

Episode 4: A Brutal Blow

Langley Hyde

From set *Dominaria United*

Being on the *Weatherlight* 's deck made Karn nostalgic. Even though a different crew scrambled along its rigging, laughed as they worked on the deck, and tinkered with its shining mechanisms, the scents and sounds felt comfortably eternal. Golden light scattered among the white clouds below and glistened on the beeswaxed decks. Blue skies stretched until the horizon. The sea breeze chilled his metal body. Only hours before, the four of them—Teferi, Jaya, Jodah, and Karn himself—had been pulled from the upper floor of Argive's watchtower one by one, dangling from a rope ladder like insects above the vast city below.

"Shanna is waiting," Jodah said. "We must set the *Weatherlight* 's course."

Karn nodded, and Jaya fell into step beside them, her white hair streaming out behind her like a pennant. They entered the stateroom. Shanna stood near an oval table, her arms crossed over her burnished leather breastplate. Arvad, his already white skin sickly with his vampire's pallor, hung back in the shadows behind her. Teferi lay on a nearby cot, his eyes closed. Raff had pulled up a three-legged stool beside him. He'd splayed his hands over Teferi's gut wound and his magic's silvery sheen wafted from his palms like heat waves. Slimefoot joined them, mushroom-like pups cavorting around its base. Tiana squeezed her wings in tight to her body to fit through the door.

Shanna put out a fruit bowl Karn had thought to be ornamental and sat down. "I might be the captain, Karn, but you're setting the course. Tell me where the *Weatherlight* flies."

"We must force the Phyrexians into open warfare," Karn said, "before they gain in strength and convert more populations. We will do this by baiting them with the three things the Phyrexians want more than anything else: the sylex, the Mana Rig, and me."

Jodah looked to Karn, worry brightening his eyes. "It's a risky plan. Defeat would mean losing Dominaria's most precious artifacts—and you, Karn. I don't like the idea of you in such danger."

"I like some risk," Jaya said. "If we draw them out, if we win, we kill the Phyrexians at the root. They're like ivy: you have to pull it early. Once it's established, it'll spread."

"If the events at Argivia have taught us anything," Karn said, "it is that our forces are stronger together than apart. Phyrexian tactics rely on dividing us, on the secret work the sleeper agents can perform in the shadows. If we are separate, we are vulnerable. Together, less so."

"Still," Jodah said, "our allies are stretched across all Dominaria. With Argivia fallen, the most powerful armed force on this continent is no longer ours—it is theirs. We have to recruit all the allies we can to make our stand."

"So we split up," Jaya said. "We recruit allies and bring them to the Mana Rig."

The crew from the *Weatherlight* had been quiet during this discussion, but now Raff sighed. The magic faded from his fingers. He looked up at Karn. "My sister will fight for you."

"I'll seek out Danitha," Jaya decided.

“Yavimaya’s been attacked as well,” Jodah said. “The elves will help us. I can go to them, to recruit them to fight at our side.”

“I will go to the Mana Rig directly,” Karn said, “to speak to Jhoira. I am the only one who has read and can remember the key I found to the sylex. I need to record that information for others to examine.”

Teferi roused from his stupor. “I’ll go with you, Karn. I need time to recover, and I can also recruit our Shivan allies while the Mana Rig and the sylex occupy you.”

“You do not have good luck,” Karn said, regarding Teferi’s wounds.

“I think I have excellent luck,” Teferi said. “I survived, didn’t I?”

“If we split up,” Jaya said, her hair gusting around her face, “how will we tell if any of us have been compromised? Stenn didn’t even know he was one of them.”

“The scryer has difficulty focusing on Phyrexians,” Karn said. “If I cannot view you, I will assume you have been compromised.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t sleep,” Jaya said.

Shanna looked to her crew, who had been listening patiently. “It’s decided. Let’s set sail.”

