

Episode 10: The Rhythms of Life

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From set *March of the Machine*

On Kamigawa, a boy returns home, covered in the dust of a city's wreckage. When he arrives, he holds himself differently—no longer afforded the wide-eyed innocence of a child. Things have changed.

His mother has changed.

The boy's father knows it the moment he hears her voice, the moment he sees her. Gone is her body, replaced by a string of characters that glow in time with false breath. A spirit that hovers before him, holding his son's hand.

And yet it is unmistakably her.

A father can wish for many things. A boy can, as well. But the one wish they share is that their family can remain together.

Fate has taken much from them—but it has not taken that wish.

The father embraces his family. The mother returns home. And the boy stands weary, but happy, in the middle of it all.

On Kaldheim, an elf stands on the gunwale of a commandeered ship. He watches the seas churn before him and counts the minutes. How long has it been since he's seen his brother?

A count of hundred. A count of two hundred.

How long has it been since the serpent dragged him under?

Two hundred fifty.

The fighting around them has come to a miraculous halt. Everywhere there is raucous cheering, everywhere there is music, everywhere his fellows celebrate a battle hard won.

Yet Harald has ears only for the sea.

Three hundred.

How long will it be until he gives up?

How long would it be until Tyvar gave up on him?

Harald never has to answer the question. On the count of three hundred thirteen, Tyvar Kell bursts from the water clinging to the serpent's engorged head. Grinning as always, he slaps its surface. "Do you see, brother? You will never outdo this!"

Harald does not often cheer when met with a boast he cannot match—but today, he will make an exception.

On Kaladesh, a mother braces herself for death. What hope does she have for anything else? Her only weapon is a length of sharp metal she scavenged from the wreckage of her plane. Surrounded by Phyrexian soldiers on a platform above the aetherflux reservoir, she has nowhere to go. The whirr of a metal blade heralds her end—but if she can at least push them off the platform as she falls, maybe it'll be safe for a while longer.

She takes a breath. Takes a step. Readies herself for the pain of impact—only for the whirring saw to still.

Soldiers crumble like piles of twigs, their metal limbs falling off the platform.

Hope blooms in Pia's breast. All over Ghirapur it is the same: the Phyrexians are falling. Some stop in place, some crumble apart. Those already compleated fall to the ground as if in a deep slumber. In the distance their warship is plummeting from the sky.

They've won.

Pia Nalaar's not sure of the mechanics of this. She doesn't know how any of this is happening, although she suspects Saheeli will fill her in later. What she does know—and what she has always known—is that she can trust in her daughter to get things done.

On that platform above the reservoir, Pia mutters a thanks to Chandra.

You can say much with a drum. One rhythm tells the tale of the market's latest wares; another the arrival of a new family member; a third announces the passing of an elder. When you speak in this way it will carry over a great distance. Another community's drummer may hear it and bring the news to their own people, with a flourish to tell them from whence it came. For centuries, the Zhalfrins have known this: whatever they speak with their palms against stretched leather will soon resound through the plane.

And on this day the message is a simple one: *Rejoice*.

Everywhere, the drums call; everywhere, rhythm fills the chests of the Zhalfrins and tells them of the reason for their joy. Phyrexia lies broken and defeated beyond the reach of time. Zhalfir itself has found a new home among the planes, a place where they may once more entertain visitors.

Visitors like their own wandering son, Teferi.

Teferi, too, can hear the drums. It is hard not to smile when he does. For him, it's been hundreds of years away—hundreds of years in which he might have forgotten the rhythmic language of home. What a relief to stand on a grassy hill and perfectly understand it, instead. Every beat tells him that he belongs here.

And, on other days, he might feel that's true. Most days.

Today the story is more complicated. For while the people of Zhalfir are celebrating their victory, Teferi is mourning his losses.

It took the better part of two days to find the perfect spot for Wrenn. As he searched, he tried to imagine what sort of things she'd like. Would she prefer to grow among the ancient baobab trees, protected by these gigantic arbors? What about afiya—were they chattier, since there were often so many of them? Did she admire the upright, unfaltering nature of marula, or was she more interested in the flexible and mystic yew? Zhalfir had all of these and more. Which is the most fitting tribute for the woman who saved the Multiverse?

