

# Episode 3: Inconceivable Losses

Seanan McGuire

From set *Phyrexia: All Will Be One*

The tunnel plunged downward, arrowing for the heart of New Phyrexia. The enclosing walls whipped by too fast to focus on, concealing the unspeakable horrors and horrific wonders of the transformed plane.

Elspeth clung to the cart, aware that a single bump could leave her tumbling and alone in the depths of this hostile, breathtaking darkness.



Art by: Yeong-Hao Han

For the first time, she wished she were riding with the other Planeswalkers, instead of the Mirrans. Someone who could have provided her with a distraction. Instead, there was only the descent and the dark, and the elves at the controls, holding on as tightly as she was.

There had been a little time for conversation between their departure and the beginning of what she couldn't help thinking of as a plummet, the two operators eager to share what they knew of their gutted plane with the person they had been told might be a potential savior. Oh, how she wanted to earn that title! They were as unfamiliar to Elspeth as she was to them. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she was grateful for that unfamiliarity. It was easier for people to see you as a hero if they had never seen you fail.

She had already failed Mirrodin once, and this broken place was her punishment and payment for that mistake. She couldn't see the Multiverse suffer the same fate. She would die preventing it, if that was what she had to do.

*"We're bypassing the Hunter Maze and the Surgical Bay,"* they had said. *"Be grateful for that. We're sparing you things you should never have to see."*

*"The Hunter Maze . . . ?"*

*"You might remember it as the Tangle. Vorinclex transported the worst of it beneath the surface during the great transformation, using it as the seed of his new empire."* The one who replied had looked almost wistful. He had probably been born in the Tangle; he probably remembered it as free and vital and beautiful, and thought it could be that way again.

Their plummet had begun shortly thereafter, and the operators had become too busy to continue their explanation of the landscape she wouldn't have to see. Elspeth shut her eyes against the rushing wind—there was nothing beyond the faint metallic glow of the cart's central steering apparatus, anyway; the darkness of New Phyrexia was all-encompassing, without even the gravitational magic of the lacuna to gentle their descent—and hung on for dear life.

Then, bit by bit, they began leveling off. She cracked her eyes open, and almost immediately wished she hadn't.

The sky, such as it was, was a sea of leprous clouds that roiled and shifted endlessly, somehow giving the appearance of rotting from the inside out even while hanging in the air. Pools of glowing green liquid she recognized as necrogen dominated the landscape, casting an eerie green light. Even before Phyrexia, it had been deadly, capable of transmuting the unwary into the undead. Now it could do that *or* induce phyresis, and she wanted no part of either option.

Elspeth looked at her hand and winced. The necrogen light made her look sallow, like she was rotting. The pallid complexions of her companions mirrored her own. As far as this place was concerned, they were already dead.

"Everything rots here," said one of the operators. He kept his attention focused on steering their cart to the end of the line, where the rest were already waiting. "If you stay too long, breathing in the fumes, you'll rot, too."

"It's not as bad as the Surgical Bay," said the other, her own face drawn with worry. "There, if you get too close to one of the fountains, you can find phyresis starting just because you breathed the spray. The fumes kill you before they turn you."

Elspeth unlocked her fingers from the bar she'd been gripping and stood, shaking the cramp out of her hands. "That's horrible," she said.

"That's New Phyrexia," said the first operator. "It changes what it can, kills what it can't, and converts the ruins into its own image."

They were still slowing, now almost at a stop. The other carts weren't far ahead, their passengers in various stages of gathering their gear and disembarking. Koth's demolition team was testing the blackened ground between pools of necrogen with long metal poles, scouting out the closest thing they were going to find to a safe path through this nightmare.

"We have a tunnel not far from here that should take us straight to the Fair Basilica," said Koth, voice grave but not grim.

If he hadn't lost all hope by this point, Elspeth suspected he never would.

“You make it sound so easy,” said Nahiri, hopping down from her cart, heels thumping against the ground. It seemed impossible that she should manage to avoid the necrogen, but she spoke the language of metal and stone; the sphere was probably telling her all its secrets even now. No point in worrying about Nahiri, who was moving toward Koth without hesitation. “But it’s not going to be, is it?”

“No,” said Koth. “If we take the most direct route, we might be able to avoid the majority of Thrissik’s forces. If we can’t avoid them, they’ll be trying to take you alive if they can. He’s building cairns to bring about his Destroyer, and the strongest mages are the best building materials.”