The Red Iron Mountains were so beautiful that planning a war here seemed irreverent. Not that Jaya was the devout type, but those harsh jagged peaks with shale cascading down the ravines, white in the light, and the alpine blooms drooping from the meadows in sprays of purple and gold, and that massive androgynous statue of some hero whose story had been lost to time

Well, maybe she was growing old, but Jaya could see herself relaxing outside a small cabin in a cedar-wood tub in one of those shadowed valleys where war machines lay rotting, forgotten beneath emerald mosses and upright sword ferns, inert as boulders. Maybe with some chilled peppermint tea in hand. Now that would be a relaxing way to pass a decade or two.

She snorted at herself. *Not like you’re ever going to retire!*

“Jaya!” Ajani strode from the trees’ deep shadows, his white fur glinting in the light and his cloak rippling behind him. “Danitha told me you arrived. I have been seeking deer to feed the camp. There is good hunting here.”



Art by: Matt Stewart

“Any luck?” Jaya asked.

Ajani offered her a fierce grin that revealed his teeth. “Always. The Llanowar millenarians remember the Phyrexian invasion well, and they’ve already sent scouts to join us. Some of the best archers in Dominaria.”

When he’d leapt after Aron Capashen, Jaya had worried. “It looks like you didn’t recover Aron?”

Ajani turned his gaze to Danitha’s camp, established on the edge of a cloudy green glacier lake. Her Benalish knights had set up white canvas tents. In addition to House Capashen’s proud tower with seven windows, House Tarmula’s flag flew, a seven-pointed star upon it. A stewpot scented the air with smell of cooking onions.

“They outdistanced me, and by the time I circled around, you had left. So I started tracking them and encountered Danitha.”

Danitha Capashen strode through the camp toward Jaya and Ajani. Her light-brown skin glowed with health and her hair, shaved along the sides, had been drawn back into a tight plume. Her armor gleamed silver with ribbons of gold crossed across her chest like Gerrard’s sash, embedded with stained glass that gleamed in red, scarlet, and yellow petals.

“I tracked the Phyrexians to a base south of here, concealed in some caves,” Ajani said.

“My father must be there.” Danitha turned to Jaya. “Danitha Capashen, daughter of Aron Capashen, heir to the House Capashen. And you are?”

Well, well it had been some time since Jaya hadn’t been recognized.

“Jaya Ballard,” Ajani cleared his throat, “fights alongside Jodah the Eternal.”

Jaya snorted. Jodah collected nicknames like some little boys collected marbles. “I’m here to invite you to bring reinforcements to Shiv.”

“Any friend to Ajani is welcome here,” Danitha said. “But unfortunately, I can’t commit my troops to fight at Shiv until I’ve rescued my father.”

“The delay—”

“Is worth it, and if you would like to assist me, I would appreciate your help,” Danitha said. “If my father is alive, you’ll have House Capashen’s gratitude and knights to call upon. And if he’s not well, you’ll have House Capashen’s new leader in your debt.”