In the middle of the second day, he realized he'd been going about it all the wrong way. The trick wasn't to wonder about the specifics of the thing.

With the acorn in hand, he thought of his friend, and he walked until it felt right.

So, he ended up here on this grassy hill overlooking town. A few oaks are within singing distance, he thinks, and from here she'll be able to see all manner of things in the village. And, when she's grown, she can choose to move wherever she likes. Zhalfir will welcome her.

Teferi digs. The earth is warm, the soil dark and rich. He lays the acorn in the little clearing he has made, then fills it in. Water from his own gourd he offers her. He sits next to the little mound and sighs.



Art by: Gaboleps

"I think you'd like this," he says. "The music, I mean."

The mound says nothing.

"I *should* join them. You're right. But I wanted to make sure that you were all right first."

Down in the village, the flute players have emerged. They, too, begin to dance around the fires. He watches them for a little while: the youths with more vigor than skill, the married couples clinging to one another with easy grace, the Mirrans who do not know the steps and the children who teach them. By all accounts, it is a beautiful sight.

"I've waited a few hundred years. A couple more minutes won't hurt anybody. And I wanted to thank you, again, for everything you've done. It's " He runs a hand along the back of his head. "Please don't get the wrong idea, I'm grateful, more grateful than I've ever been. But it's hard to lose another friend."

When he searches the faces around the fire, so many of them are familiar. Once, he knew everyone in this village: their mothers, their fathers, who made the best food and whose food is better off slyly served to their livestock.

He has lived for years without them. Centuries. Yet to them, he has only been gone a short while. There are bridges that his countrymen can never cross with him, things they can never understand. But family rarely understands each other completely.

This place—it is home, and it isn't. It's a home he needs to learn again.

They are friends he needs to make again.

In the wake of the war against Phyrexia, that feels an impossible task.

Teferi hangs his head back. "I know the others are here," he says. "And I know, I should go speak to them. See how they're doing."

Only the drums answer. He closes his eyes. For a long while he does not open them. Instead, he lays a palm against the earth and wills himself to truly feel it. To notice how it is still a little damp, how it feels when he tugs on the blades, the soft springiness of the dirt beneath. In the distance he can hear laughter. Someone, probably one of the Mirrans, is asking how to play the flute. Seconds later a shrill note jolts everyone offbeat—but more laughs follow. The crackle of a fire, the wind against his skin, the cool moonlight air like drinking fresh water all his wrongs made right.

There's a pain pricking at the corners of his eyes, a pressure.

For a little while, he will allow himself to weep. Tears for him and his lost years, tears for Karn and his lost past, tears for Nissa and Ajani and all the others who may never wake now that Phyrexia has fallen.

And, most of all, there are tears for those who cannot join in the dancing by the fire.

When he is done it is the dead of night. The moon hangs high overhead. Dancing's given way to story swapping, something he can no longer hear from where he is. The Zhalfirins listen as one of the Mirrans speaks. Fire paints his greenish skin gold, yet the look in his eyes is distant and pained. Thrun, they'd called him. He's asked after Melira every day since the end of the war.

They will all be paying the price for their freedom for years to come. Teferi included. He has to go see the others.

He gives the mound of dirt another reverent pat. "Thank you for the company," he says. "Next time, I'll bring the rest of our friends."

Once he's gotten to his feet it doesn't take long to reach his destination. Here in the healer's ward, there is no dancing. There can't be. In all his days as a boy, the ward was never so full as this. Beds spill out onto the surroundings, boughs shaped to hold the infirm. Healers move from one to another like bees within a hive. Here the wails of the dying provide a dirge to counter the joyous rhythm.

Teferi doesn't look away from any of it. The results of this war have been a long time coming. If he ignores them now, he does a disservice to all those who made it a war they could win. As he searches for his friends, he takes the time to visit some of the injured and wish them well. Here and there, when he knows of something that might help, he assists the healers in their duties.

Eventually, he makes his way into the main structure itself. Karn, Koth, and the others are easy to spot within it: they are sequestered away in their own section. Tonight, their new suns shine on them, but in the morning the awning above will be drawn, and they will be in the cool shade. He wonders how Karn feels about that sort of thing, if it makes any difference to him either way.

