

Episode 5: A Whisper in the Wind

Langley Hyde

From set *Dominaria United*

18. 08. 2022

Teferi slammed a Phyrexian monstrosity onto Karn's worktop and pinned it with a knife. The creature squealed, spurting black glistening oil from its octopoidal body, writhing in anger. Karn observed its thrashing with dispassion.

"It's the second saboteur I've found." Teferi managed the troops, acting as both a general and a quartermaster—no easy task in the new Coalition, where so many species acted in concert as allies.

"What damage did it do?" Karn asked.

"It was in the food stores," Teferi said. "Jhoira is checking them for corruption, but until they're cleared, dinner is off. You can imagine how our troops feel about that."

Karn only understood organic beings' relationship to food in abstract terms, but he'd witnessed how missing even a single meal could cause Jhoira to become irritable, even when starvation had not been at issue. Imagining that on a grander scale

"Is this interrupting Jhoira's progress?" Had the creature found the food stores accidentally? Or had the spy given their location to Sheoldred? Karn had been unable to determine the spy's identity; Jaya, Jodah, and Ajani had yet to arrive, and he expected that they would be able to help once they did. Jhoira had occupied herself with setting up the self-destruct mechanism on the Mana Rig's helm, a priority now that Sheoldred's troops had begun to mass. They would not permit Sheoldred to obtain and convert the Mana Rig. If she did, she would be able to create powerstones and apply Thran steel, which was nearly indestructible, to her monstrous creations.

Teferi shook his head. "It's installed, and she's currently linking the cannons into the Mana Rig's power supply."

Pinned and writhing as the monstrosity was, Karn did not know what information it could transmit to Sheoldred. He placed one hand on it, removed the blade, and tossed the creature into a crucible. It writhed, hissing as its blood boiled, its oil conflagrated, its flesh cooked, and its metal melted.

"Your work on the sylex?" Teferi looked worried. He shifted his shoulders beneath his breastplate. A buckle had come loose, but due to his still-healing injuries, he could not reach around to adjust it.

Finished. Karn had determined how to activate it. But he hesitated to say so aloud. What if it was not a spy that Karn needed to seek but a spying device, hidden somewhere aboard the Mana Rig? He stepped forward and tightened Teferi's breastplate, glad he had no need of such accoutrements. Organic beings' torsos being gigantic buckets for their organs was an obvious design flaw. "Please be still. I cannot risk harm coming to you due to badly fitting armor."

“It was too easy, to think of you as a thing, while watching you being built.” Teferi bowed his head. “For what it’s worth, Karn, I apologize for how I treated you in the past.”

“I accept your apology.”

A klaxon blared above decks, summoning the troops to fight.

Teferi broke out into a jog, and Karn followed him onto the upper deck. Since Jhoira’s workshop was located at the prow, from here Karn could see the entire Mana Rig. The lower decks looked like a split globe; the two hemispheres joined with an assembly that supported the Mana Rig’s legs. Although Karn could not see them from his vantage, he knew they clamped down onto the red desert rocks, fixing the Mana Rig to the cliffside; similarly, the distant stern hemisphere was connected to the mountains of Shiv by a jury-rigged bridge. City buildings rose from both decks. Above him, the upper decks climbed toward the helm, located in an outcropping that overlooked the front hemisphere. Goblins and viashino disassembled food stalls wedged between the buildings and rolled out siege machinery to replace them: mana cannons hung over the sides, pointed at the desert below.

The desert seethed. The Phyrexians beneath the Mana Rig were so numerous they resembled an iridescent pool in the bright Shivan light. Its surface heaved like a sea about to be breached by a whale, rippled, and then broke as an immense monstrosity arose from its depths.

This was not another sortie.

Teferi roared, “Status of the cannons?”

“Not ready!” one woman shouted.

The first wave of Phyrexians scaled the Mana Rig’s sides. Coalition fighters shoved back their ladders, chopped off grappling hooks, and jabbed spears into the twisted beasts.