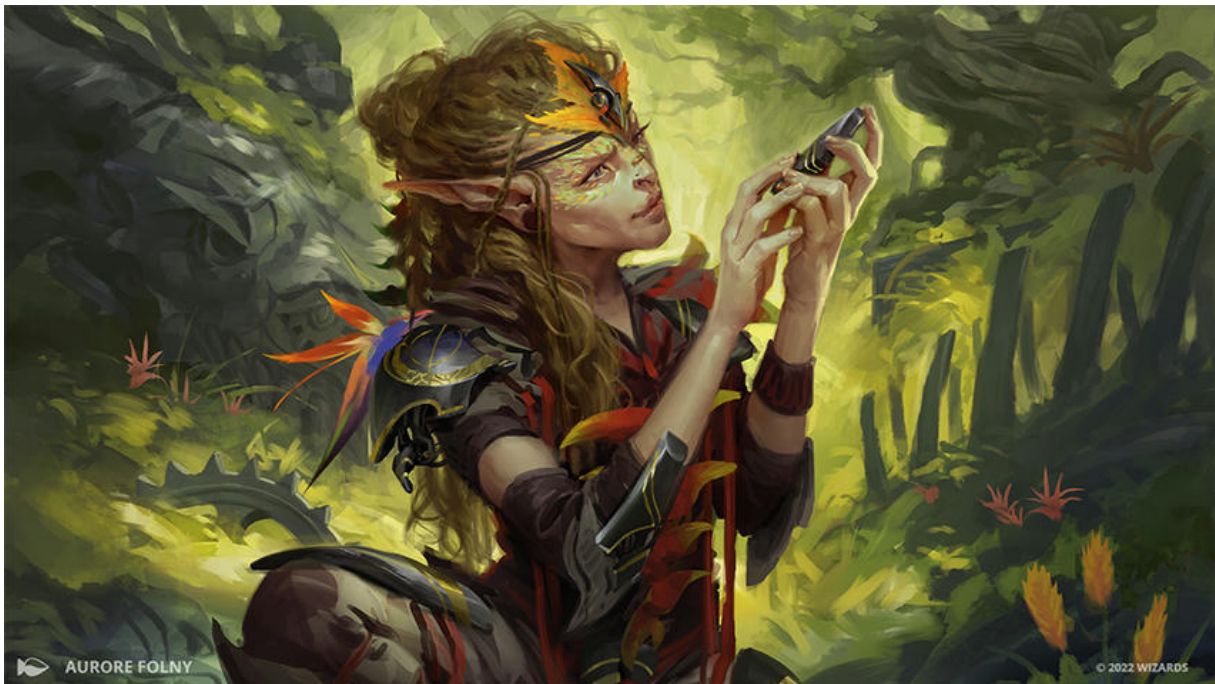
Jaya stretched her fingers, pulling flame from the air. The heat radiated across her skin. “Well, one sure way to get someone out of a cave is smoke.”

If there was any place on Dominaria where Jodah felt young, it was in the ruins of Kroog, in Yavimaya. The ancient domed building, its vaulting roof open to the sky, its golden stone draped with trailing pothos, seemed to hold the sunset’s colors like a dragon-hoarded treasure. Exposed when a massive treefolk uprooted and migrated into the sea, it still smelled like earth.

“Jodah?”

He did not recognize the voice. A cerulean butterfly lit upon his shoulder. He moved to brush it away, then hesitated.

An elf stared at him, her light skin dappled with gold around her bright, intelligent eyes. Even though Jodah could not have said why, she seemed young. She wore a warrior’s leather armor; scarlet, ochre, and orange, yet unlike the armor he’d seen on other Yavimayan elves, she’d integrated repurposed Thran technology.



Art by: Aurore Folny

“You’re Jodah the Eternal?” she said. “The Archmage Jodah?”

Jodah coughed. For some reason, with the elf staring at him, he felt particularly self-conscious about the butterfly lazily beating its dinner plate-size wings near his face.

“Elder Druid Jenson Carthalion told me all about you. Some people say there were many different Jodahs who took your name as a title, but I always thought there was only one.”

“I’m here to negotiate with Meria,” Jodah said, “to recruit troops to fight for the New Coalition at Shiv.”

"You must be four thousand years old!" She looked him up and down like she'd look at an archaeological artifact. The butterfly flitted away. Jodah cleared his throat. He felt sized up, a sensation he did not appreciate.

Then the elf sighed. "I wish I could help you, Jodah. Since I was a child, I've dreamed of fighting alongside you, of leading my people to your aid of saving Dominaria together. But I'm sorry. I must think of my people."

Jodah smiled. So this was Meria. Only centuries of practice at diplomacy permitted him to conceal his shock. Seldom did elves follow someone with youth's freshness stamped upon their features—one reason he'd thought it best that he perform these negotiations himself. But then, seldom did elves seek shelter in old ruins, buildings of stone and metal. Dominaria was changing. "The Phyrexians are invading, Meria. It isn't a question of whether you fight. It's a question of when, of how—and the answers to both these questions, whether we will stand together, will determine if we achieve victory."