Nahiri lifted an eyebrow. Kaya, who had solved the problem of avoiding the necrogen by phasing her lower legs into purple translucency, snorted. “Yeah, yeah, we’re always the best targets.”

“At least the chaos should give us some cover.” Greeted with blank looks from the Planeswalkers, Koth smiled a quick and terrible smile. “Seven thanes rule the Dross Pits, but they’ve never been united. Four have thrown in their lot with Urabrask. Roxith, Geth, Vraan, and Sheoldred are lending their forces to the rebellion against Norn’s Phyrexia. The remaining three are likely to be distracted, grabbing for territory, watching for betrayal. We have a better shot at our goal. But we have to move now.”

“If this is when we can move without being seen, that means we’re out of here,” said Kaito, and stepped down from the cart. Tyvar was close behind him, spinning his piece of Glimmervoid metal between his fingers like a coin as he grinned at Kaya.

“My friend is fond of being overlooked,” he said. “An admirable, if incomprehensible, desire.”

Elsbeth shrugged off her pack as she moved to join the group. They were what remained of the strike team: they were the only hope the Multiverse had of being spared from the Phyrexian apocalypse. They had to win.

“Here,” she said, opening the bag and removing a string of glass Halo bottles, individual doses tied together with a leather band, their corks pushed firmly down. “This will protect us from the necrogen in the air for a little while.”

She passed the bottles around, waiting until everyone had one before uncapping her own and downing its contents. As always, the taste was effervescent and clean, citrus-bright and sweet without being cloying. She wiped her mouth and looked around to see the others doing the same.

Jace swallowed the last of his Halo and breathed in sharply, the bottle slipping from his fingers before he collapsed backward onto the cart behind him. The Mirrans around him exclaimed in dismay as Kaya raced over to crouch beside him, feeling for his pulse.

After a moment, she looked up, eyes wild. “His pulse is going haywire,” she said. “Elsbeth, what did you *do*?”

“Nothing—unless the necrogen was stopping something else from happening.” Elsbeth moved quickly to Kaya’s side. Jace was starting to twitch, not quite thrashing, but clearly not in control of his motions. “Let me see him.”

Melira was close on her heels but stopped when she saw Jace. “This isn’t phyresis,” she said. “I don’t know what this is.”

“The Halo can’t *hurt* people,” said Elsbeth frantically. She reached for Jace, then froze, wincing. “He’s in pain. So much pain. It’s burning him alive. I would have noticed if he’d been in pain like this while we were higher up. This is new. This started when he collapsed “

“We have to get out of here,” said one of the cart operators, looking to Koth. “We didn’t come prepared to linger in the Dross Pits longer than it took to make a drop-off. I’m sorry. Even with the lady’s magic juice, we should get out of here.”

“And we should do the same,” said Koth. “Whether we send your friend back up with the others or carry him, we have to move.”

“I can carry him,” said Tyvar. “We need him for the plan to work.”

“But he’s not the only one who knows how to operate the sylex,” Nahiri glanced at Kaya. “She’s trained as well. Both of them can do it.”

“I’m the backup,” said Kaya. “I only take point if he’s incapacitated.”

“This looks pretty incapacitated to me,” said Nahiri.

Jace gasped and sat up, bluish-white light crackling in the air around him as the motion knocked Kaya to the side. He twisted wildly, staring at nothing, before he shoved himself to his feet and leapt from the cart, seemingly determined to take off across the blackened landscape.

Tyvar caught him by the arm before he could step into a pool of necrogen, jerking him to a stop. “You gave us a fright, friend,” he said. “What happened?”

Jace turned to stare at him, not seeming to fully see him. “The Halo cleared my head, and I she’s in pain,” he said. “She’s calling me to go to her. I have to help her. I have to help her right now! You have to let me go!”

Tyvar frowned, not releasing Jace. “She? Who is ‘she’?”

“Vraska,” said Jace, the name sounding like it was being dragged out of him, like there was nothing else he could have said, like it was the last thing in the world he wanted to say. “She made it down here, and she’s alone and she’s scared. I would—I would hear her distress anywhere.”

