

# Chapter 1: Stronghold

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From set *The Brothers' War*

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*There are times when destiny calls forth a people and demands an action. Now is the time. We are the people. This is our action.*

— Eladamri, Lord of Leaves

Teferi never thought he'd walk any halls erected by Urza again, let alone ones his former mentor strode through as a mortal man. Four thousand years was a long time for any edifice to remain standing, let alone one so integral to a continent-destroying war. But there Teferi was all the same, climbing the spiraling steps of the tower where, millennia before, Urza engineered mechanical constructs to fight a bitter struggle against his brother, Mishra.

The tower itself was in pristine shape, if desolate. Stone and metal were meticulously fitted together with no seams or cracks, as if the tower had been willed into existence rather than put together by hands. Legend had it that Urza built this tower to be his personal workshop away from the horrors of the Brothers' War, and it showed in the care he'd poured to its golden accents, its orniary, its assembly armatures—the kind of care he'd never been able to extend to the people in his life.

The mystery of the tower was how it had evaded ransacking through the centuries. There had been no signs of raiders establishing camps, no evidence of opportunistic wizards setting up their laboratories. Structurally, it would have been perfect for either. Teferi could have been convinced that it was the tower's well-concealed location in a mist-shrouded vale that ensured the tower's survival. But he knew better. It was dumb luck—the same luck that all of Urza's machinations seemed to rely on (and succeed with). Reckless luck. Dangerous luck. The kind that promised only the extremes of success or failure with pain attached to each.

Teferi reached the top of the stairs, where he paused to catch his breath and clutch his midsection, the wounds he'd received in New Argive still sore. Yes, he could have used his magic to levitate up, but Subira had always impressed upon him the serenity that came with the meditation of one step after one step after one. How he wished Subira were there to cut through his tightly wound knot of concerns.

*Get out of your head*, she would always tell him. *Look with your eyes.*

Entering his quarters, Teferi noted the new, if sparse, furnishings of a table, chair, and cot that had been added in the week or so since he was gone planeswalking across the Multiverse. Then he ventured out onto the mist-shrouded battlement high above the secluded vale. Breathing in the cold Argivian air, he gazed over the edge and imagined phalanxes of metal warriors lined up underneath this very battlement, their thunderous heels pounding the ground.

Teferi turned away from the battlement to see a squat construct resembling an upright brass caterpillar waddle through the door, tenuously balancing a cup filled with a steaming, green-hued liquid and

small plate of tea biscuits. Teferi could only watch confused as the poor thing made its way across the room. He assumed that the construct was Saheeli's work, but he wasn't sure how to react to it.

"This can't be for me," he said, hoping that it understood him. "I just arrived."

"That's my doing." Standing in the doorway was Jodah, as handsome and vibrant as ever. No matter how miserable the occasion, he always managed to look every bit the part of Dominaria's most acclaimed archmage. His robes were spotless, and his smile shone as bright as the Null Moon on a clear night. "I cast an intruder alarm on the tower, so I knew you were back. I hope you don't mind me taking liberties with your breakfast."

"No. You're very kind," said Teferi, biting into one of the tea biscuits. Hmm. What was that strange flavor? Not sweet, but salty, with an odd tang and a sand-like grit between his teeth. "What is this?"

"That is the traditional biscuit of the Kjeldoran people," Jodah said. "I gave my recipe to Saheeli, and she whipped up one of her constructs to bake them. She's quite brilliant." He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Is it supposed to taste like that?"

Jodah picked up a biscuit and scrutinized it. "I've eaten thousands of these, so I don't see what could be wrong." Then he took a bite. "Huh. You're right. It's a bit off. Maybe the roach flour's gone stale."

"Roach flour," Teferi repeated, glaring at Jodah.

"Mmm-hmm," said Jodah, popping the rest of the biscuit into his mouth.

Teferi gingerly dropped his onto the plate. "How are things holding up here?"

"As well as can be expected. You'll have to ask Saheeli how she's faring on her project, but I can tell you that we have our privacy. For now, at least."