Meria dipped her head in solemn acknowledgement. "You are wise, Jodah the Eternal. I am honored to meet you. Truly, I am. But neither your words nor your name will sway me. I see no reason for my warriors to abandon their homes for your cause. Yes, if the Phyrexians shadowed our canopy, we would fight—on our home ground, with the advantage. But travel to Shiv? No, I think not."

"The Phyrexians can create sleeper agents," Jodah said. "They can infiltrate—"

"We know," Meria said. "But when Yavimaya allows my people to return, Multani will sort the good from the bad."

"Would you rather that the fight come here?" Jodah said. "Better to snuff the Phyrexian threat now than let Yavimaya burn."

Meria's eyes glinted. She wasn't angry. She wasn't scared. She wasn't even implacable. She was amused, and this befuddled Jodah most of all. He wasn't used to being laughed at by someone a fraction of his age.

"Very compelling arguments," Meria smiled and patted him on the shoulder. But Jodah could tell, as she turned away, that she'd made up her mind.

Jodah had failed. Meria would not lead her people to Shiv.

Jaya hunched behind a stone outcropping that overlooked the entire valley. Not the most comfortable position, but she couldn't complain about the view. At the end of a narrowing ravine, the cave's large triangular mouth gaped. Two Phyrexians guarded the opening, centipede-like monstrosities with butchered human bodies in their cores. Their multiple limbs glinted in the sunlight, restive.

From her vantage, Jaya could see what the Phyrexian monstrosities could not.

Ajani led half a dozen Llanowar scouts to remove the guards from the perimeter, clearing out the creatures that lurked in the shadowy woodlands. He'd been successful—so far. No dying creature had shouted an alert.

Danitha led the bulk of her force. Her knights lay in wait near the cave's mouth, concealing themselves in gullies, behind bushes and trees, in the mossy nooks behind granite boulders. Danitha held up her hand, signaling: *Jaya, it's time.*

Jaya distilled her focus until it was keen as a blade inside her. She narrowed her eyes at the cave. The air itself combusted, exploding into flame. The pine needle turf smoldered, sending thick clouds of smoke toward the sky.

The Phyrexian guards launched into action, swarming through the underbrush. Danitha pointed at three knights, who charged, cleaving the nearest monstrosity with their broadswords. It fell into bloody hunks, each of which grew dozens of tiny legs. Danitha raised her hand again, and she sent another splinter force to drive the Phyrexian pieces toward Jaya's position.

Once they were near enough, Jaya sent out plumes of fire after each segment. This time, when the knights stabbed the cooking Phyrexian chunks, they stayed dead.

"Good riddance," Jaya muttered.

At the cave's entrance, heavy smoke coiled into the air. More Phyrexians poured from the cave—well over two dozen humanoid abominations.

"Nine Hells," Jaya muttered. The knights had revealed themselves too early. Their inexperience showed: they fought as if their opponents were ordinary soldiers, rather than interplanar horrors.

A vortex of flame shielding her, Jaya stalked down the hillside. As she blasted Phyrexians, she glimpsed brief horrors behind her gout of fire: a compleated woman, iron coils escaping from her heart, stripping a Benalish knight of his armor like a child removing the limbs from an insect; a compleated child, plunging her wires beneath another knight's armor, bursting him apart from the inside. Danitha fought back-to-back with her second-in-command, her face grim.

The Benalish were being overwhelmed.

Ajani led his Llanowar scouts into the fray, cleaving the Phyrexian monstrosities with his double-headed axe. The Phyrexian advance halted, stymied.



