the needs of the few: this is what it means to guard the Multiverse.

Giada grins. This is the start of things—the start of what she's been waiting for. She hurriedly shouts at the others: *this is where we're needed, this is where we've got to go! Help them out if you can!*

Angels soar through the air, hurtling at unimaginable speed toward the portal. On the other side, they burst high above the sea. The angels displaced in this way feel no fear, no hesitation, no regret—they simply do as they've always done.

They protect.

Like motes of dust, they travel the winds toward their destination. Some wrap about the throat of a thrashing sea monster, holding it in place long enough for a crew of sailors to sever its heads. Others make their way to temples. The gods who call it home matter not; supplicants in need of protection soon find it. The black oil smeared across a fleeing woman's arm miraculously avoids her wounds; a javelin thrower turns the second before he would have found himself skewered.



Art by: Dominik Mayer

There is one god who notices their arrival. Bright as the morning sun the befouled Heliod shines, the ethereal angels threatening to burn within his sight. Yet they venture closer, and closer, and closer, for clambering up behind him is a woman who needs help as much as she hates asking for it. So distracted is the god that he does not notice Kaya's violet-wreathed form upon his corrupted carapace. When at last she drives a dagger into his throat—well, the angels see to it that the spray of black oil never touches her. As the god fades, the woman lands once more on the temple. Ajani is there to meet her—but what does a godkiller have to fear from a mere mortal?

Giada's formless heart beats faster. Every step is a step closer to her old friend.

Once more the portals of New Capenna shift, this time to myriad planes, some new to the angels, some familiar—all in the desperate throes of a fight they cannot win alone. Good thing they are no longer alone.

"Charge !" Giada shouts.

Warhorns echo throughout New Capenna, and the angels spread where they are needed most. On planes where they are worshipped, on planes where they are hated, on planes where they are completely unknown—they do what they have always done.

When at last the portals turn to New Phyrexia, Giada knows precisely what to do. The moment has finally arrived. There in plain view is Elspeth Tirel.

I'm so happy to see you , she calls.

Elspeth Tirel is too busy to do more than glance toward the portal: there are thousands of Phyrexians charging the platform before her. Fighting takes most of her attention. Even so, when her gaze skims toward the surface, there's a small smile on her lips. *Giada. I'm happy to see you, too.*

She's already learned to speak the proper way, hasn't she? It warms Giada's spirit to see Elspeth shining so brightly. *You've done so well.*

Thank you , Elspeth answers. She drives her sword through a winged blade-serpent, splitting it down the center. *But there's still work to be done.*

That's just what I wanted to tell you. Some of us are coming to help.

The serpent falls to the ground, but Elspeth remains in flight. A copper vine wraps around her sword arm. She severs it with a weighty chop. *Whatever aid you can send, I'll accept gladly.*

Giada remembers what it is like to grin. Though she cannot in this form, she feels it in her spirit.

She readies another call.