That was good to hear. A handful of weeks had passed since the attack on the Mana Rig, leaving Teferi with few allies and fewer resources. Karn had been taken by the Phyrexians, the sylex destroyed, and Ajani revealed to be a sleeper agent. To thwart any more prying eyes, Jodah insisted on finding a new base, a sentiment Teferi agreed with. What he didn't necessarily agree with was relocating to Urza's Tower. But what was done was done.

"I brought Wrenn," said Teferi. "Did you happen to see her?"

"Yes. We met on my way up here. Not exactly the friendliest sort."

"Let her warm up to you. You'll find her wisdom without peer."

"Speaking of peers, two more Planeswalkers arrived soon after you did."

Teferi raised an eyebrow. For the last month, he'd been feverishly chasing down allies throughout the Multiverse, but most of the long-standing Planeswalker contacts he managed to find laughed at his entreaties. Teferi had more luck with the younger Planeswalkers who'd fought alongside him against Nicol Bolas: Saheeli Rai was the most vital recruit due to her skill with artifacts. Kaya was instrumental for her keen strategic mind and her network of informants across distant planes. And Wrenn he'd sought out for her ability to see through his own foolish affectations. He had not expected anyone to come looking for him.

"Kaya seemed to know them," said Jodah, shrugging his shoulders. "That and the fact that this place hasn't exploded yet means that they're probably friendly."

"I guess we should see what they want." Teferi took a sip of tea. The hints of lemon and honey tempered his anxiety, allowing him to address something he'd been dreading since they'd left Shiv. "Before we go, I wanted to ask a favor."

"This sounds ominous."

"Once Saheeli's time machine is ready, I'll be indisposed," Teferi explained. "I'll need—all of us will need—someone to lead and make the right decisions." He placed a hand on Jodah's shoulder. "I'd like you to consider being that person."

"Consider?" Jodah asked with a grin. "You're not just going to order me to do it?"

Teferi shook his head. "I've learned that it's better to ask."

"Only took you sixty years." Jodah placed his hand on Teferi's. "I'll try not to burn the place down."

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"Where is Ajani?"

The expression on Elspeth Tirel's face when Teferi answered was one he'd seen before. It was at Tolarian Academy, on a visit to Barrin, his old headmaster—not so much a visit as an act of contrition. Teferi remembered the venerable mage standing up from his desk, his face sunken, jaw quivering, the tempest inside stayed only by propriety. The name dividing them was *Rayne*—Barrin's dead wife, killed in a war Teferi spearheaded, a war he bore responsibility for.

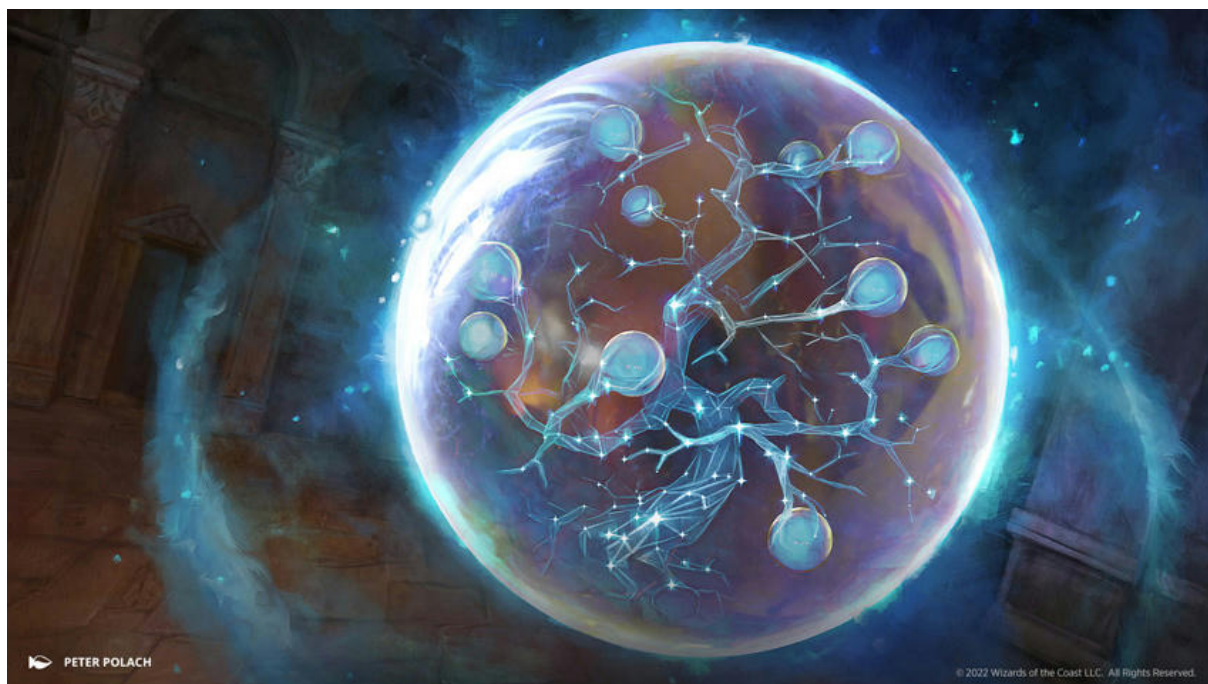
The name was different this day—Ajani's instead of Rayne's. But that exact same look that Barrin had worn. It cut into Teferi like an old, rusty dagger in Elspeth's calloused grip.