Art by: Manuel Castañón

Jaya thought, for one hopeful moment, that the lionin had turned the battle in their favor, until a new Phyrexian emerged from the cave, more monstrosities at his heels. He was human-form, broad and muscular, with pale armor merging into his torso. Metal spikes curved through his pale blond hair like horns and his orange-irised eyes wept black oil across his ice-white cheeks. He held up his double set of arms, which merged at the biceps, in ironic welcome. "And here I was hoping some of my old crew might be in the rescue party. Shame—I was so looking forward to catching up."

Jaya, despite the fire in her hands, chilled down to her guts. *Ertai*. She'd heard of him, sure—one of the original crew of the *Weatherlight*. He'd been dead for centuries—and still had death's pallor, though some force reanimated his twitching features. His eyes possessed a terrible intelligence.

"It's such a pleasure to be back," he said. "And I have learned so, so much in my time away. Would you like to see?"

And Aron Capashen stepped from the cave's mouth.

Karn brought out his sketch of the clay tablet he'd found in the Caves of Koilos, then lost in Oyster Bay. He traced the arcing symbols. Though he could remember what he had found perfectly, he could not make sense of it.

"Karn?" Teferi peeked into Jhoira's workshop, which Karn, in her absence, had co-opted. "I've spoken with Darigaaz, but the dragons are still deliberating."

"And the Ghitu?"

"The Ghitu will not commit until the dragons do. It's council politics."

"The viashino?"

"Same story." Teferi inclined his head. "Only the goblins have come forward."

"The goblins? That is a surprise," Karn admitted.

"They wanted to be first," Teferi said. "They're confident the dragons, the Ghitu, and the viashino will come to fight when the Phyrexians attack, but the goblins wanted to be able to say that *they* 'joined first' so they'll be able to use that as leverage in future relations." Teferi lay down on Jhoira's cot. He closed his eyes in exhaustion. Although magic had healed him, he was still recovering.

A screech broke the workshop's quiet—so loud that Jhoira's thinner beakers shattered. Teferi bolted upright, now alert. A second later an impact rattled down, shaking dust onto the delicate apparatuses, ruining experiments. The sulfurous stench wafting through the door made Teferi cough, though Karn's senses told him its concentration wasn't high enough to harm human life.

"What—" Teferi began.

Karn pressed his finger to his mouth to request quiet. He was listening. The *Weatherlight*. Karn left the workshop. Though weary, Teferi followed.

In Shiv's skies—so hot they were not blue but a seared white—the *Weatherlight* wheeled through the sky, draped in the rotting detritus it had been using as camouflage from the Phyrexians hunting them. It seemed they hadn't been able to elude one, though, which circled them like a predator. Unfurled, the Phyrexian dominated the sky. Its thin bat-like wings had clawed metal tines with too many joints, and its body was a mass of fibers. The *Weatherlight* fought it, firing harpoons into the beast, but the barbs fell through the loose mesh of fibers, useless. Magic blinked across the sky, but even Karn could see that this creature effortlessly outmatched the *Weatherlight*.

But then a small shadow in Shiv's white sky grew closer, spreading two massive wings: a dragon. Even Karn had to appreciate a full-grown dragon: no mightier being existed on Dominaria, the apex of both violence and wisdom. The shadow brightened, glinting as the sun struck its scales. Darigaaz had come to their aid. He turned down, diving, and gained speed, until he struck the monstrosity.

The Phyrexian exploded at the impact, parted into a writhing mass. Still airborne, its fragmented body draped between its wings. The monstrosity attempted to draw itself together. Slick iron fibers wove and interlocked.

But Darigaaz had already pivoted midair. He exhaled a flame so white-hot over the Phyrexian monstrosity that it did not burn: it vaporized. Molten metal droplets rained onto the Mana Rig's deck, followed by Darigaaz himself. People scattered, retreating to a respectful distance.

"Planeswalker Teferi." Darigaaz bowed his head. "I accept your proposal to fight here at Shiv. I will defend our skies—no doubt, my brethren will join me. As will those from the other nations who have seats on the Shivan council."