"isn't a fairy tale. You have to stop holding on."

Ah—that voice. Kaya. She must have arrived while he was away. As he rounds the corner into their enclosure, he readies himself for the worst.

"There's a way. I just know there is. All we have to do is find it, right? And she's not getting any worse, so I don't see the harm."

"And if she awakens?"

The air in the room is taut as a bowstring when Teferi enters. All at once he can feel their eyes on him: Karn, Koth, Chandra, and now Kaya. But there are others in the room, too. Nissa and Ajani are both laid out on their own beds. Chandra's got Nissa's hand in her own—she's not moved since they got back from New Phyrexia. Koth and Karn worked with the healers here to remove as much Phyrexian metal from her as they could—but from the look of it she'd have to hold onto some. Ajani, next to her, is a newer sight. They haven't culled anything away from him yet.

Aside from their breathing and the occasional twitching of their eyes, they are motionless. Between them—and with some help from Saheeli, during her brief visit—they think they understand why. Wrenn swapped New Phyrexia and Zhalfir's places in the Multiverse. That means New Phyrexia is off somewhere nothing can reach.



Art by: Anato Finnstark

“Suppose you’re New Phyrexia. You’re going to compleat thousands of people in short order. What’s the best way to keep in contact with them?” Saheeli had asked them.

“Some kind of signal,” answered Kaya. “A call only they can hear.”

Saheeli nodded. “Just so. But what will you use to carry your signal? What unifies all Phyrexians?”

“Oil?” ventured Chandra.

“That’s right. Maybe that’s why they’re so intent on spreading it—to amplify whatever signal they were spreading in the first place. Now that Phyrexia’s left the Multiverse, they’ve gone out of range. The oil keeps listening for new orders but isn’t receiving any. Why’s that? Well, there are a host of possible answers all worthy of study. However, in *my* expert opinion, I think all of it was tied back to Norn. A megalomaniac of that scale wouldn’t want anyone else to have control over her army. I imagine she was the only one who could send orders—and, further, that the oil is rendered inert without her. Wouldn’t want a rival seizing control when you’ve lost contact, would you? So, without her “

“They might be asleep forever,” said Koth.

“Or they might wake up,” said Chandra, who sounded as if she was trying to convince herself first and foremost. “The best thing to do is wait.”

That had been days ago. Saheeli had long since left for Kaladesh anew. The rest of them? They'd continued to wait.

Of course, not everyone is so lucky as to escape with their lives in suspended animation. Melira's here, too. Teferi nods to her as he enters—but she hardly has the strength to acknowledge him. The healers have done what they can to hide the scent of rot, but there's no mistaking it. Her chest wound's gone bad. And, judging from the clamminess of her skin and the glassy look in her eyes, she doesn't have long. Koth's at her side.

Teferi feels a pang of anger at all of them, arguing over something that could wait when Melira's in this state. Thankfully, they stopped when he came in. "We can discuss that later, Kaya," he says. He picks up a small bowl and pours Melira fresh water. This he hands to Koth, who helps her to drink it. "For tonight—let's be grateful we're all here in one piece."

"Right," says Kaya. "Sorry."

"The war had us all on edge," says Koth. "And I can't say you're wrong—we do have to decide what to do with them. But maybe maybe not tonight."

"Do you have any good news?" Chandra asks. How like her—quick to anger, but just as quick to forgive and forget.

"Some," Kaya says. "Things are starting to stabilize. Everywhere I've been, people are starting to catch their breath. Liliana's all right. So's Vivien. Tyvar's going to be bragging about killing a Phyrexian sea serpent long after we're all dead. Kaito's helping the Wanderer with reconstruction efforts on Kami-gawa. Still no sign of Jace, or Vraska, but I'm not holding my breath on either of those counts."

Their conversation picks up from there. Chandra has about a thousand questions to ask and only space for ten; Kaya's happy enough to answer whatever comes her way as a peace offering.

But that's their conversation. Tidings of distant planes probably mean little to Melira, who spent all her life within the confines of New Phyrexia. "Is there anything I can get you?" he asks her.

To his surprise, she offers a weak smile. "You know, it's funny."