A Phyrexian dreadnought lifted itself from the horde, whale-like in its immensity—only no whale Karn had ever seen possessed a centipede’s legs or mandibles. Stones plinked from its glistening black body and small fibers writhed out from its armor plates as if tasting the air. It lumbered toward the Mana Rig, its mandibles clacking.

“Nine Hells,” Teferi muttered. “Aim for the dreadnought—for its thorax! Hold until you’re ready to activate the cannons.”

Jhoira emerged from the lower decks, two human technologists at her heels. She rushed to the cannons and knelt, checking the final connections. Her assistants seated themselves behind the cannons, wheeling them to face the dreadnought. The cannons accumulated power, their snouts wreathed in burning blue energy.

Jhoira waved. “Fire!”



Art by: Sidharth Chaturvedi

The cannons released a crackling blast that slammed into the Phyrexian's thorax, charring the metal and rocking it back into its own army. Blue energy burned between its armor plates. Jhoira waved again, and the cannons blasted the dreadnought a second time, ripping through its weakened armor. It collapsed onto its own troops, crushing them.

"Well," Jhoira said, "those are working."

A shadow passed along the Mana Rig's decks. The *Weatherlight* soared above, and for a moment, Karn felt relief—until he saw it loose a salvo at a cluster of viashino, sending them scattering.

"Oh no," he muttered. Now, looking closer, he could see that the coils and tendrils that had previously served as camouflage were no longer dead and inert. Even its cockpit was crusted over, blood and gore dried into a leathery coating over what had once been shining glass. The Phyrexians had completed the *Weatherlight*.



Art by: Adam Paquette

The ship swooped low, dropping twisted horrors from its decks—some small as cats, others lumbering and bear-like in their bulk, interspersed with the compleated humans. Sheoldred must be hoping to overwhelm them, Karn thought, before Jhoira finished installing the self-destruct mechanism on the Mana Rig. If these Phyrexians attacked Teferi and the viashino from the back, the cannons would be left undefended.

Karn moved to meet them. A humanoid Phyrexian leaped from the *Weatherlight* 's deck onto the Mana Rig, silhouette strange yet familiar. He walked toward Karn, his doubled-up arms raised. His pale hair, laden with metal spikes, was slicked back, and his eyes dripped black oil down his cheeks. He stretched his mouth into a grin directed at Karn. "It's been quite some time, old friend."

It couldn't be—yet it was. Ertai.

Karn had thought him dead. Whatever techniques the Phyrexians had used to revivify him after all these centuries had left what made him *him* intact: how he set his shoulders, how he narrowed his eyes at Karn, how he flexed his hands; these mannerisms remained the same.

High above, dark specks in the blue resolved themselves into dragons, diving for the compleated *Weatherlight* . The airship pivoted and gained altitude to engage the dragons, narrowly avoiding a gout of flame. Darigaaz threw himself at the *Weatherlight* 's hull, clinging to the airship so that it wallowed in the sky. He used his back claws to rake the *Weatherlight* 's draping intestinal cables like a cat gutting a rabbit.

Karn faced Ertai.

Ertai opened his doubled arms in mock welcome. "It's been so long since the *Weatherlight* left me for dead. You all could have come back for me. But you did not. And now look at who captains it—a neat twist of fate."

"Not fate," said Karn, simply. "Her design."

"She may think you're special, Karn," Ertai said, "but I know the truth. Anything that has been built can be disassembled."

Ertai smiled and drew doubled arcs with his four hands, inscribing the dust-choked air with glowing magic. Karn advanced on him, and Ertai, with a flick of his wrists, shot the spell forward faster than throwing knives. The glimmering light struck Karn. He expected it to bounce from his body, repelled by the careful wards Karn had enchanted himself with, but it felt as though he had rusted solid, his joints rendered suddenly nonfunctional.

"I've had time to think about this during my revival," Ertai said. "Time to plan, to redesign myself so that I could fight you."

"What—have—you—done?" Karn grated out.

Ertai lifted his doubled arms, drawing Karn into the air as if Karn weighed no more than a piece of dandelion fluff. That grasp tightened, squeezing. If Karn had been a being with lungs, he would have passed out. He clenched his jaw against it, but that gave him no relief from the agony that pulsed through him, emanating from his plating. His metal body made a crumpling sound, denting beneath the pressure. Ertai opened his hands, slowly—finger by finger, unfurling his fists, but he did not release Karn.