The cart operators moved back to the controls, glancing to Koth for permission to depart. He nodded, and they began working the pumps, simple machines driving them up into the darkness, out of the green necrogen glow. Jace tried again to pull away from Tyvar.

“You have to let me go,” he said. “I have to go to her. She needs me, and she’s not going to make it if we don’t help her.”

“We have a mission—” Koth began.

Jace’s head snapped around, eyes seeming to focus for the first time. “Vraska needs me,” he snarled, then took a deep breath, calming himself. “You can go on without me. I’ll help her, and we’ll catch up to you together. Please.”

“A force divided is no force at all,” said Tyvar.

Jace looked at him, wide-eyed, like he couldn’t believe his attempt at logic hadn’t worked. He wrenched himself away from Tyvar, harder this time, and broke free. He began stalking across the blackened waste, not looking back.

“This is rash,” muttered Koth.

“He loves her,” said Elspeth. “He can’t hear anything else.”

“We can’t let him go,” said Nahiri. Kaya and Kaito blinked at her. She shook her head. “He has the sylex. If we lose that, we lose everything. We may as well not have come. We could have stayed home, worried about our own planes, and let the remains of Mirrodin burn.” The group set out after Jace,

abandoning their safe route through the Dross Pits. The plan, while not yet forgotten, was crumbling in their hands, and would fall apart completely if they didn't find a way to get it back on track soon.

They followed Jace's lead, a clustered group of Planeswalkers and Mirrans.

"This is a terrible idea," muttered Kaito. "I have plenty of terrible ideas, but they don't usually get everybody around me dead. But Jace has *special* bad ideas, I guess."

Still, he walked with the others, and not one of them looked back.

---

At first, it seemed they had the blasted, necrogen-blotched landscape to themselves. Then warring figures began to appear, shells of blackened metal barely containing raw red sinew and exposed bone, limbs jutting from every surface of their bodies, weapons like rough-hewn cleavers designed for splitting powerful exoskeletons. Some were small, scaled to match the Planeswalkers, while others towered over them, massive colossi of metal and viscera.

Most of them echoed the Dross Pits, shells black and blistered from their caustic environment, while others glowed red-hot, superheated metallic forms cutting through their opponents as they fought onward. Urabrask's rebellion was well underway.

The Phyrexian forces made Elspeth's stomach turn. She recognized the echoes of shapes she had fought beside in the war for Mirrodin, the arms of a viridian elf, the powerful chest of a loxodon. Other aspects of their forms were entirely new, making them all the more unsettling. Every time she thought she knew what she was looking at, she would spot something else that turned it strange and unfamiliar. It hurt to look too closely.

For the moment, the Phyrexians seemed consumed by their battle with each other, their heavy feet churning at the metallic landscape and sloshing through the necrogen pools. It wasn't until one of the fights tumbled past at only a short remove that Elspeth realized what was happening. Her eyes widened, head snapping around to focus on Jace.

"You're shielding us from them," she said.

"When they look at us, they see nothing at all," he said. "It's not a shield. It's a full change to their environment." The strain was evident in his voice. "This is the fastest way to get to Vraska. She's so afraid, and she's all alone."

A vast, terrible structure loomed out of the rotting clouds of fog, as blackened and decayed as everything around it, sheltered by the terrible "wings" of a ribcage too large to have ever belonged to any living thing. Kaya made a small sound of disgust. Koth made a larger sound of dismay. Kaito glanced to them, eyebrows raised.

"Sheoldred's Coliseum," said Koth. "She makes them fight there, for her amusement."

"'Them'?" asked Kaito blankly.

"Phyrexians. Champions or those who have displeased her, it doesn't matter, they go in, and most don't come out again. Sometimes she takes our people there, when they're captured alive and deemed unworthy of the 'gifts' of Phyrexia." Koth shook his head, looking more revolted by the instant. "No one exits the coliseum alive and unchanged. I escaped. Mostly. Part of me will fight there until I die."

"Vraska," said Jace, and broke again into a run, Nahiri and Kaya close behind—Nahiri following the sylex, Kaya following Nahiri.

"If his illusions go with him, the forces of New Phyrexia will see us soon," said Tyvar. He sounded nervous for once. In unspoken agreement, he and the others ran after Jace. The coliseum gates were

unbarred, so narrow the group was forced to enter single file. Jace was first through, Nahiri and Kaya close behind.