"I'm told I'm very funny," he answers. Koth's staring daggers at him for it, but Teferi knows how important laughter is to the sick—and she does chuckle a little.

"Sort of, in a certain kind of way," says Melira. "I was hoping you'd come by. I have a request."

Teferi takes her hand. "Whatever I can do to help, just say the word."

Melira turns her head, moving as slowly as a stuck weathervane. Her glassy eyes land on Karn. "Could you call him over, too?"

There's no need. Karn can hear them well enough, and he lumbers on over. It occurs to Teferi that they might be the most miserable people on Zhalfir right now. A thick cloud of guilt stops up their throats and burns their eyes. All they can do is offer one another company.

At least until Melira breaks the silence. Though spoken in a quiet voice, the words are bright and clear as lightning. "I think I think I have an idea for fixing the two of them."

Koth frowns. "They're gone, Melira."

"Not all the way. If their hearts are untouched, I might be able to manage something. The signal's dead, right? So as long as we can cleanse their bodies, they should be okay." "In theory," Karn says. Teferi always admired how someone as large as his old friend could speak in hushed tones. "Although the means of doing that have escaped us."

“That’s just the thing,” she says. “We have the pieces right here, they’ve all come together.” She pauses. Teferi’s not sure whether it’s because she’s mulling over her proposition, or because she’s too tired to keep talking right now. Before he can offer her some peace to think things through, she continues. “If we’re going to do it, we have to do it soon. I don’t think I have much longer. It isn’t going to be easy, and there’ll be a price. But I want people to have hope that it *can* happen. And maybe years from now someone will figure out an easier way to do it. One that won’t require me, or Karn. People need that hope.”

Teferi hangs his head. In the distance, he can hear the drums, announcing to all who will listen that Zhalfir will welcome them. Rejoice, they say. Celebrate that you’ve survived.

Not all of them have. Melira won’t survive the night.

But if they can save Nissa and Ajani maybe it’s worth trying. Maybe they can erase just a little of this illness.

“Let’s hear the plan,” Teferi says.

“There you are. Do you have time to talk?”

Koth isn’t used to Elspeth’s celestial shape, but he has some faith that the woman underneath is the same. Yet only some. A woman standing atop a tree, balanced on a single foot, overlooking her surroundings in perfect stillness, can hardly be said to look human. Elspeth Tirel never looked at him with such clear eyes before.

“Koth. It is good to see you,” she says. Though she is atop the tree and he at its base, he hears her perfectly. “There is always time to talk, if talking is what’s needed. Give me a moment.”

She alights down from the tree, floating like a feather down in front of him. As the drums continue, they head out toward a clear patch of grass. Koth can’t remember the last time he saw so many plants in one place. Maybe never. Everything here feels soft and delicate, as if it’s under threat from his feet, but he tries not to dwell on it. This place is not Mirrodin. It can never be Mirrodin. The Mirrodin he fought for is as dead as Elesh Norn.

But that’s part of what he wants to talk with Elspeth about. Once they’re out of earshot, he takes a breath. Where to start? He could ask how she became this. Thank her for coming back to a place like Mirrodin knowing it could kill her. They could talk about what happened there, in those final moments, or they could talk about what’s going on in the healer’s ward now. Normally he’d know exactly where to start—but here, there’s just too much.

“You want advice,” Elspeth says.

He feels a smile tugging at his lips. “Didn’t expect you to start things off. Yeah. I need advice.”

She doesn’t smile back, although there’s a certain softness to her features. “This form has its blessings. What’s troubling you?”

“Do you know about Melira’s plan?” He asks. He isn’t sure how far those new blessings extend.

“No. But I know that she will not be with us for much longer,” she says. Elspeth looks up at the suns above them. “I will be very sorry for her loss.”

Strange—the sorrow does touch her voice, but only slightly, and it never reaches her face. When he’d first met Elspeth, she cried often. To see her so composed now Koth is proud, but part of him worries about her. When all of this is over, what will remain of those who fought for Mirrodin? Elspeth’s an angel now, the resistance survives bloodied and broken, Melira’s about to die, and Karn

What will they even do with Melira, afterward? She will be the first of them to die here. Among the Vulshok, bodies were burned and ashes spread. But what were the traditions here? Would the Zhalfirins want her buried beneath this soft earth, that the roots may claim her bones, and the worms feast on her flesh? They might say it's an honor to rejoin nature, but Koth knows otherwise.