"You'll be unrecognizable," Ertai said. "Beautiful, and new."

Frost bloomed over Karn's body, a white sheen that coated his metal. He cooled. He could feel the metal contracting, stressed by the temperature difference between the Shivan desert heat and the magical ice. Ertai twisted his hands, a wringing gesture, then drew them apart. The tension changed from compression to a stretching as Ertai drew Karn's limbs away from his body. He was pulling Karn apart, limb by limb, like a cruel child torturing an insect. Karn's joints torqued under the pressure. Metal gave way in Karn's shoulders and his knees, the joints bent and mangled.

What would it be like to die?

Karn had never contemplated it—not as a realistic option for him. Death was something that happened to other people, a tragedy that he inevitably survived, and thought that he would always survive again. He had no way to fight this, no way to stop Ertai that he could think of—and the Mana Rig was being overrun.

He would not like to die.

Ertai grinned. The pressure intensified.

If he was to die, he would first protect the sylex. Karn reached into the Blind Eternities, into the hum he associated with its magic, and drew forth particles of the hardest material he could generate. He visualized the distant sylex, in Jhoira's workshop. He'd never generated material at such a distance from his body. But he forced it, hoping he'd get it right. He spun the densest carbon filaments he could from the aether and encased the sylex in its lockbox in titanium. He wove those filaments around the lockbox into an impenetrable mass. From this distance, it took tremendous will. He focused hard on the act of creation rather than the sense of torsion in his body.

A roar—like an excavator breaking stone.

The *Golden Argosy* swept through the Shiv's red mountains, stone churning in its wake, and drew abreast of the Mana Rig.

Ajani leaped from the *Argosy*'s decks, dropping down behind Ertai. In one smooth motion, he drew his double-bladed axe from his back and swung at Ertai. The Phyrexian mage stumbled backwards, concentration broken—and with a scream, tumbled over the side of the Mana Rig.

The magic gripping Karn eased, and he dropped to his feet. His knees gave way, and he fell. He was too damaged to stand.

Ajani, his teeth bared, swung his axe down in a low salute. “I have returned to fight at your side, my friend.”

Karn, creaky from the intense pressures, inclined his head. He was glad he could do that much: he was no longer in fighting condition. “And I am glad for it. We must defend Jhoira’s workshop.”

“Her workshop?” Ajani asked. “What of the helm?”

“Jhoira can hold it.” Karn nodded at the helm, where it overlooked the decks, high above and a good distance from the fight. “The sylex. The sylex is in her workshop.”

With a savage growl in reply, Ajani turned and laid into the Phyrexians.

Grappling hooks launched from the *Golden Argosy* as it drew in close to the Mana Rig. The Phyrexians still climbing the sides were crushed as the *Golden Argosy* ground into position alongside the Mana Rig’s stern section. The crew from the *Argosy* threw planks across to bridge the gap, and Jaya led the charge, followed by Danitha Capashen in her house’s colors and Radha with her people’s battle cry on her lips. Keldon warriors and Benalish knights poured from the *Argosy* onto the Mana Rig’s decks. They laid into the Phyrexians with their massive blades, cleaving the creatures into spare parts.



Art by: Zoltan Boros

Jaya raised a curtain of flame and drew it along the decks, herding the Phyrexians toward the *Argosy* and her troops. “Karn! How do you like your interplanar nightmares cooked?”

“I do not require nutritional sustenance,” Karn said.

She rolled her eyes and drew up arcs of fire. “I’m unappreciated in my time.” The scarlet blaze whirled around her like blades, cutting into Phyrexian monstrosities. She lifted her hand, fingers clawed with effort, and electricity began to coalesce around her. With a great boom, a bolt of lightning coursed through the enemy ranks. Apparently, Karn was staring; when she next turned to him, she grinned. “What? I learned some new tricks.”

Behind them, over the edge of the Mana Rig, a vast and burnished viridian shape rose from the desert sands far below. That visage, those branching horns—Karn knew them too well. Sheoldred, affixed now

to some nightmarish construct from the ancient wars of Dominaria. It brought her small human torso level with the Mana Rig.