"I'm sorry," Teferi repeated, but the words felt hollow. "I wish things were different—"

Before he could say anything more, Elspeth raised her hand to stop him. She crossed her arms and stepped into the far corner of the room, her back toward everyone else. Teferi began to follow, but Jodah seized his arm, keeping him in place.

"Let her be," he said, then to Kaya: "Go ahead."

Everyone who had gathered in Kaya's makeshift war room, save Elspeth, huddled around a glowing sphere of ghostly light that hovered over a pool in the room's center. At the head of the crowd was the other freshly arrived Planeswalker, Vivien Reid, who Teferi had met on Ravnica during their struggle against Nicol Bolas.



Art by: Peter Polach

“The New Coalition continues to marshal defenses against further attacks on Dominaria,” Kaya explained. “But the Phyrexians are relentless, as we found out on Shiv.”

Teferi could barely pay attention. His eye strayed again and again to Elspeth alone in the corner. Karn had told him tales of her courage in saving him from the Phyrexians. And then there was Ajani pulling him aside to excitedly tell him how he’d found Elspeth alive, despite her seeming demise on Theros. *The champion we need*, Ajani had said. *One that we can trust.*

Was Ajani still himself then? Could Elspeth be trusted?

“Kaldheim and Ixalan are mobilized,” Kaya said, walking around the sphere to highlight key points and locations in the Gatewatch’s plan. “Jace is on Ravnica lobbying for support from the guilds, while Chandra has gone to Zendikar to contact Nissa. When we’ve finished our tasks here, Saheeli intends to spearhead the defense of Kaladesh.” Kaya stopped at one last point on the sphere. “Then we have the Mirran camp on New Phyrexia itself, led by Koth.”

Elspeth turned, her eyes lit. “Koth is alive. How did you find this out?”

“Jace,” Kaya said. “I don’t know his source, but he told me that Koth and the Mirrans are planning an assault on the Phyrexian core. We plan on joining them once we’re ready. Then together, we’ll eliminate the Phyrexian leadership and mop up what’s left. Without a head, the body will fail.”

“That’s a death sentence,” Elspeth said. “Koth knows that better than anyone.”

Teferi began to explain. “If you’ll just listen to our plan—”

“No. You listen to me. Koth and I once tried to do exactly what you’re proposing, and it ended in failure.” Her eyes darted from person to person before finally settling on Teferi. That look. “None of you were there.” With that, she stormed out of the room.

The quiet afterward was unsettling. Teferi knew that no matter what strategy they used, the odds would not favor any outside force trying to penetrate New Phyrexia’s defenses. Everyone else in the room

understood that, too. But hearing it said out loud in as direct a fashion as Elspeth had done crystallized how dire the stakes really were.