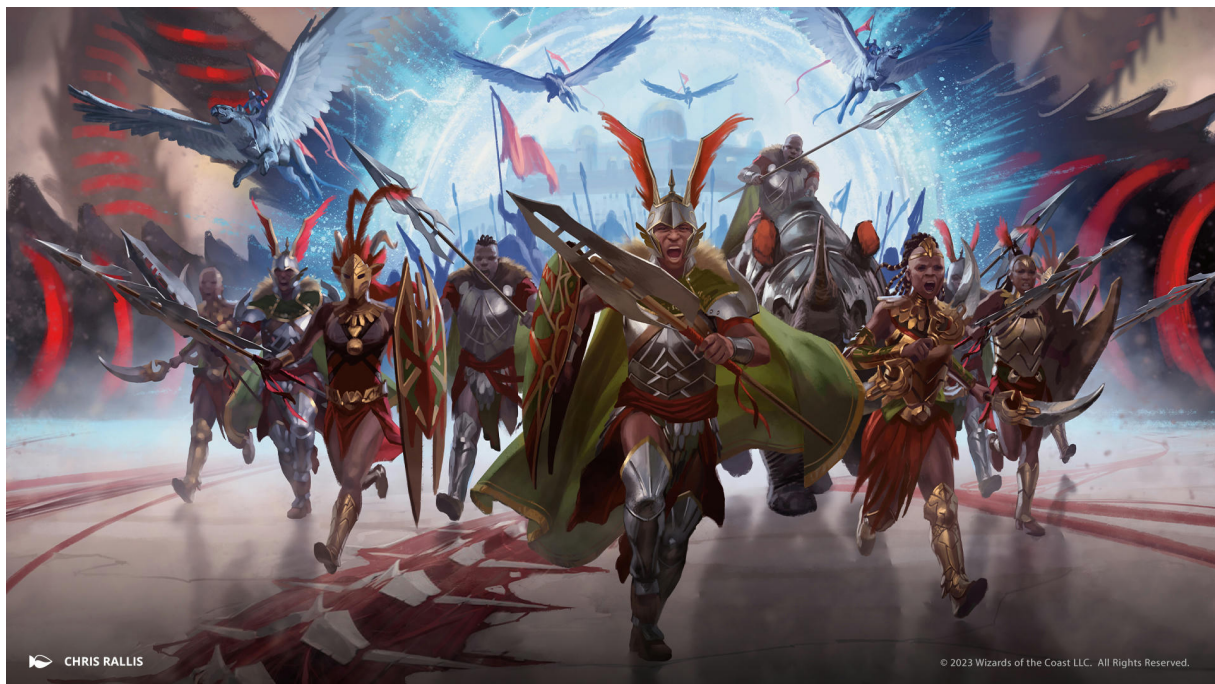
Those who go to New Phyrexia will not return. It is a small price to pay. Someone must watch over them—someone must stanch the bleeding.

“Charge!”

On Dominaria it was often said that Zhalfirins did not know fear, but the Zhalfirins said otherwise. So far as they were concerned, they knew fear better than anyone else. You could find fear sitting by the fires near nightfall. Every parent who sent a child to war chatted with fear in the mornings and at night. Fear was with you when you surveyed your fields and wondered if there'd be enough for the coming season. The truth of the matter is this: when you know fear and invite fear into your house, when you treat fear as you'd treat anyone else, fear can no longer frighten you. Your community will look after your fears, and you will look after theirs.

The Multiverse is afraid of New Phyrexia.

Very well. Let Zhalfir look after that.



Art by: Chris Rallis

Armed to the teeth, smiling and eager as they face the enemy—the warclans are only too happy to meet the Phyrexians. As Koth's barricade comes tumbling down, the Zhalfirins charge ahead. Teferi catches Koth staring down at them with confusion. “Wait, where'd you come from? What's going on?”

Teferi smiles at him. Pride swells in his chest. “Zhalfir. Wrenn found us. We're here to help.” All around them the ceiling is starting to crumble, the ground is atremble. Teferi isn't bothered. “The two planes

are swapping places—New Phyrexia’s being flung out into the abyss, and Zhalfir is finally coming home. She will welcome you and yours, if you let her.”

Koth looks out onto the gathered forces. His expression is hard to read—determination, relief, and sorrow all carve their marks upon his iron. “Then let’s make sure Phyrexia never forgets us. Mirrans, make your marks!”

There aren’t many Mirrans left—but those who can fight are only too happy to join the charge.

A veil of multicolored light settles over the army’s vibrant garments like the blessing of a distant god. Power prickles along their skin. They know what danger the black oil presents them. They know how to counter it. Lances pierce Phyrexian serpents and nail them to the platform’s surface; hurled stones crush them underfoot. Rains of fire melt the enemy in place; breath of ice makes them brittle; the blow of a great hammer shatters them into hundreds of pieces.

For years, Zhalfir has awaited the chance to prove their mettle against these argent slags. Now that they are in the thick of the fight there is a prideful joy in the air. Sidars start their chants, calls and responses echoing along from the mouths of Askari, Akinji, and Altali:

“You cannot break—”

“—what is woven together!”