“Karn.” When Sheoldred spoke, her entire body resonated and her voice filled the battlefield, melodious, with strange harmonics. “You have the sylex for me.”

Karn’s plan to use the sylex to draw Sheoldred out had worked.

“Jaya, go to the workshop and get the sylex,” Ajani said. “We must get it away.”

Jaya nodded. Covering her own retreat with flares of fire, she backed into the workshop. Ajani and Teferi both flanked the doorway.

Sheoldred moved forward, not so much striding with her many legs as swimming through her army, gathering monstrosities into her body and incorporating them into herself as she went. She approached the Mana Rig from the side. Cannon fire rained down against her iron shell but sheeted from her body. It did not damage her.

Was she going for the joint between the Mana Rig’s sections?

But Sheoldred opened the mandibles on her dragon engine body and slammed her chest into the Mana Rig’s bow section like a battering ram. The thud boomed through the Mana Rig. From the hull, metal grated on metal, the vibrations traveling through the entire rig. She extended her legs out into the Phyrexian army. Her writhing fibers withdrew into herself as her army swarmed up her body, using her legs as ladders and her dragon engine body as a ramp onto the Mana Rig’s upper deck.

Karn hunkered down in front of the workshop door. Why hadn’t Jaya planeswalked away with the sylex yet? Karn’s damaged fingers were too bent for him to make fists, so he crushed Phyrexians between his palms, cognizant of two Planeswalkers fighting behind him. He had to protect Ajani and Teferi as best as he could. He could not help but admire how Teferi fought: not only with a Planeswalker’s determination but a father’s. He was a man who’d decided to save his daughter’s plane, and his own. Yet even as Karn threw aside a monstrosity that looked like an assemblage of human, horse, and squid, he also remained aware of Ajani. He had to stay far enough forward to remain clear of Ajani’s arcing blows. Ajani could spin that double-headed axe and sweep it through metal and flesh alike so smoothly that it took the Phyrexians a moment to consider what, exactly, was wrong before they slid apart. From the Phyrexian army’s rear, reinforcements emerged—not, Karn thought, that they needed them: two more dreadnoughts. Immense metal plates covered their cables, pulsing organs, and flesh, bristling with spikes large enough to spear three people through. The dreadnoughts lumbered forward on their stumpy legs.

“Nine Hells “ Teferi breathed, behind Karn. He bellowed, “Ready the cannons!”

“I don’t know how we will emerge from this victorious,” Ajani said.

On the horizon, a shadow deepened—a line of sudden and towering green. It almost looked to Karn like the edge of a forest.

High above, Darigaaz led his dragons into a wheeled dive at the dreadnoughts. Darigaaz slammed his bulk into one of them and began to wrestle it apart, plate by plate. The *Weatherlight* pivoted in pursuit, its bat-like sails dexterous in Shiv’s winds, harrying the dragons with sickly green blasts of light.

The Mana Rig shuddered, then thrummed. Karn could feel the heartstone in his core hum in response, a call and answer, like the beginning of a duet. Jhoira must have completed her work, and she’d woken the Mana Rig. It stood: slow, inexorable.

Everyone on deck—even the Phyrexians—stopped fighting to regain their balance, swaying as the Mana Rig lifted itself to its feet. Karn could feel his body press harder into the decking, the airflow

squeaking through his damaged joints, clean and hot in comparison to the battle's filth. It hurt his dented metal plating. The remnants of the bridge connecting the Mana Rig to the desert tore away. Sheoldred's mandibles screeched down the Mana Rig's length, and Karn could feel the entire structure lurch as she lost her grip on its hull.

The Mana Rig was free.

Sheoldred tipped, her balance disrupted.

The Mana Rig strode forward along the rocky desert landscape, not graceful but efficient, well-balanced, crushing Phyrexians beneath it. It scooped up rock as it went and spewed molten lava across the seething Phyrexian army. Karn could not see the details, but he could see the results: withering masses, shrinking as they burned, soon submerged under thick waves of molten rock.