"Let me talk to her," Jodah said, a hand on Teferi's back. "The responsibilities of leadership, eh?" He walked out the door to track Elspeth down.

Vivien extended her hand to Teferi, greeting him with the grip of a seasoned hunter. "Good to see you again Teferi, though under circumstances just as unfortunate as last time."

"You and Elspeth are welcome to stay and rest if you need it."

Vivien shook her head. "I'm going to Ravnica to make sure Jace is apprised of the situation. Then I'll head to Ikorra. I'm worried about being able to organize a meaningful defense there. All the settlements do is squabble, so I'm going to make sure they stay in line."

"And Elspeth?"

"With this news of Ajani," said Vivien, "I think it would do her good to be among friends."

"If she considers us friends."

"She's been through much. Give her time."

*Time.* A luxury Teferi knew they had precious little of.

"As for the task at hand, that's why we're here," she said. "I have intelligence from a Phyrexian insider—Urabrask, the praetor of the Quiet Furnace. Kaya's information seems to align with what we've been told, but it is incomplete."

Teferi felt the frown lines on his face deepen. The Phyrexians he'd been familiar with were militaristic fanatics who did not tolerate dissent. The notion of these New Phyrexians having factions among them seemed anathema to their very nature.

"What did Urabrask say?"

"That Elesh Norn, a rival praetor, has nearly unified New Phyrexia under her banner," said Vivien. "Urabrask and his forces stand opposed to Norn's aspirations. He's planning his own revolution and is communicating with the Mirrans."

"Whatever the case, we'll be on the ground there soon," Teferi insisted.

"Not soon enough," said Vivien. "Urabrask didn't give specifics, but he was concerned about some way that Elesh Norn may have to force her 'one singularity' throughout New Phyrexia and, more importantly, the Multiverse. She plans to expand her dominion all at once."

"Gods and monsters," Kaya whispered.

"What is it?" asked Teferi.

"The creature I told you about—the one I was hired to kill," she said as she began pacing the room. "I'd never encountered anything like it—a beast of stitched flesh over metal. After you and I talked, we both agreed it was a Phyrexian. But I couldn't figure out why, of all places, it was on Kaldheim. With Vivien's information " Kaya activated the expression pool, shaping it with the force of her mind. The result was a three-dimensional rendering of a many-limbed tree, crowned at the top like the great magnigoths populating the woodlands of Yavimaya, only constantly undulating as if made from the effluvia of the Multiverse itself. "This is the World Tree of Kaldheim. It's like a network that allows instantaneous travel between all the realms of the plane. What if "

Kaya didn't have to finish. If the Phyrexians had somehow replicated or repurposed Kaldheim's World Tree, it could conceivably join every plane in the Multiverse. With it in place, the Phyrexians could be anywhere, at any time, at the speed of thought. They didn't just have to worry about secret infiltrations like on Dominaria; the Phyrexians could march their armies in directly.

"By now, whatever Urabrask has planned is only days away from happening. If we're going to make a move, it must happen very soon."

"Days?" said Teferi. He didn't think he had such a small window to work with.

"I don't like it," said Kaya. "The timing of this proposed alliance is too perfect."

At a gut level, Teferi agreed. He'd played this game before and learned that the enemy of my enemy could be the *worse* enemy by far. All it took to fall into the trap was a tasty scrap, an irresistible temptation. The truth was the choicest morsel of all to snatch a victim.

"I have my suspicions as well," Vivien said. "But I don't believe we have many alternatives other than taking Urabrask at his word. I'll vouch for him and for the intermediary who arranged for my audience with him."

"And who is that?" asked Teferi.

"Tezzeret."

"No," Kaya declared. "No way. You know what he did on Ravnica! And he still has access to the Planar Bridge!" She turned to Teferi. "If we trust Tezzeret, we could fall straight into the Phyrexians' trap. Again."

Once more, Kaya spoke the truth. And yet, how foolish would it be to cast aside a possible advantage over their opponents? A revolution from within could split the battlefield and nullify the upper hand the Phyrexians had on their home plane.