Melira is from Mirrodin. They'll give her a proper send-off.

When it comes to that.

He presses his eyes closed. "She wants to try and heal the others. Ajani and the elf."

"I owe Ajani my life and much more besides," Elspeth says with a nod.

"It's going to kill her, doing that," Koth says. "And Karn's going to burn what he's got left of Venser's spark, too. They have it all planned out."

He doesn't care to argue about whether Ajani deserves redemption; Phyrexia warps those it touches. But there's a bitterness in his heart when he considers that Ajani might make it out of this with time to consider his actions. So many Mirrans won't have the same opportunity. And no one fought to bring the bodies of their compleated brethren back—only the bodies of the dead. Why is it that Ajani and Nissa are being given a second chance at life when so many of his companions aren't?

It's a difficult thing to swallow. More so when the Zhalfirins have been nothing but kind to them. Fresh cooked meals every night; new, colorful homes for each of them, and plenty of visits to stave off the silence; new clothes and new friends. Hard to ask for anything more than this. Mirrodin is dead, but Mirrans can live on, thanks to Zhalfir and her people. He's grateful to them—more grateful than he can hold in his mind at any one moment.

But do Ajani and Nissa deserve that same mercy?

Elspeth's brows inch closer to each other. "Hmm. How is it meant to work?"

That she doesn't ask about Melira or Karn upsets him. He can't quite keep his tone level when he answers. "First, she's going to inoculate their bodies against further infection. That's standard. But then Karn's going to pull their sparks out. And use Venser's spark to filter them somehow. Some theory Venser had before everything happened. When he brings them back, Melira will clean the sparks, and then Karn will place them back inside."

The whole thing sounds risky—more so when Elspeth doesn't immediately respond. Silence only leaves him to contemplate all the ways things can go wrong. He runs a hand over the back of his head, the rough metal a welcome anchor to reality. Everything else here was too soft, too plush—even the fabric of the clothing they'd lent him. People here were kind, valiant, and attentive—but they'd never know suffering the way he did. May this roughness always remind him of that.

"You're afraid," Elspeth says.

Part of him wants to argue the point—a large part, bellowing within his chest. But he knows she's right. "Aren't you?"

She looks up at the suns again. "No."

"She's going to die."

"In a manner of her own choosing," Elspeth answers. "Once, you said to me you'd fight for Mirrodin even if there was no Mirrodin left. You stayed, knowing you might die, and leaving me no choice in the matter. You were my friend, and I left Mirrodin thinking you'd been torn apart by Phyrexians. For years that thought pained me."

Koth looks down.

"I no longer feel that pain. But the lesson lingered: we all choose how to face our end, and some causes are worth the price of a life. Melira is willing to pay that price on behalf of others. There's valor in that that," she says. Elspeth lays her hands on his shoulders. "She is making this choice herself—and for the benefit of others. She'll be among friends."

"But what do we do afterward?" Koth says. At last, it feels like he's come to the truth of it. "What are we going to do here?"

Elspeth remains serene—but she does offer him a smile. "You will try to make this place home. It will welcome you, if you let it."

"I'm not sure I know how anymore," he says. "And I don't think it's that simple."

"Many things aren't. But that doesn't mean they're not worth trying."

She draws him into an embrace—and he finds himself slumping against her, trying to make sense of the cacophony in his head. Elspeth could be difficult sometimes, but this is something new entirely. He's not sure how much she's listening to him. This place isn't his home. His home is gone, forever, and she's just

He hates how much the embrace helps. Words don't mean much, but at least she knows when someone needs holding. "You You've changed, haven't you?" he mumbles.

"Yes," comes the simple answer. "But I will always be your friend, Koth. If you ever have need of me, all you have to do is pray." He feels her squeezing tighter—and hears the flap of her wings. She's taking him somewhere. The irony hits him like a hammer to the chest. Years ago, he'd sunk her into the ground to send her someplace else. He didn't want her to have a choice. Tonight, she lifts him through the air to make his choice for him.

The wind whips against his skin. "This isn't goodbye."