Teferi strode toward the dragon. He bowed. "We accept the allegiance of the dragons of Shiv. Respectfully, of course."

Darigaaz bowed his head, solemn. He flung himself into the sky, his takeoff an economy of power, and spiraled upward into the blue.

In the silence, Jhoira slid down a rope from the *Weatherlight*'s deck onto the Mana Rig. Her owl swooped down and landed on her shoulder, its metal body gleaming in the sun. "That's a hard act to follow."

Aron Capashen stepped out from the cave. The surgical lines on his face still had raw edges, but they did not weep blood: instead, black oil glistened near the sutures. The lines did look artful, Jaya had to admit, as if Ertai had carefully considered each arcing cut over Aron's cheekbones, then deliberately contrasted it with the jagged line across his forehead. But otherwise, Aron seemed devastatingly human. His expression was anguished—unlike the other Phyrexians, he seemed self-aware. He was still Aron Capashen, and he knew what had been done to him, what it meant. His lips formed the words: *please, don't look at me*. But he did not, could not, voice them.

"Father." Danitha's gasp was hoarse—yet so pained. Jaya wished she could provide some iota of comfort.

"What have you done?" Ajani demanded.

"Sheoldred has taught me that beauty lies in change," Ertai said. "It's a hard lesson, when applied to oneself. But when applied to others, the beauty of change becomes more apparent, its aesthetics a revolution. Watch."

Aron's face opened along the surgical incision lines, unfurling to reveal that his skull had been replaced with steel, his eye with a crystal lens, and that his brain lay protected beneath glass. Unlike other Phyrexian monstrosities, Aron's changes had a clockwork intricacy, each delicate mechanism ticking and whirring. It reminded Jaya of a star map.

"My father is not your plaything." Danitha's voice sounded flat with shock, but her eyes burned with rage. Her hands on her broadsword, she stalked toward Ertai and Aron. Her father watched her with pained hope—for what, Jaya did not know.

No Phyrexians moved to intercept her.

Ertai watched with fascination. "Aron? Do your duty."

Aron lurched forward. He raised his hands, jerkily, and drew his sword. He lunged at Danitha. She parried, looking startled. His movements seemed bizarre, twitchy and unwieldy, like he was resisting himself. Or resisting Ertai's command? He swiped down again, and this time Danitha caught his blow

on her broadsword. She forced him back, throwing him off. His intact eye wept glistening oil as he marched toward her again.

“Danitha,” said Aron, his voice strange and distorted. “Do your duty.” His words were a distorted echo of Ertai’s.

Devastation crossed Danitha’s face so quickly that Jaya, at this distance, almost missed it. But then Danitha’s lips firmed. Her gaze turned both steely and pitying. “Yes, Father.”

This time, when he brought his blade down on her, Danitha side-stepped. She raised her broadsword and swept it down in a graceful arc, separating his head from his shoulders.

Ertai watched all this with dispassion. “No respect for art. But I suppose I can always sew that back on.”

He waved one three-fingered hand.

The mountains shook. Stone broke, and rubble tumbled down. Sharp shale spun past Jaya, cutting her cheek. She gasped and clutched at her injury. A Phyrexian monstrosity broke free from the mountain in front of them, shattering it into rubble. The roar of rock sliding from its body brought tears to Jaya’s eyes. The monstrosity reared into the sky, so large that it blotted out the sun. Its plated body rose, brimming with complex mechanisms and weaponry, perched upon immense, deceptively thin legs. Its head was a battering ram, and its tail ended in a stinger, dripping with oily venom.

“Dim-Bulb’s stupid horns that’s *huge*,” Jaya whispered. A Phyrexian dreadnought. It had to be the largest one she’d ever seen. “How are we supposed to fight *that*?”

Meria paused, her head cocked. Birds arrowed through the sky overhead, screaming. She watched them, a frown marring her forehead between her brows. Hoots boomed throughout the forest as monkeys shouted the alarm, and Jodah even heard the coughing roar of some great forest cat.