"See what you can learn through your contacts," Teferi said to Kaya. "Right now, we have to concentrate on what we're doing here."

Kaya stood down. "Fine. I'll shake the money tree on Ravnica. We'll see what gets knocked loose."

"I wish you both luck," said Vivien, turning to leave. "For all our sakes."

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If any part of Urza's Tower still bore the marks of its creator, it was the eastern wing. At the height of the Brothers' War, witnessing the machine arms assemble one of Urza's constructs would have seemed like a miracle to the Korlisians or Argivians who'd only waged war with pike, sword, and blood.

Now those machine arms lay in heaps on the floor, joining the spare parts and scrap Urza left behind when he abandoned his tower for Argoth. And amid this heap sat Saheeli Rai cross legged on the floor. Saheeli had been one of Teferi's first recruits. Like Vivien and Kaya, he'd first met her on Ravnica, but she was a far cry from their forbidding dispositions. Saheeli instead embraced the visceral joy in seeking the art in artifice, as exemplified by the beautiful spun-gold peafowl that hopped up high and glided back down to the floor.

"Hello!" greeted Saheeli, enjoying a small cup of tea to go along with more of those biscuits Jodah had served to him earlier. She slid over and patted the floor next to her. "Care to join me?"

"No thank you," he said. "I wanted to quickly check in. How are things going?"

"They are going."

Teferi looked around at the circle of workbenches Saheeli had pulled up upon the main assembly platform, her own private little workspace in the middle of the wreck that used to be Urza's grand showroom. Atop one of those tables was an item that caught his eye—an exquisite piece of art, a bowl made of copper pulled, twisted, and shaped like no human hands ever could. But it was so much more than that.

"You did it," Teferi said as he approached the bowl. "It's perfect."

"I wouldn't use that word," said Saheeli.

But Teferi wanted to. Saheeli had crafted a perfect replica of the sylex: a blend of the signature elements of the original relic with subtle nods to Saheeli's characteristic filigree stylings. Her version featured the same heavy handles on both sides, the same shallow bas-relief depictions of farmers armed with scythes facing down a troop of armored knights. Identical runes—a master translation between several ancient languages—spiraled downward from the inner edges of the bowl to the very bottom.

"It's one thing to create something you've seen and held before," she said. "It's another to do so from notes that may not be complete."

"I trust you did your best."

"I hope my best is good enough."

"How is the new time machine?" he said, moving onto the other major goal he'd assigned to her.

"Temporal Anchor," Saheeli reminded him. "Things are progressing, as you can see." She motioned to the other side of the platform, where her machine sat. Teferi still remembered Urza's time machine—an eyesore of glass cylinders and snaking tubes that took up half a classroom in Tolarian Academy. Saheeli's, in contrast, was a sculpture of swooping curves made of fiery orange metal. It, like the sylex, would have fit into any gallery of fine art.

"You're too modest. It's far less painful-looking than your initial version."

"I'll accept that compliment," Saheeli said with a laugh. "Still, there have been a few snags. Aether is a much easier energy source to manipulate; even the most powerful aether engine is like a candle flame to a supernova when it comes to this."

She placed her hand on the pedestal where the *Weatherlight*'s powerstone sat enmeshed in a nest of copper coils. Teferi grimaced. The mere memory of seeing the mighty airship, a symbol of strength for all Dominaria, twisted into a Phyrexian abomination soured his stomach.

"Managing the power load while trying to ensure the safety of the occupant is difficult," Saheeli said. "These components were never meant to work together." The mildest of accusations hung in the air between them. Teferi knew he'd saddled Saheeli with a nigh-impossible task and very little margin for error. "I think I've figured it out, but I need to run more tests."

He measured his words. "It's not my intention to push too hard, but—"

"I know," said Saheeli. "Here." Placing her hand onto the floor, Saheeli allowed the wind-up bird to alight onto her finger. "I made it for you."

"For me?"