The others didn't even make it inside before they heard Nahiri swearing and the telltale sound of metal ripping itself out of the ground as the lithomancer prepared for war. They exchanged a glance and hurried their steps, unlimbering their weapons as they moved.

Kaito grabbed Elspeth's arm before she could enter. "We can't do this," he said. "Jace is our friend, but this is foolishness. We have to recover the sylex and keep moving."

Elspeth looked at him as levelly as she could manage. "What's the value of fighting at all, if we can't even make the stand to save our own?" she asked.

Looking chagrined, he let go.

Elspeth turned back to the entrance and stepped into Sheoldred's Coliseum.

The interior was a vast, gutted-out bowl surrounded by high ranks of backless seating, so steep that there was little doubt that eager spectators could tumble from the heights if they weren't careful. A pitted black-metal floor stretched through the center of the bowl, a pool of bubbling necrogen visible at its center and around the edges. It was a pit of horrors.



Art by: Dibujante Nocturno

And in the bowl, bleeding profusely from a dozen terrible wounds, stood Vraska. The gorgon had one hand clasped against her midsection, blood trickling between her fingers as she held some essential piece of herself inside. The serpentine tendrils atop her head hung limp, and a ring of Phyrexians closed in on her, stepping over the petrified bodies of their fellows.

Those weren't the only bodies on the ground: fully a dozen Mirrans had been slaughtered before things reached this point. Elspeth couldn't help thinking, as she looked at them, that at least they had died without being compleated; it had been clean and quick.

Jace was heading straight for Vraska, trusting his illusions to protect him. The Phyrexians still didn't see him, but that wouldn't last forever. Passing like ghosts on a battlefield was one thing. Stepping between a predator and their prey was something else altogether. Kaito raised his sword as Elspeth

drew hers. Tyvar pulled the hex of black metal from his belt and spun it between his fingers, skin rippling into a new composition as he borrowed its innate nature for himself.

Koth sighed, shoulders slumping. “So we’re doing this,” he said, before shouting grimly, “*For Mirrodin!*” He charged, stony armor turning white-hot as he activated it. He grabbed a pike dropped by one of the fallen as he ran, the heat spreading along the weapon’s metal shaft, until he held a superheated rod.

The others were only a beat behind. Nahiri’s blades spun a whirling song of death in the air around her, cutting down two of the remaining Phyrexians before they could finish turning. Kaya moved to advance, and Nahiri whirled on her, eyes blazing.

“No,” she snapped. “If that fool wants to get himself killed, we’re depending on *you*. Without one of you, we’re finished. You stay back.”

Kaya had never been afraid of Nahiri before. She looked her in the eyes, and felt her skin crawl, sudden dread washing over her. She stepped back and watched as the others engaged the Phyrexians.

The Phyrexians turned away from Vraska, distracted by the Planeswalkers, though still not seeing Jace, who continued his single-minded race for the gorgon. Kaito raised his sword to block a blow from one of the armored creatures, Himoto beeping warning, and staggered from the force of the impact. Tyvar was suddenly there, shoving himself between Kaito and the next swing of the creature’s sword, grunting as it slammed into his own metal-plated back.

It barely even dented the surface. His grin was wild as he swung his weapon at the beast. Behind him, Kaito cocked his head. The sheet of glistening Phyrexian oil the blow had left on Tyvar’s transformed skin peeled off and rolled into a ball, floating in the air above Tyvar’s head.

Koth battered the Phyrexians with his superheated fists, aiming for the breaks in their armor, the joints and open places, sidestepping their weapons. One of the Phyrexians—a terrible thing that looked like a metallic lobster constructed by welding a dozen or more smaller humanoid corpses into a single shape—roared and tried to stab him with a vicious semi-crustacean claw. Koth caught it right before it could jam the tip into his armor, straining to hold it away from himself.

A strike of Elspeth’s sword sundered the claw, radiant golden light shining from the blow. Koth grinned at her as she continued to swing, decapitating the beast. Then he turned and flung the claw into the next combatant in the line, driving the barb through its throat. The fighter blinked once, looking almost comically surprised, and then collapsed, lifeless and limp.

The ball of oil Kaito had created suddenly accelerated, splashing into the eyes of the nearest Phyrexian. The big figure staggered backward, momentarily blinded, and that was all the opening Tyvar needed to strike it down. He kicked the body as it fell, turning back to Kaito.