The Phyrexian army began to pull back—but the dark cloud Karn had spotted on the horizon had resolved itself into foliage and trees: rank upon rank of Magnigoths marched forward, darkening Shiv's deserts with their cool shadows and verdant foliage. The Mana Rig's lava drove the Phyrexians beneath the Magnigoths' branches. The Magnigoths tore into them—and Yavimayan elves, vibrant as bromeliads upon the Magnigoths' limbs, rained down arrows at the monstrosities beneath.

A flighted kavu glided onto the deck, and Jodah sprang from its back. An elf with pale skin and dapples across her cheeks tumbled off after him. Meria. Jodah had told him of her. "So many Planeswalkers," she said. "It's an honor to fight alongside you all. And the Mana Rig is even bigger than I imagined!"

All around the deck, more gliding kavu dropped down, Yavimayan elves upon their backs. The fighting reignited as the Yavimayan elves charged the Phyrexians, spearing them through and freeing up the beleaguered defenders. Jodah raised a searing white light, enveloping the cannons and their operators in protective shields to buy them the time they needed to work their weapons. Cannons blasted the larger Phyrexians, knocking them out before they could attempt to breach the Mana Rig's defenses. Meria fell in beside Radha and Danitha, coordinating her troops so that the Yavimayan archers formed up behind the Benalish and Keldon warriors. Waves of arrows arced over the Keldons and Benalish, studding the oncoming monstrosities.

"We're saved," Teferi murmured.

From the tone of his voice, he had not thought reprieve possible. Neither had Karn.

Jaya emerged from Jhoira's workshop, stepping out into the space between Teferi and Ajani. In her arms, she held the titanium lump Karn had generated around the sylex. Her teeth were gritted as she lugged it out. It had not occurred to Karn that an object of that size and weight might be difficult for a human to maneuver.

"I can't bring it through the Blind Eternities alone," Jaya admitted. "It's too heavy for me to planeswalk with."

Karn nodded. He passed his bent hands over the case, stripping off its protective metal coating. Then he waved again, and the lockless chest opened. The sylex gleamed in its box. It alone would be light enough for Jaya to carry.

"Finally." Ajani's voice sounded distorted, not with bloodlust's growl, but mechanical.

Karn turned toward his friend.

Ajani bared his teeth in an agonized grimace. He flattened his ears and clenched his good eye shut. His skin undulated, as if worms crawled beneath his fur's surface.

Jaya made a noise of disbelief. Teferi stepped forward. No—Ajani couldn't be—

Ajani's good eye widened with horror. He shook his head in denial and mouthed *no, no, no* gripping his own arms as if he could restrain the Phyrexian fibers beneath his skin and prevent them from emerging. But they engorged, ripping open muscle and fur, to reveal a sleek, dense Phyrexian musculature that had been installed beneath his own.



Art by: Victor Adame Minguez

Ajani had been compleated. *He* was the spy, the traitor. He'd betrayed them to Sheoldred.

Jaya clutched the sylex protectively to her chest. Still stunned, she took one step back, retreating toward the workshop. Fire flared around her, encircling her. This motion seemed to trigger Ajani. He swept up his axe and drove into her body. Jaya's back arched, and her mouth gaped in pain. She fell.

Teferi raised his hands, his magic slowing Ajani's attack. Karn rushed the leonin, placing himself in front of Jaya, hoping that someone, anyone, could place a healing spell on her prone body. Ajani swung the axe into Karn's torso. Karn expected the blade to skid from his metal body, but it cut into him deeply, like he was no more than meat. Pain radiated up from the wound. Karn gripped the axe's handle and tried to wrestle it free, but the blade had embedded into him. Ajani effortlessly passed him by, Teferi too drained to slow him any longer.

"Sheoldred calculated your strength well." The mechanical voice emanating from Ajani's throat sounded nothing like his usual growl. "The sylex and Karn: two of the artifacts the Whispering One wished to obtain on Dominaria."

"You'd—have—to—kill me," Jaya gasped, "before I'd let you—"

"Yes," Ajani said, simply, hoisting her into the air with one hand. "You are dying."