Meria turned to face him. “Something is coming.”

She spun and ran out from the building. Jodah fell into pace beside her. In the distance, tree branches rocked—then shattered, exploding upward in a burst of greenery as a dragon engine reared into Yavimaya’s vacant blue skies.

Jodah had never seen a mechanism so vast. Its bronze skull glistened in the hot tropical light, blotting out the sun. Its razor-edged back sloped away into the rainforest, longer than the ridge of a hill, and it waded through the trees—toward Jodah, Meria, and the elves.

The dragon engine’s serrated mouth gaped open in a voiceless roar. Its thrum was so deep Jodah couldn’t hear it: he could only feel it, like a blow to his heart. The vibrations traveled through the landscape, shattering branches. Parrots dropped from the trees, stunned. Small marsupials fell, eyes and noses bleeding. Jodah touched his face, pressing his index finger to the hot trickle that tickled his lips. He, too, bled. Yavimaya elves emerged from their buildings, scrambling to arm themselves. Riders led their kavu from the treetop stables. One male elf stumbled from his cottage holding an infant bleeding from its nose. He stared at Meria with beseeching eyes.

The dragon engine tore through the rainforest, uprooting a tree.

Meria gasped. “It’s destroying Magnigoths. Those trees have stood for centuries!”

Jodah began to catalyze his spells. He could feel the power rising within him, so brilliant that it poured from his skin, that it lifted him from the ground, that it cradled him. To hold all this magic at the ready. It was as integral to his being as his veins. He prepared himself.

All around him, Yavimaya elves evacuated their homes, dragging children and bundled belongings away from the fight. Jodah caught teary but brief farewells as warriors told their offspring to be quiet and brave and then embraced their partners before parting ways.

Warriors astride kavu clung to every tree branch, their bows, spears, and blades held at the ready. Spellcasters stood in phalanxes upon the mossy turf, brighter than blossoms in their finery, their fingers interlocked, their lips already moving with chants to conceal the retreating civilians. Meria gave Jodah an anguished look and led him to the forefront of her warriors.

With one sweep, the dragon engine cleared the ground between itself and the Yavimayan village. Ancient trees crashed to the ground, splintering, the leaf-shaped houses upon their boughs crushed. Soil clouded the air, then settled, revealing a raw ditch between the Yavimaya and the dragon engine. The dragon engine had not only uprooted ancient trees so that their roots framed the battlefield, exposing dirt—it had also revealed artifacts from the Thran city deep beneath the Ruins of Kroog. Ground water seeped through the rich loam, pooling around the golden objects. Meria gasped.

“I recognize that,” she breathed. “From my studies. Oh, that—Jodah, that is our hope.”

Jodah couldn’t determine which object Meria meant in the jumble, but that she had picked out one artifact from this distance was remarkable. Little wonder that the Yavimayans followed her.

The dragon engine craned its head as if to look at their armed forces. Within its skull, its driver sat like a jewel, illuminated with a pale blue light. Even from this distance Jodah could make out her features, see the red light of her replaced eye. She matched Karn’s descriptions: Rona. Her teeth were barred in a fierce smile.

In an echo of Rona’s own body language, the dragon engine opened, exposing its barbed jaws. Within its mechanized armor plates, the remains of small, rotting forest creatures hung suspended between oily ligaments. Rona had butchered them to restore the dragon engine’s bulk.

Jodah’s stomach turned.

“Archers!” Meria cried.

The Yavimayans loosed their arrows, but they were useless against the dragon engine’s plates. Jodah could feel the machine building its energy—and at this proximity another roar would wipe them out.

Ertai laughed softly. He lifted his arms. The upper set had only three stubby fingers on each hand, which he beckoned with. The dreadnought swung its tail around and crushed Phyrexians and Benalish knights alike as it spewed venom. The viscous fluid arced out, so acidic it melted trees and boiled the alpine creek. The blow echoed throughout the mountain range, triggering distant rockfalls and avalanches.