“Well aimed!”

“I cheat,” said Kaito, with a shrug.

Through it all, Nahiri moved forward in a cloud of whirling metal, a terrible dealer of endless destruction. The remaining Phyrexians never stood a chance against her, much less against the strength of the gathered Planeswalkers. The last of them fell as her knives returned to neutral in the air around her, and as Jace finally reached Vraska, who took a step backward, away from him, her free hand raised to ward him off.

He stopped, staring at her with shocked eyes that still glowed faintly blue from the effort of keeping himself hidden from Phyrexia. “Vraska?” he said, not bothering to keep the hurt out of his voice.

“Vraska, we have Elspeth with us. We have Halo. We have Melira. She can cure phyresis. We can patch your wounds. It’s not as bad as you think it is “

“No,” said Vraska, normally steady voice hollowed out and gutted. “No, Jace, no. I’m so sorry I called you here. I didn’t mean to. We were linked, and you—you shouldn’t have heard that.”

Jace blinked, taking a step toward her. “What? No. Calling me was the right thing to do, and you’re safe now, you’re safe, we *saved* you—”

“No !” All Vraska’s missing strength returned for a single, forceful syllable. She staggered, sagged, looked at him, somehow smaller than she should have been, somehow *reduced* . “You didn’t save me, Jace. You can’t. You were too late. It’s inside me. Phyrexia is a poison even I can’t fight off. It’s too late.”

Jace stared at her, openly horrified. Melira bit her lip.

“I can feel it from here,” she said, quietly. “The fact that she’s still this much herself she must have a will that could move mountains. If she weren’t so badly wounded, maybe, but as it stands “

Nahiri stepped forward, knives following. “We can give you a clean exit,” she said, voice devoid of all feeling. “We can let you die as yourself.”

“I will kill you if you touch her,” Jace snarled, taking his eyes off Vraska long enough to shoot a glare at Nahiri.

Nahiri stopped, looking at him dispassionately. Jace turned back to Vraska.

“Please,” he said. “We can at least *try* . We can we have to do *something* .”

“You have to run,” said Vraska. “All of you. Run now, while there’s a chance this works out the way we meant it to. We knew there might be losses. We knew there *would* be losses. Run. Run, Jace Beleren, and don’t look back. Please. I love you. Don’t let me loving you be the thing that destroys you. Go. Save the Multiverse, and live. That would make me happy.”

“I won’t leave you,” said Jace.

“The rest of us will,” said Kaito. “Jace, you can stay with Vraska if that’s what you want to do. You’re allowed to make your own choices. But you can’t do it with the sylex.”

Nahiri snapped her fingers. Her knives darted forward, slicing through the straps of Jace’s pack before he had a chance to react, and Kaya snatched it before it could hit the ground, clutching it to her chest as she backed off again.

“You’re just giving up on her?” Jace looked hopelessly from face to face, people he’d known and fought beside for years, people he barely knew at all. “Elspeth, you came here to be a beacon of hope—”

“For everyone,” said Elspeth. “Phyrexia doesn’t let people go.”

“Jace, please,” said Vraska. “It’s over for me. Let me have this.” She paused, a faint smile tracing her lips. “I never expected to die anything but alone.”

“You’re *not* dying alone,” snapped Jace, turning back to her. “You’re not dying.”

“But I am,” said Vraska.

Neither of them seemed to notice as the other Planeswalkers fled the coliseum, leaving them behind, Kaya holding the sylex tight. They were lost in their own world.

Then Jace stepped closer, and this time, Vraska didn’t retreat, not even as he reached for her bloodied hands and took them in his own.

“Close your eyes,” he said.



Vraska obliged.

The group forced themselves through the tight passage single file, emerging into the blackened, rotting landscape outside the coliseum, leaving Vraska and Jace behind.

They stepped straight into the middle of a war.

The fight inside the coliseum had been anything but quiet. They had killed and screamed and shouted for each other without consideration for the fact that they might be overheard. With Jace still inside, there was nothing concealing them from the combatants on the field, most of whom were no longer scattered, but had come together outside the coliseum. They had arranged themselves in ranks ranging from multi-legged, human-size creatures to hulking constructs of sinew and bone.