Jaya coughed. "Maybe. But not alone." Fire poured outward from Jaya's body, a white and scarlet conflagration; Ajani snarled and leaned back, his fur burning away to reveal blackened wires and cables below the skin, the air filling with the reek of charred oil. With a thrust of his ruined hand, he hurled Jaya over the edge of the Mana Rig.



Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

Teferi gasped. Jodah raised a frail cry.

Karn tried to remove Ajani's axe from his body, but his damaged joints bent under the pressure and the blade did not budge. The sylex was so close—right in front of him, where Jaya had dropped it. He'd avenge her, he'd—but Ajani had been right: Sheoldred had calculated his strength perfectly. Perhaps he'd given away more of himself in the Caves of Koilos than he'd known. Ajani put his arm around Karn in a parody of friendship, gathering Karn to himself. With the other hand, he lifted the sylex—and crumpled it in his hand, as if the ancient artifact were made of nothing more than paper. Karn could only watch in horror as the intricate runes lining the device flashed briefly, then died.

Sheoldred slammed into the Mana Rig, halting its advance and crunching it between herself and a mountain, the impact rattling throughout the massive artifact's hull. The battle's tide turned yet again as Phyrexians dropped down from the mountainside onto the decks. Benalish, Keldons, Yavimayan elves, goblins, humans, and viashino now fought, hard-pressed.

Karn struggled against Ajani's grip. Jodah and Teferi stood stunned. It had all happened within seconds.

Sheoldred split apart, her small humanoid half popping itself off its massive dragon engine host body, revealing a snake-like spine that she used for her insertion into her larger host body. Her humanoid part slithered down her massive torso and dove onto the Mana Rig's decks. She moved toward the Planeswalkers. Her horned helmet folded back—it did not show the gore and metal Karn expected but rather pallid skin. Sheoldred revealed a fine nose, full lips, and large dark sorrowful eyes, like a doe's. No doubt she had harvested her face from some poor woman, long dead.

She pressed one small, pale hand to Karn's chest. "I have the Mana Rig. I have you. Dominaria is vulnerable to invasion. All the wonders of my people will become your wonders. All our beauty will become your beauty. There is only one truth. The next step in evolution will be completed."

All around the battlefield, Phyrexians murmured, "There is only one truth." The murmur rose from the ranks, softer than a wind from distorted mouths, and far more eerie.

"It did not happen like I planned it, Karn, thanks to your efforts." She clutched the chain around Karn's neck that held his scrying device, locator, and the gadget he'd used to communicate with the *Weatherlight*. "No, this is *better*. I do have a plan, Karn. A plan for you—and for Dominaria. For all the planes."

"I guess you're going to be disappointed," Jhoira's words boomed, amplified by the rig's structure, "because you won't get what you want today." A long pause—as if Jhoira had to force herself to do what she knew was right. But Karn believed in her. Then, an ominous ticking emanated from the Mana Rig's central structure. Jhoira had triggered the Mana Rig's self-destruct mechanism.

The *Golden Argosy* broke away, racing into the sands.

"Jodah," Jhoira shouted, "portal everyone out of here! Now!"

Jodah wrenched himself to his feet. Around the Mana Rig's decks, portals whirled into existence, swallowing up nearby troops. The gaping soldiers who weren't sucked in got shoved through by friends quicker to understand what was about to happen. Jodah pulled up a portal and threw Danitha, Radha, and Meria into it, shifting them to a safe location away from the blast radius. He even ensured that Meria's precious kavu would not be left behind, enveloping it in a whirling portal. Lastly, Jodah looked at Karn. His eyes bright with regret, he stepped back through his final portal.

The decks grew eerily quiet: Sheoldred with her stolen face unmoved, Ajani controlled, his arm a skeletal and charred ruin where Jaya had burned him.

Karn waited.

"I've acquired the targets. I am ready to return." Sheoldred exhaled—Karn could not tell if she sighed with disappointment or satisfaction—and a scarlet light, at first only the size of a bead, materialized in the air behind her. Lightning threaded it as that light expanded into a shining, whirling scarlet globe. It roared with power, eating into the air and environment around it. It grew toward them, gnawing at the atmosphere.