Bravado is as potent as any armor. After only minutes on the field, the Zhalfirins drive a wedge into the Phyrexian army’s forces, while their healers tend to the wounded Mirrans on the platform. At the vanguard rides Teferi, his staff aglow, magic swirling about him. The spears that fly, the bladed insect swarms, the shards of the dead blown asunder—all slow as they near him. His companions snatch weapons from the air and hurl them back at their owners. And though Teferi’s rarely known exertion such as this, he meets it with a glad heart and centuries of skill.

Rushing to catch up with him are the other Mirrans—those that can still fight. Chandra points him out to Koth. “You see? That’s him! That’s Teferi! I told you he was—”

She’s cut off when Praetor Vorinclex leaps toward Teferi’s vanguard. A moment of hesitation stops Chandra’s breath, but Vorinclex does not get far before he hits the wall of Teferi’s magic. Everyone—no matter how fearsome—looks foolish moving in slow motion.

Even Koth breaks into a smile at the sight. “All right. Maybe you were onto something.” But he, too, is busy. Koth drives both fists into the ground. Two cracks spread out toward the Zhalfirins, one on each side. “Give me a hand.”

Chandra doesn’t know exactly what he wants, but she assumes he needs fire. She sends some shooting down each of the cracks. Flames rise to fend off the incoming blows of the Phyrexian army—and turn the Askari’s burning weaponry into bladed infernos. Only a few seconds later Koth whips his arms up. Incandescent metal shards fall like the condemnation of the Multiverse on the backs of the Phyrexian army.

Yet not all meet their fate so easily. Even Teferi’s concentration can flicker. Vorinclex’s struggle against it at last finds purchase; he tears the jaws from Teferi’s mount and sends him tumbling to the ground. In no time at all the praetor is atop his prey.

Vorinclex’s roar has heralded the death of many warriors—but fear is an old friend of Teferi’s, and he does not feel its pull now.

“Look behind you.”

The praetor turns, snarling.

A blazing sword severs Vorinclex's head from his body. One of the Askari—a woman named Shella, who often drank her comrades under the table—offers Teferi a hand up. He takes it, thanks her, and then she is gone. On a battlefield there is always more work to be done.

It's then he sees the angel, hovering only a little overhead. The serenity of her expression belies the concern in her eyes.

"You'll need to be more careful."

"Elspeth?" he asks. But the confusion on his face changes to acceptance, and he offers her a smile in the middle of the battlefield. "I'm happy you're here."

There's something foreign in the way she looks back at him, as if she doesn't entirely understand how it is she's meant to respond. In the end, she doesn't.

Teferi understands. Sometimes people change. She's still his friend—and a skilled soldier. "Any tactical advice?"

A copper root flies toward Elspeth; she severs it with a single cut. She doesn't spare Teferi a glance. "Leave Nissa to me. Your forces will need to hold off Jin-Gitaxias and Norn. My sisters have given us a gift. The infection cannot take hold so long as they are with us. Don't waste it."

Elspeth speaks in a strikingly normal voice, as if she's discussing what to wear at an outing rather than plans vital to the survival of life on all planes.

"Understood," he says—but by then she's already left.

Up above them the roof of the sanctum cracks. Wrenn's work, Teferi wagers: as Zhalfir moves to take New Phyrexia's place in the Multiverse, New Phyrexia is cracking under the pressure. Structures tear and break. Slabs of metal plummet down. Zhalfirin wizards conjure the winds to redirect the boulders out toward the enemy. No amount of Phyrexian armor can protect against the forces of mass and gravity—smears of black oil are all that remain of those squashed beneath. Distant towers topple, monuments shatter, vats crack and oil slicks the walkway. The ground rumbles beneath Teferi's feet.

These are the death throes of Phyrexia.