Art by: Lie Setiawan

The Planeswalkers and Mirrans stared. They had exhausted so much of their strength on the fight to save Vraska. Patches of skin were starting to show through Tyvar's metal shell, and the knives around Nahiri swirled a little more slowly.

They couldn't go back without backing themselves into a dead end. They couldn't press forward without clearing the field.

Elsbeth reached for Koth's hand, squeezing his fingers, trying to take comfort in the fact that they had done everything they could. They might fail here, they might fall here, but they had tried.

"For Mirrodin?" she asked, resigned to the fight.

The big man nodded. "*For Mirrodin!*" he roared, and they surged forward, a wave destined to break upon the rocks, fighting to the last.

"You can open your eyes now," said Jace.

Vraska blinked as she turned to look around. The coliseum was gone, replaced by a sundrenched Ravnican avenue, the sky above them perfect and cloudless as it so rarely was. She glanced back to

Jace, startled, and blinked again. All signs of battle were gone, along with all signs of battle readiness. Instead, he was dressed for an afternoon stroll, hair almost tamed into behaving itself, and offering her his hand.

"I may not be able to save you from Phyrexia, but I can spend one more day with you first," he said. "Let me give you this."

"Jace," she said, voice cracking into a laugh as he took her hand and pulled her close to him, and everything was wonderful, and nothing was wrong.

She could almost pretend she believed in this illusion it was so all-consuming. They wandered the streets of Ravnica, visiting guild halls and great museums, and she let her head rest on his shoulder, lost in his dream of the future they could have had together, had the Multiverse been just a little kinder.

She gripped his hand tight in this version of her perfect world—*their* perfect world. "Thank you," she whispered. "It's wonderful."

"I love you," he said.

Vraska grimaced. "It's time for you to go. Otherwise, I fear that when Phyrexia reaches my mind, I'll harm you. Please. For what we could have been, do this for me."

"No. I won't leave you. I can save your mind, in here, at least. We can stay together, in a place Phyrexia can't touch—" The sky above them began to darken. "Oh, Jace," she said, voice becoming a sigh as she reached his name. "Don't feel bad. You always need to be the hero who finds the answer, but sometimes there isn't one. If you'd just been a little bit faster "

If Elspeth and Kaya had made it down from the surface sooner—if he hadn't chosen to wait for them—if he hadn't allowed Nahiri to bait him into an argument in the Mirran camp.

If.

"It's not too late," he said.

"But it is." She touched the side of his face. "It's in you, too. You're already lost."

"What?"

"Here in the Dross Pits, the oil that spreads the infection hangs in the air above the necrogen pools. You should have run, my brave, foolish boy." She shook her head. "You're as doomed as I am."

"I took Halo before we reached you. I have time. *We* have time."

Jace sighed, moving closer. Vraska leaned in to meet him, and their lips met, one last kiss shared in the shadow of the end.

He tasted the lies on her lips as something stabbed the palm of his right hand, burning like ice, and the illusion he had so carefully constructed shattered around them, leaving them back under the blasted Phyrexian sky. Jace tried to jerk away. Vraska held him fast, their hands still joined, and smiled as sweet as anything.

"For the glory of Phyrexia," she purred.



Art by: Martina Fačková

She had grown a long, curving tail like a scorpion's, barbed at the end. That was what had struck him, delivering a hearty dose of glistening oil. She laughed, eyes flashing as she unleashed her gaze upon him for the first time. Jace raised his burning arm to cover his face, turned, and ran, fleeing from the Phyrexian who knew him better than anyone.

Her laughter followed him as he ran straight into Tyvar's metal side. The elf was retreating through the entrance, the others with him, fleeing a closing onslaught of Phyrexian forces.

Vraska was still laughing. They were going to die here. All of them.

Nahiri hissed through her teeth as she swung her sword at a hulking brute. "We're done!" she shouted. The bandage on her neck had come loose at some point in the fight, flapping with her movements. She reached back and ripped it free, revealing an odd, bony growth over her spine. She didn't seem to care who saw as she spun back to face the others.

"There's no winning here," she said. "The mission only goes forward if we move *on*. So you're moving on. Hold on to something."

Her magic rose like a burning tide as she reached deep enough to set the air dancing in a heat-haze of visible convection. Nahiri's power seemed inexhaustible, relentless. One by one, the knives she had painstakingly called from the substance of the layer dropped, inert, to the ground, as the sword in her hand blazed brighter. The coliseum around her began to warp and crack, unable to resist her inexorable call.