Sheoldred tilted her head and touched her face. "What a shame. I liked this one."

Karn struggled against Ajani's grip, but between his damaged body and Ajani's enhanced strength, he could not free himself. The ugly red light engulfed Sheoldred. She turned her face into its power with a small gasp as it washed over her. Its blaze burned over Ajani and Karn. Searingly hot, Karn could feel how it tugged at him, the very essence of what made him *Karn*, and it stole him away.

Like he was nothing more than an artifact. The object of a theft.

As night cooled the desert air, Jhoira and Teferi finished coordinating the survivors: he had set up the triage tents, she had placed the few able-bodied reserves to search the battlefield for survivors and burn the Phyrexian dead, and then they both had worked with the goblin and viashino civilians—there had been a few who refused to leave their homes and evacuate—to inventory supplies, set up the camp beneath the Magnigoths' sheltering limbs, and ensure everyone was fed according to their need.

They were both exhausted.

Speaking to Jodah After all that, Teferi did not know if he had the strength.

But he summoned it from some deep reserve. It was what Niambi would have him do.

Jodah knelt on an outcropping, dry-eyed and surveying the battlefield's devastation: the troops picking amongst the survivors, scattering vultures; the banks of black lava, steaming into the deepening night. He held, cradled in his hands, Karn's necklace: the scryer, the Phyrexian locator, the *Weatherlight* communicator—and a lock of Jaya's white hair.

“Come.” Teferi crouched beside him. “You must eat and sleep.”

Jodah popped open the scryer’s back and placed Jaya’s hair into it like a locket. “I can’t let go of her. I just got her back again. She can’t be gone. Not yet. I have known her across lifetimes, and we still didn’t have enough time together.”

Teferi felt a vast emptiness inside himself: he didn’t have enough energy to hurt. He recognized it well—he had retained this numbness after Subira had died. It had taken years for the edges to wear away, to reveal enough rawness for him to grieve. He had mourned her for a long time. He always would. She’d been the love of his life, and the mother of his child.

Jhoira joined them, her boots crunching across the gravel. “We still have living friends who need us, Jodah. What are Sheoldred’s plans? What will she do with Karn and Ajani?”

“I don’t know,” Jodah said. “How can we fight them without the sylex?”

Jhoira sat beside Jodah, cross-legged, and put her arm around Jodah’s shoulders.

Teferi contemplated the landscape. “We will build Jaya a memorial that will outlast the ages. Her strengths, her achievements, her wonders will not be forgotten. Shiv will become a site of pilgrimage.”

Jodah only shook his head.

“I’ll stay with him,” Jhoira said.

The stones rose from Shiv’s red sands, an arrangement of white pyramids around an ever-burning fire that hovered midair. Jodah had set that spell himself. In the right light, when Shiv’s winds hit it, the flame resembled a woman turning away to hide her smirk, her pale hair streaming into nothingness.

Danitha, Radha, and Meria had all returned to their homelands so that their devastated forces could recover, and so they could recruit more troops for the inevitable Phyrexian return. Jodah, Teferi, and Jhoira had remained to build this: a monument for Jaya.

Teferi would miss her.

“Jaya and I met when she was “ Jodah pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as if to hide their brightness. He swallowed. “Dominaria lost a mage—the realms lost—I lost—I’m sorry.”

Jhoira rested her hand on Jodah’s shoulder, and Jodah leaned into that old familiarity.

“I never thought I’d have to do this,” Jodah finally said.

Teferi cleared his throat but didn’t speak. He only shook his head, unable to put into words how much he’d miss her wit, the humor she brought to such serious tasks. Jaya couldn’t save a plane without making a quip about it. He had imbued memories of her in one of the stone pyramids: her patience with teaching Chandra, how she’d smile just before saying something really cutting, and how they’d met. He’d never forget the day in Zhalfir when he’d mistaken her for a line cook and asked her for a fried egg. She, grinning, had gone behind the counter to oblige and lit all the burners with a flick of her fingers—much to the actual stall keeper’s surprise. “You want some chutney with that?” He’d never forget her.