And there is its keening death wail: flinging aside soldiers with ease, consigning them to the abyss, is Elesh Norn. Her porcelain armor is pitted in places and outright sundered in others, revealing her weak, torn sinew beneath. Towering over the army—even the war machines—she strikes Teferi as a lion with a sour wound.

"What we've done what I've built will last forever!" she screams. "Phyrexia will never die. You're only delaying the inevitable. Why can't you understand that? Why won't you accept your fates?!"

Teferi sends word through the ranks to focus fire on the giant praetor. A volley of magic—lightning, ice, fire, bolts of verdant energy, withering dark—beat her back. Norn staggers, swaying on her feet. Norn's oil-slicked mouth hangs open in shock; she clutches a talon to the cluster of wounds on her chest. When she surveys the army once more she lets out another scream.

"Why aren't any of you protecting me!? I *am* Phyrexia!"

The army hears her, and the army stops—but only long enough for their own general to speak up. Jin-Gitaxias rides atop a massive war machine. Long and narrow, it is bedecked with all manner of weaponry: blades, spikes, a great ram at its head. All this to protect its precious cargo: a vat filled with his own progeny. Writhing newt-like creatures nearly ready to be born press their featureless faces against the glass. When he speaks, the vat flickers with light. "Your ego is a tumor on whatever talent you may have had. New Phyrexia has evolved beyond you. But your scraps may serve some use."

To see them turn against one another both surprises and relieves Teferi.

As does the familiar boom of a Planeswalker's arrival—until he sees Ajani, badly wounded, joining the fray. "You?" Jin-Gitaxias sneers. "Out of the way. That thing behind you is Phyrexia's true enemy."

"No," Ajani booms. "Phyrexia stands united, or not at all."

Teferi's had no time to decide what to do before Jin-Gitaxias's legions descend on Norn and Ajani.

Centurions hack at her armor, pulling off sheets in chunks, as she crushes however many of them she can. It is as if she is being assailed by a massive swarm of beetles—all of whom have sharp teeth and sharper weapons. Ajani rips and slashes at them, first with his axe and then, when it's torn from his grasp, with his claws and teeth.

He cannot stop them all. Let them weaken Norn.

Ajani leaps in front of her only to catch a disorienting blast of magic that leaves him on his back. Ropes and nets are cast over him, and Zhalfirin warriors surge forward with spears. On an instinct he can't name, Teferi shouts "Wait! Take that one alive!"

Ajani thrashes against his bonds, leaking blood and oil into the ropes, until another spell freezes him solid. Obediently, the warriors drag the subdued leonin out of the fight.

In the meantime, Jin-Gitaxias has given Norn so much of his attention he's left himself open. Zhalfirins understood the dangers of infighting as few did. That left them in a unique position to capitalize on the failings of their foes—and save what they could of their friends.

While Jin-Gitaxias oversees his army's attack on Elesh Norn, Teferi and the vanguard head straight for him. Claws rend through steel and iron; swords and axes cleave skull and sternum. Always the Zhalfirin war chants and drums lend them vigor. As Phyrexia dies around them, the Zhalfirins are more alive than they've ever been.

When the praetor turns to behold the splendor of their valor, he laughs, for he does not know fear. "Is this the best you can muster? *Organics*?" He gestures with his claw. Spikes shoot from the flanks of his war machine, impaling the beasts who strive to break it. Blood spurts onto the glass as the animals howl.

"Look around," Teferi calls. "It seems to me New Phyrexia's the one getting left behind."



Art by: Chris Rallis

Jin-Gitaxias gestures once more. Blades emerge from the joints of the war machine. Another gesture and they begin to spin. Teferi's heart sinks. Many of their mounts aren't going to make it out of this. But it'll be worth if it the rest can survive—there will be time to mourn their old friends later.

Teferi ducks the oncoming swing of a centurion. Blades, tendrils, and barbs all slow as he weaves his way through the melee toward the war machine. While Zhalfir's prowess is legendary, this is something only he can do. Sucking in a breath, he lays a hand on the flat of the spinning blades.

For a precious second they come to a stop.