With a smile, she flicked her hand, and the peafowl hopped onto Teferi's foot and pecked at his boot. "In Ghirapur, birds like this perch on the bridges that cross Canal Dukhara. Those bridges represent the founding of the city, when warring nobles decided it would be better to cooperate and create a future not dominated by war. For us, this little bird represents our cooperation, our unity in purpose."

Teferi bent down and let the bird hop onto his palm. He stood up, holding the bird close to his face. Its movements captured the herky-jerky nature of a flesh and blood bird, so much so that a casual observer might have mistaken it for its organic counterpart. But on closer inspection, one could discern between its golden feathers a clockwork heart that pulsed with the unmistakable glow of a tiny powerstone—one of dozens scavenged from the fallen Mana Rig. The bird hopped once to face him straight on, then unfurled its feathers in an arc of such delicate craftsmanship that Urza couldn't have matched in a thousand millennia, let alone a handful of days. Teferi chuckled.

"You like it?" Saheeli asked.

"Very much," he said. "My mentor was a great artificer, perhaps the best this plane has ever had. And the notion of prizing style over function would send him into fits. 'Bah! A waste of resources!' he'd say."

"Chance has granted us gifts," said Saheeli. "How we use our gifts will ultimately define us. I choose beauty. That is how I would like to be known." She whistled, and in response, the artifact bird spread its wings and spun in place, spraying a shower of multicolored sparks in every direction. Teferi couldn't help but smile. After a minute, the bird was back to its normal self, pecking at invisible crumbs he didn't have in his hand. "The Anchor will be ready to use tonight. Come back then."

Teferi rested against one of the few trees that still grew within the tower's narrow greenbelt ring. Before he lost his spark to the time rifts, he couldn't conceive of his body ever experiencing the aches and pains of age. *That's for others*, he'd thought. *Not me. Not ever.* It turned out that it was exactly for him, exactly what he'd needed, even with his spark restored. He found ironic amusement in it: the plane's foremost temporal mage succumbing to the ravages of time, welcoming them, even.

The sun had crested hours before, not that the high peaks surrounding the vale allowed for much direct sunlight outside a short window of time in the middle of the day. He thought of all the lands past the horizon. Shiv, where Jhoira was rallying dragons, viashino, goblins, and her own Ghitu to protect their land from Phyrexian attack. Orvada, where the merchant-lords had agreed to put aside their bristly relationship with Benalia and furnish food and supplies to Serran troops led by Lyra Dawnbringer. Urborg, where rumors had arisen of a spectral panther warrior back from the dead to bring salvation to the living. Outside this vale, Dominaria was uniting like it never had. But would any of that matter if he and his companions failed in their mission?

From behind him, Teferi heard heavy footsteps approach, accompanied by the brush of leaves against the wind, the creak of bark and xylem bending under stress. He looked up to see Wrenn and Seven approaching. It had taken Teferi some time to track Wrenn down, locating her finally on the plane of Cridhe, where she and Seven were basking in the intense mana showers of the plane's Clan Tree. It had taken him even more time to convince her to leave with him.

"I have fulfilled your request," said Wrenn. "They will grow strong, though your choice of land is questionable. There are no songs here, no harmony. Only isolated chords, warped and fragmented. Or worse—severed like gangrenous limbs."

"I promised you more. I'm sorry."

"Do not be. We are glad you have brought us here. I have been loath to explain to Seven about malevolence, about destruction. Better to show. Better to feel." Seven stooped to let Wrenn reach out and touch his hand. "Your own song is discordant this day, a vexing melody."

Teferi nodded. "I've been thinking."

"That is not reassuring, mage."



This amused Teferi, albeit fleetingly. “I was thinking about you, Kaya, and Saheeli—all of you who answered my call for help.” He set Saheeli’s clockwork peafowl onto the stone ground in front of him. It pecked about nonchalantly. “I can’t help but think that this path has been trod before by Urza, my teacher. He, too, assembled heroes—Planeswalkers and mortals—to battle Phyrexia. Even so, history remembers him as the monster this plane needed to defeat the monsters who threatened it.”

“Was he a monster?” Wrenn asked.