The bony growth on her spine was spreading, as if ripping this much power out of Phyrexia itself was hastening some terrible transformation. Her skin began to fissure, revealing deep veins of burning red where blood should have been.

She met Jace's eyes across the broken battlefield, her own eyes now black from side to side, like extinguished coals. "Don't let this be for nothing," she said. "Finish the job."





Art by: Andrey Kuzinskiy

She swung her sword, and in that moment, she was a figure out of legend; in that moment, she could have cleaved the plane. And then, with a vast and terrible shattering, she did precisely that, and everything fell into darkness.

Dust clogged the air, blackened with necrogen and bright with impossible radiance. Bit by bit, it cleared away.

Elspeth sat up, hacking, and pushed a large piece of debris off her torso before scrambling onto hands and knees, looking frantically around for the others. The impact of her body with the porcelain ground had smashed her pack, and she had to fight the urge to weep at the sight of her precious remaining Halo seeping into the ground and dissipating into rainbow mist.

Not that it had done them much good so far. They were losing. They were going to die here—if they were lucky. If they were unlucky, they were going to become terrible new tools in Phyrexia’s arsenal and carry destruction across the planes.

No. No, she couldn’t think that way. She pushed herself to her feet, looking around, and was relieved to see Koth picking himself out of the rubble. He looked up, jaw hanging slightly open. “That majestic fool,” he breathed.

“What?” asked Elspeth.

He pointed. “Look.”

She looked up. There was a vast hole in the silvered sky, dark and jagged, like someone had smashed their way through.

“She dropped the whole coliseum into the Fair Basilica,” he said. “Incredible.”

The others were picking their way out of the rubble, Tyvar helping Kaito to his feet, Kaya assisting Jace. Elspeth was relieved to see that the pack containing the sylex had fared better than her own; it was still apparently intact.

Nahiri was nowhere to be seen.

Above them, Phyrexians began pouring from the hole, almost immediately joining in battle against one another. They didn't fall, but clung to the silver surface of the sky, ignoring gravity in favor of carnage. More Phyrexians boiled up the walls, these ones shelled in shining silver and white, marking them as denizens of the Fair Basilica.

Elspeth turned her head and gasped. The others followed her gaze. There, bright against the artificial horizon, was the gleaming, wide-winged form of Atraxa, fighting against the blackened invaders to her master's domain.

"We must move," said Koth. "This battle will keep Elesh Norn's forces distracted for a time, but not forever."

"And I don't have forever," said Jace. He held up his arm, blistered and burnt from Vraska's venom, skin splitting in fissures to reveal tissue gleaming with a slick brightness that had nothing to do with blood. "The Halo in my system will slow it, but not stop it."

"Melira," said Elspeth.

The petite Mirran shook her head. "He'd be incapacitated, and we'd never get him back to the surface," she said. "I can't do it here."

Jace looked entirely unsurprised. "Kaya, give me back the sylex. I'm not going to survive this as it stands, I may as well be the one to trigger the blast."

"If you think that's a sales pitch, you've lost your damn mind," said Kaya, clutching the pack protectively.

"We can argue while we walk," said Koth. "We're close to the altar. Your lithomancer friend has driven us to our goal, and we shouldn't let her sacrifice be in vain."

"I can't believe I'm living in a world where Nahiri saved me," said Jace. He glanced at his arm, mouth twisting. "But then again, guess I won't have to."

They began to move, picking their way across the rubble-strewn path toward the towering shape of Norn's altar.

Jace continued whispering to Kaya, trying to convince her to hand him the bag, until finally, with a disgusted expression, she shoved it into his arms and stalked ahead, body flashing purple as she phased through the largest chunks of rubble. Jace let the bag rest against his hip, looking neither pleased nor displeased; the loss of Vraska and his own future in the same blow seemed to have broken something inside him, and the despair in his eyes was a blow to Elspeth's heart. She couldn't look at him for long.

They had lost two of their number—three if she already included Jace on that list—and all the Halo. They were trapped in the heart of New Phyrexia, with no clear way home.

How much did they really have left to lose?

Under the burning sky of the Fair Basilica and the corrupted light of Atraxa, they continued.