It is enough.

"You won't hurt Teferi!" a woman shouts. Teferi looks up to see her: one of the warclan's very own, a massive warhammer lifted high over her head as she soars toward Jin-Gitaxias. When she brings it down upon him the war machine's glass cracks. Foul-smelling liquid gushes out, bathing Teferi in its filth. New clothing will be a small price to pay to see Jin-Gitaxias plummet into his own creation. Even smaller when his own creations start eating him.

Teferi wipes his face clean.

He looks back toward the Invasion Tree. Koth is overseeing the portal. Most of them have already crossed over into Zhalfir—but some linger. Koth, Chandra, and Karn all remain. And judging by the jagged edges of the portal, there won't be much time left to return.

It's time to call for a retreat; the warclans have done enough here. Teferi signals to the drummers. The vital rhythm beneath their feet shifts to something far more dour.

Zhalfir knows what this means. For the whole to prosper, the individuals must be kept safe. New Phyrexia is fading—but that doesn't mean the Mirrans have to fade away along with it. So long as they live, they can forge a new home.

"Clear a path for the Mirrans!" comes the war-leader's shout.

Phyrexia does not let them go easily. The Zhalfirins at the front fend off what blows they can while the rear of the army retreats through the portal. With every step back they take, they leave scores of dead

Phyrexians behind. There are Zhalfirins, too, among the dead—but they are treated with reverence. There are those among the army whose sole job it is to see these bodies returned home—fleetfooted Altali who weave between the tangles of the melee clad in bright white. The Zhalfirins part at the sight of their uniforms to allow them through.

By the time Teferi makes it back to the platform, nearly everyone has gone ahead. He can see his home waiting to welcome him on the other side—and he can see Wrenn, too, jutting from the tree’s surface. His old friend has become a delicate ashen statue. Precious little of her bark remains intact. Teferi swallows at the sight. When he looks over the armies once more the thought is loud in his mind: none of this would have happened without her intervention. There must be something he can do to help.

And there, as he studies her, he can see it: an acorn hidden within the ash.

It will grow strong as she did on Zhalfir.

As he carefully plucks it from the ash, Koth shouts from behind him. “I’d get to leaving if I were you.”

Teferi pockets the acorn and turns. He shakes his head. “I ran once before my plane was safe. Never again.” His eyes fall on his old friend, Karn—still alive, though torn asunder by Phyrexian experimentation. Teferi lays a hand on Karn’s shoulder as he looks to Koth. “You go on ahead.”

But the young man is as stubborn as the metal that dots his skin. He’s not going anywhere. And perhaps that’s for the best: as a copper spear shoots toward Chandra, it is Koth who raises a shield to protect them. Strange. It isn’t like Chandra to let something like that happen. She took whatever excuse she could to melt things. When the shield sinks back to the ground, the picture’s clearer.

Nissa’s on the other side. “You ruined *everything*.”

“You’re not yourself—” Chandra starts.

“There isn’t time,” Koth says. “Go back through the portal.”

“No. I’m not leaving without her. She’s still in there, I know she is.” Nissa hurls another boulder at them, forcing Chandra to blast it away. She steps in front of Koth and opens her arms toward Nissa. “If you want to kill me, here I am. But I know you won’t.”

Teferi bites his lip. Chandra’s optimism knows no bounds—but it might get her killed here.

“She’ll be all right.” It’s Karn who speaks from Teferi’s side. “Elspeth is looking after them. May I ask a favor, Teferi?”

As if to punctuate the point, a flash of light heralds Elspeth’s arrival. A second later, she drives the pommel of her golden sword into the back of Nissa’s head. The elf drops like a stone out of her armor, and out of the sky.

And Chandra, of course, is there to catch her.

“Of course, old friend,” Teferi says. “What can I do?”

“Buy me a moment more,” Karn says. There’s a wobbly tone to his voice, one Teferi hasn’t heard before. “I want to walk out of this place under my own power.”