Teferi pondered that question. Most on Dominaria would have said *yes*—those who’d actually known Urza emphatically so. But for Teferi, the answer wasn’t so pat. “On Innistrad, I told you about Zhalfir. Remember?”

“Your homeland. The one you hoped I could help you find.”

“I didn’t tell you exactly how I lost it,” he said. “You see, Urza petitioned me to be one of his titans. Yes, me. I had the great Urza Planeswalker begging me to join his merry band of heroes, and of course, I told him I would if he helped me first.”

“A reasonable agreement.”

“That’s what he thought, too.” Teferi clasped his hands together and rested his forehead on his fingers. “So, with his aid, I sealed shut a Phyrexian portal that had opened up in the skies above Zhalfir. When the task was done, and he demanded my help in return, I simply laughed and refused. ‘You’ve only wanted to defeat your foes,’ I told him. ‘This is how I save my people. This is how you and I differ.’ Then I siphoned energy from the closed portal to fuel a spell spiriting Zhalfir away from space and time itself. I didn’t ask permission. I didn’t care what the people of Zhalfir thought. So, you tell me—who is the monster?”

“Your tangle may prove too snarled. Even for me.”

Teferi let out a dry laugh. “I was so damn proud of how easily I’d stolen his petty victory over me for my own petty victory. That’s the way we all are—all of Urza’s children of fury.”

“Children?”

“We who are touched by his actions,” Teferi explained. “His students, his colleagues even his enemies. We despise him, yet we follow in his footsteps like luckless understudies. I’ve smashed armies, sparing no mercy. I’ve vanquished those I deemed villains and maneuvered allies to their demise for my own ends. *For the greater good*, I told myself.” Teferi picked up a small rock and hurled it into the mist. “A liar who lies about his lies, the true heir to Urza’s mantle.”

Teferi waited for Wrenn’s response. The dryad sat in quiet contemplation of his confession. He had never told anyone the extent of his missteps, at least not this directly. The reasonable reaction would have been for Wrenn to planeswalk away.

Instead, Wrenn turned to him, waves of heat emanating from the fire contained within her chest, and said, “I am not here to provide you absolution, mage. Your crimes are your own, and you will answer for them in time. Ultimately, you are not important. Neither am I. Teferi and Wrenn are singular melodies. I am here to play my part in the symphony.”

The sounds of more footsteps, this time the harsh tapping of metal-shod boots, caused Teferi and Wrenn to break off their conversation. Elspeth was walking resolutely toward them clad in a full suit of armor. Teferi stood to receive her.

“If you seek punishment,” said Wrenn, “I am sure there are others happy to mete it out. For now, I shall depart.” Seven reared up and stomped away, taking Wrenn with them.

Teferi raised his hand to address Elspeth, but like before, she stopped him as he started to speak.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said. Her hand rested on the hilt of the sword that hung on her belt. "Thank you for letting me rest under your roof."

"It's not my roof," said Teferi. "But you're welcome all the same."

"Also I owe you an apology. Vivien thinks highly of you, and out of respect for her, I should not have spoken to you like I did." Satisfied, she spun on her heel like a trained soldier and began to walk back to the tower.

"Wait," Teferi called out. "I didn't know about Ajani."

Elspeth stopped and turned back around.

"None of us did," he continued. "I was there with him when it happened—when the compleation took hold. It almost seemed like he didn't know, either."

"This is no comfort," said Elspeth.

Teferi took his time with a response. It was a simple matter to say the truth was the truth. Isn't that what a great leader, a battle-hardened general would say? Isn't that what everyone needed him to be? Who was the true Teferi? Was it Teferi, mage of Zhalfir, who pledged to defend his home no matter the cost? Was it Teferi, master of time, the elitist, nigh-omnipotent planeswalker who thought everyone should simply get in line and follow? Or was it Teferi the disruptive student, who used cruel humor to obscure his own fears that no one would ever understand him, that no one would ever consider him a friend?

*Get out of your head . Look with your eyes.*

"Are you hungry?" Teferi asked.

"Hungry?" asked Elspeth, puzzled.

"Yes, have you eaten?" Teferi walked past and motioned for her to follow. "I've just realized that I haven't had so much as a crumb since this morning."