"No, not with me," she says. "But you do owe someone a goodbye."

His feet touch the ground again. She's left him in front of the healer's ward. The earth brings with it the weight of what will soon happen.

It isn't his earth. The earth here is soft and springy, yielding too readily to him. Nothing here is metal save the things the Zhalfirins have made themselves—and even then, they favor bone and glass where the Vulshok would use steel.

Nothing about this place is home. He doesn't see how it could be. Maybe Elspeth can, from her vaunted place, but here on the ground

"Thank you," he calls to Elspeth. As much as his mind was still an avalanche, she'd at least tried to help.

"Always," she says.

Always. So easy for her to say. She might be immortal now—she has all of eternity to make herself feel at home. But him?

Koth crosses his arms. He watches Elspeth take off beneath Mirrodin's suns. He watches the suns, too, as they move across a new firmament. Saheeli, the scientist, said it was probably an unintended consequence of the planes overlapping.

An unintended consequence—just like him and the other Mirrans.

He takes a breath. This won't be easy. But so long as those suns are in the sky, he can face it.

This place isn't home. But there's a little of home in it.

“Let’s do this outside. I want I want to be outside, when it happens.”

In the face of everything they’re about to do, Melira’s request is simple. Teferi and the others promise to honor it.

Outside they go: Teferi, Karn, Koth, Chandra, Kaya, and Melira. The nights here are warmer than days on some other planes, but it is not an unpleasant sort of warmth. No, as they step out into the swaying grass, each feels curiously as if they’re stepping into someone’s home.

The first order of business is to spread out blankets for Nissa and Ajani to lay on. Next comes setting them down. The sunlight lends their Phyrexian implants a gilded luster.

“You’re sure this is going to work?” Kaya asks.

“We won’t know until we try,” says Chandra, clearing away strands of hair from Nissa’s face. “And it’s worth it to try.”

Silence, then, that Teferi worries will become another argument.

In the end Kaya nods. “Right. Well I’ll help where I can.”

He’s grateful she doesn’t illuminate all the ways this could go wrong. There are many, and there are many things left to do. For this to work, they must all work in harmony—just as the drums of different communities come together.

His job is, in some senses, the easiest, and he will lose the least through this process. Part of him almost resents that. No, that’s a young man’s thinking, and selfish besides. He will make good by doing good.

Right now, doing good means forming a small-time bubble around them. It won’t last long. Looking over the others, he asks if they are ready.

Koth lays Melira down between Ajani and Nissa. With her eyes closed, she nods.

Karn takes his place standing over everyone’s heads. His shoulders rise and fall with unnecessary breath. It is hard not to smile at it a little at him taking on such human traits—but this is not a time for smiling. Karn will lose almost as much as Melira in this. If he is nervous, it is only natural. “I’m willing to try.”

“All right,” says Teferi. “I won’t be able to keep this up for long.”

He breathes in. The soft vibration of the drums fills his lungs as surely as the air. Magic hums within him. His body aches still from the war’s exertions, but he will not falter when his friends need him. Not anymore.

All at once, the air *distorts* around them. The whipping grass slows to a near standstill. Beyond the unseen sphere of power, the outside world continues—but here they have only the space between two beats of a drum to save their friends.

Karn acts first. Driving his hand into the metal portions of their bodies, he pulls *something* out, something shimmering and bright. Teferi’s ears ring as Karn’s magic builds within him, an engine gathering steam. Or is this hesitation? What he is about to do will change him forever. In some ways, he’s saying goodbye to an old friend to save two new ones. No wonder there’s so much angst to him.

Teferi strains against the waves of time. Karn will make the right choice here, he knows it.

Light leaks from within the silver golem’s plates, light as pale and glistening as the moon’s. Karn closes his eyes. “Together, Venser,” he says, quiet in a way only he can be.

A thundering boom threatens to throw off Teferi's concentration, but he holds fast. It passes, and the two orbs Karn had been holding are gone. Melira takes the hands of her companions. She, too, begins to glow—a glow which spreads through the Nissa and Ajani. Her face wrenches in concentration.

First, the leonin.