Teferi walked in a circle around the monument. Sweat bloomed on his skin, and he wiped away the beads on his forehead. He paused to touch the empty pyramid they’d left for Karn to instill with his memories of Jaya if he—no, *once* he returned.

Teferi straightened his shoulders. Saheeli waited at a respectful distance, her jewel-toned clothing flickering in the wind, the gold accents winking, her brown skin burnished and her black hair slipping down. At his *I'm-ready* nod, she turned, and they left together.

When Teferi stepped through the portcullis, he had to suppress a shudder. They had reached it—Urza's tower. It was more than the worn flagstone emanating the previous night's chill. He never thought he would step into this place again.

Saheeli brought him to an ancient barrel-vaulted hall with its roof still intact, well protected from the sun. She rested a hand on her device, which Teferi would use to heighten his magic's strength and precision. He was not eager to climb into it: with its platform, its leather straps and wires, it resembled a device found in a dungeon to elicit confessions, not a magical item made to heighten a Planeswalker's innate talents.

While the clay tablet Karn had found in the Caves of Koilos had been lost, his drawings had not. Jaya had grabbed them when she'd grabbed the sylex. But unlike the sylex, the drawings had remained on Jaya's body, hidden in a secret pocket in her clothes.

Saheeli hadn't been able to determine *how* they described the sylex's workings. Only Karn had figured that out. But she had been able to determine *when* the sylex had been fired—and made a perfect replica of her own.

So this was now Teferi's mission: to return to the *when* to learn what Karn had already determined: the *how*. How did one activate it?

"Good luck, Teferi," said Saheeli. "For all our sakes."

He forced himself to relax. A small brown songbird perched in an arched window, then dropped down onto the floor to bathe in the dust. Karn would have known its species, its habits.

To save his home, to save the Multiverse, Teferi would do the one thing he had vowed never to do: cross time itself.

The Planar Bridge's red light faded. Karn gathered, from the chitters echoing throughout the darkness, that he stood in a vast cavern. He could sense mineral deposits, the weight of quartz stalactites overhead, and he could smell cold, damp stone. He felt ill—wrong—as if the turbulent passage through the Blind Eternities had coated his metal surface in an unclean film. He knelt, his crumpled body still aching from the battle on the Mana Rig's deck. He hoped the others, Jodah, Jhoira, Teferi, had fared better than he, and Jaya no, better not to think of that. Not until he could mourn.

White light flared, overwhelming his senses. The chittering noises stopped.

Elesh Norn stood before him, glowing as though she housed a star. Her attenuated limbs had an insectile delicacy, and her long face had an arthropod's beauty. Her smile was narrow and self-satisfied, even as she scraped a servile bow in his direction.

"Welcome, Father." Elesh Norn's voice was a throaty, pleasing contralto. "Welcome home."

Karn looked around for Ajani and Sheoldred. He had seen the Planar Bridge engulf the praetor, as well as his compleated friend, but he saw no sign of them here. It must have deposited them elsewhere. Only he and Elesh Norn stood upon this plateau, heaped with drifts of white porcelain sand. Below the plateau, insectoid Phyrexians seethed in a glistening, white-gold mass.

Norn grabbed his chin, wrenched his attention back toward her. “You have been away for far too long,” she hissed. “We have missed you. You deserve to share in the glory of what is to come.”

Karn tried to rise but found he couldn’t move his legs. He tried to summon his spark, to transport himself somewhere, anywhere, but he was too broken, too tired. Norn’s claws dug into the metal of his cheeks, turning his head. His neck complained at even that motion, the joints grinding together—and then he saw it. A small, stunted sapling growing from the porcelain sand. Its gnarled, delicate branches reminded him of the small trees he saw above the timber line in the mountains. Its pale limbs glistened with an iridescent sheen. Beads of oil hung from its twigs like buds.

Even now, in this hell, surrounded by monsters, he couldn’t help but feel a tenderness for that tree. A living thing, fighting against all odds to survive. “What is it?”

Norn leered down at him, her rows upon rows of teeth spread into a mocking rictus. “It is the beginning of great things, Father. It is the beginning of *everything*.”