"Jodah provided me with some of his biscuits."

"Oh, then we should hurry."

With the cold, wet night air flowing through his robes, Teferi led Elspeth across the greenbelt to the tower proper, where they followed the wall around to a small patch of grass butted up against the tower's base. There, encircled by a globe of green energy, was a sprawl of vines bearing bulbous, pale green fruits. Teferi picked one and held it out to Elspeth.

"Mitab," Teferi said. He took another fruit and bit down into it, letting its juices flow out the sides of his mouth. He was aware he looked silly, not at all how a regal Planeswalker of old was supposed to comport himself. "Wrenn and I made a short stop in Jamuraa, my homeland, before coming back here."

Elspeth took the fruit and brought it to her lips. She tried to maintain decorum as she ate, but juice and fleshy bits of fruit stuck to her face no matter how careful she was. At some point, she gave up and began to eat faster, with more aplomb.

"I was hungrier than I thought," she said.

Teferi stared at the spell that Wrenn had woven to keep his mitab alive despite the vale's inhospitable climate. He reached down and hovered his hand within it, his fingers tingling as they grew warm. "I won't lie to you," he began. "You're right about our plan—it's yelling a prayer into a gale. But it's

our best shot. We have a weapon capable of stopping the Phyrexians at the source. Right now, we're working on a way for me to learn how to use it. It's not perfect, but I must have faith that it's enough. For me, the fight against the Phyrexians isn't about being victorious."

Where was he headed with this? He'd always been so prepared. Even his practical jokes required extensive planning to pull off. But now, the words flowed out of him, first at a trickle, and then a torrent that he couldn't control. "I have a daughter," he said. "Her name is Niambi, and she Everything I'm doing is about saving *her*. It's about her knowing that I did everything I could to save others while always remaining the person she knew, the father she loves. If I waver—if I have any doubt at all—I doom Niambi this very second."

"Then you do know," said Elspeth. "The terror that comes with hope."

No response was necessary. The remains of the mitab sat in his hands, the flesh eaten away leaving only the core and seeds. His fingers, covered in juice, glistened in the starlight. He placed the remains of the fruit onto the dirt underneath the vines and wiped his hands on his robes. In time, the heat of Wrenn's spell would bake the core dry, and worms would pull it under to nourish new plants.

"I should go," said Teferi. "Saheeli is waiting. I can escort you back to your room."

Elspeth refused. "I think I'll walk the grounds for a while. I like this weather."

"Then live on, Elspeth. Be well and happy. Safe journeys."

"If the Phyrexians are still on this plane," said Elspeth, "it's only a matter of time before they find this place. You will need someone to defend you if that happens—if they track us down."

"Us?"

"If you'll have me."

"We will. Gladly," said Teferi. "I hope we can get to know each other better."

Teferi turned and walked back toward the front of the tower. He managed only a few steps before a bright flash caused him to look over his shoulder. There, Elspeth stood with her sword unsheathed. Out of the globe-shaped pommel, tendrils of milky light spiraled outward, its radiance soft and warm like his earliest days spent under the Zhalfirin sun.

The pains of his wounds dulled, and his mind cleared, bringing forth a long-neglected memory: a flock of wattle-eyes that would pay regular visits to his home in Jamuraa. According to his father, they were the descendants of an injured bird he'd saved in his youth, a bird that lived under his family's roof as a full member until its wanderlust obliged it to leave. In the years, then decades, that followed, the bird had its own children that would regularly visit out of loyalty. Out of love. That's why the trees on his family's land always sang.

Eventually, Teferi became a wizard of repute, then a Planeswalker whose legend spread to other nations, other continents, other worlds. Still, in between waging bitter battles and accomplishing incredible magical feats, he'd recall the story of the birds and find comfort in hearing the low, soothing bass of his father's voice in his mind.

*They do what they do out of love.*

The tale itself he'd dismiss as his father's whimsy and nothing more—an extravagance perfect for children who needed a story to hold onto.

But not this time. This time, Teferi chose to believe.