Teferi can hardly deny him that. As he watches, Karn forms himself a new body, building it layer by layer.

On the horizon, Norn’s torn through most of her own army. No longer does she stand tall and proud above the other New Phyrexians, for they have taken her legs. Crawling toward them is a skinless abomination. Even her headpiece has been shattered, yet still she pulls herself forward. Clawing through the fields of dead she reaches for the portal.

“We don’t have long,” says Teferi.

“No, we don’t,” agrees Karn. He flexes his new hand—a roughly hewn thing without any of his usual artistry. “You should leave.”

“What about you?”

Karn looks out toward Norn. “There is something that needs to be done. Go. Tell the others that we won’t be long.”

Karn feels heavy.

It isn’t a new feeling. In the most objective sense, as a golem, he’s always been heavier than anything around him. In the subjective ones, things often haven’t been much better. Since Urza’s death, Karn’s felt heavy every day in one way or another. Some days, the weight of the Multiverse paled in comparison to what he felt. And some days what he feels *is* the weight of the Multiverse.

This is one of the latter days. Watching Elesh Norn crawl toward the platform, he’s more aware than ever of the burdens he’s chosen to bear. Mirrodin was his creation. Everything that’s befallen it is his fault. What began as simple ignorance of his own composition—bringing glistening oil to Mirrodin—evolved into a willful ignorance of his failures. For a long time, he’d consigned this place to oblivion. After Venser gave his life to save Karn’s, the best thing to do seemed to be to live it in atonement. Back then he thought there must be some way to repair Mirrodin—some way to undo all his mistakes.

He understands differently now.

Karn glances at Teferi. The mage is aglow with magic, straining to keep the portal open. After centuries of struggle, Teferi had finally righted the wrongs of his youth.

It’s the same for Elspeth. All that time running away from Phyrexia, all that time trying to find a new home elsewhere, and here she’d been only moments ago resplendent in the righteousness of her new path.

You can’t run away from your mistakes. You have to fix them. That starts with confronting your wrongs.

Karn steps forward. In the dilation of Teferi’s time bubble, Norn’s screeching is the booming bray of an unseen warhorn. What’s left of her is pitiable and small. If he leaves now, she may well die from her injuries.

But he can’t be sure that she will. And if Norn lives, then so does her ambition.

Many years ago, Karn vowed never to bring harm to the living. He had seen the horrors of war and wanted no part of them. The first Phyrexian invasion changed that, but those decisions never sat well in his core. What right did he have to end the life of another? He, whose life was so artificial? He hated it. He’s always hated it. Whenever possible he’s tried to find other solutions.

There are no other solutions to an evil as pernicious as this.

To save the lives of many, it must be exterminated completely.

How heavy this knowledge is.

Karn lays a hand on what remains of Norn’s head.

To assemble something is a delight—a puzzle that pleases him in a way few things do. The interplay of connected gears and axles is as exquisite to him as any song. Music, he’s found, is quite like building a machine: every piece of an orchestra must function in respect to and in tandem with its fellows. A

conductor oversees the processes much as an engineer oversees his creation. In music and in creation there is unity.

In destruction there can only be solitude.

He hates it. As his magic works on Norn's body, tearing porcelain from wire, he is filled with an animal revulsion. He wants to look away. He wants to stop.

Violence, even in the service of the greater good, should never be easily wrought.



Art by: Scott Murphy

He forces himself to look. To watch the metal disintegrate. He burns the sight of Norn's corpse into his memory.

He could have asked Teferi. He could have asked Koth. Certainly, he could have asked Elspeth. But he is tired of others fixing his problems for him, and asking them to do it would be the same as killing her himself in the end. This is the smallest way he can take responsibility.

When it is done—when Elesh Norn is a red smear against the white platform—Karn walks to the gate. Teferi relents, and time resumes. Concern shadows his expression when he sees the carnage.

“Let's go,” Karn says.

It is another weight to bear, another heaviness upon him.

But it's the first step toward a lighter future.

Zhalfir welcomes him.