Every second that cannot pass is a hook in Teferi's soul. He grunts as he strains to keep time stopped long enough for Melira to finish her work. As he watches, the glow ripples through Ajani. Wherever it goes, it leaves their skin brighter and removes the sinister luster Phyrexia has impressed upon them. The metal that remains is nearly as pure as moonsilver.

But this is only half the work.

Another boom sees the two orbs returning to Karn's hands—one whole and pure, one crumbling.

As Melira turns her attention to Nissa's orb, Teferi's heart sinks. It's flickering. Worse than that are the ash-like motes of energy falling away from it. Teferi is used to seeing things happen in slow motion; this is like watching a leaf decay right before his eyes. Lattice-holes open as the light courses through it.

"I can't slow that down!" Teferi shouts.

"Quickly!" says Melira.

Kaya helps her up, so that she can reach the orbs. A single touch and a halo of light ripples out of them.

It's almost time, almost.

Violet wreathes Kaya. She, too, drives her hands into the spheres of light. Together with Karn they send them back to their respective hosts.

Teferi drops his spell—and drops to his knees. Sweat slicks his brow. The drums return, carrying with them news he is too tired to follow. All he can do is turn his attention to the others and hope that what they've done is worth the sacrifices they've made.

His answer comes when Ajani's good eye flutters open, when breath returns to his scarred chest. Despite his injuries, he forces himself to sit up. "What Where am I?"



Art by: Viko Menezes

“Zhalfir,” says Kaya.

“Zhalfir? That’s impossible,” he says—but the more he looks around, the more he seems to realize it’s the truth. But so too does the tiredness overtake him. He slumps back over to the ground. “Teferi I’ll congratulate you some other time. I think my body needs to rest.”

He’s asleep before Teferi can say much else—and for the better. Let him have a few moments of peace before the horror of what he did dawns on him.

Karn slumps over, one hand to his great chest. The lights within him have dimmed; only the ghost of them remains, an afterimage in red and violet.

“Are you all right?” Teferi calls.

“It’s I feel lonelier,” Karn says. “I will miss him, but I’ll be all right.”

Koth is less sure. He kneels next to Melira and pulls her onto his lap. She fell as fast as Teferi did. The concern on his brow is easy to read—as is the misery that compels him to close his eyes. “She’s gone.”

Kaya lays a hand on his shoulder.

Tears run down his cheeks, yet Koth does not conceal them, or hide how much pain he’s in. Teferi knows exactly the kind of pain that’s driving him now. It isn’t just Melira’s death. It’s everyone’s, felt at the same time—all his friends, comrades almost everyone he ever knew. Gone.

Teferi pushes himself up. He and Karn both throw an arm around Koth as the tears take over. There aren’t words enough at times like these. Their only consolation is that Melira’s wound no longer troubles her—that she must no longer live in fear. But to say this would be cold comfort to Koth, so Teferi bites his tongue. Companionship will have to do. Grief is an awful burden to bear alone.

Yet the air is thick with grief. Next to them, Chandra shakes Nissa, anxiety flaring hotter with every second.

“What happened? Why isn’t she awake yet? The flickering “

“Something went wrong,” Teferi says. He swallows. “I’m not sure if she’s “

Maybe it'd been too much to hope for. Returning someone from phyresis even Urza hadn't figured that one out. Who were they to try? Having no other options didn't mean they'd succeed. You could dedicate your whole life to a craft and never get any acclaim for it. You could spend every waking minute laboring to further a cause and never see it come to fruition. Wanting something so badly it threatens to break you does not mean you are entitled to it.

But sometimes

"Chandra ?"

Sometimes, it'll be worth it.

It's worth it to be alive here on Zhalfir. It's worth it to be surrounded by old friends and older community—families old and new.

It's worth it to put the past, at last, behind him. To build a new future.

And it's worth it to see that happen for the others.

To see the tension on Chandra's face melt to pure happiness, to see her clutch Nissa close and to see Nissa hold her in turn, to hear the happy sobs along with the despairing ones

This is life. This is what they all fought for. What Melira died for, why Karn's given up his spark, why Teferi spent hundreds of years trying to restore his home.

For this.

"I'm right here," Chandra says. She presses her lips to Nissa's. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Good, Teferi thinks.

He won't be going anywhere for a while, either.