Despite the cacophony of tumbling rock, Jaya could still hear Ertai’s delighted laughter. He waved his arms, and the Phyrexians launched themselves into the devastated Benalish forces. Ajani fought at Jaya’s back, hacking away at the creatures that skittered toward her. Danitha retreated to aid her troops. She shouted orders that caused the Benalish knights to reform around the Llanowar archers, circling up now that they were surrounded.

“Fire,” she called, and the Llanowar elves released their bowstrings. Their arrows rebounded off the dreadnought’s legs, not even denting its armor.

The dreadnought stretched and straddled the battlefield. It arched its spine. If it released more acid, they’d surely be doomed

“Stop!” Ertai called. His Phyrexians scuttled back, retreating into the rocks like so many crabs. The larger ex-human creatures ran toward the dreadnought’s legs and clung there. Some knights paused. “Call off your fighters, Danitha.”

“Or ?” Danitha asked.

Ertai smiled. He pointed at the dreadnought with one upper hand and the melted slag from its acid spray with the other. He raised his eyebrows. The bristles along his head seemed to lift with pleasure.

“Or,” he said.

Danitha lifted one hand. Her knights stopped fighting. Jaya let her flames die, overexertion washing through her. Ajani settled back, his double-handed axe weighed between his palms with more than some reluctance, teeth bared. He met Jaya’s gaze, and she gave him an exhausted shrug. She didn’t have a plan.

“Jaya. Ajani. If you don’t give yourselves up to me,” Ertai said, “I will tell the dreadnought to eradicate these people. All of them.”

Jodah lifted his hands, raising his energy to form a protective barrier. The shield rippled from its brightest point, a white sheen that colored the air itself. He couldn’t mitigate the effects of the dragon’s booming roar, but he could soften them—even if his spell, however powerful, would only hold up beneath one blast.

“There. I need to reach that.” Meria pointed at an uncovered Thran artifact that lay in the dirt between her troops and the dragon engine. She touched Jodah on the arm and looked up at him hopefully. “Can you leave that shield there to protect my people while you come with me? Out on the battlefield, I mean.”

Jodah nodded. What was the nature of this artifact, that Meria pinned her people’s lives on it? “Yes, I can do that.”

Meria raised her voice in a cry, which Jodah assumed meant “hold,” because he saw the archers shift from offensive to defensive postures, eyes wary. She nodded in satisfaction, then returned her attention to Jodah. “Ready?”

Jodah stretched out his fingers and pressed them into the air. The spell shimmered in response, then stabilized. Meria smiled at him, her face sharpened with intelligence and eagerness. She tapped her spear on the ground, and an intricate Thran tracery illuminated its length. Metal spurs shot out from one end of the spear, and a translucent webbing unfurled between them. Her spear appeared to also function as a powered Thran glider.

Meria threw one arm around him. “Hold on tight!”

Jodah stiffened—but too late. The glider jerked them both from their feet. He found himself uncere- moniously clinging to Meria as the glider drove them both through the air. They zipped through his magical barrier. It offered some resistance, flexing, but permitted them passage. Hot magic buzzed along their skin, shocking in its power. The glider took a sharp turn, then dived toward the earth. They splashed down into a crater quickly filling with brackish water—right at the dragon engine’s feet.

“Cover me,” Meria said.

“Is that why I’m here?” Jodah said, dryly. But he readied his spells. He could still feel the shield they’d left behind to protect the Yavimayan warriors draining him. This did not stop him from summoning his reserves. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” Meria, heedless of the filth, dropped to her knees and started searching the muddy waters. “It’s here somewhere. I know I saw it “

The dragon engine roared. Jodah flung up a radiant white bubble, protecting them. The sonic force beat against both of Jodah’s shields. He summoned more arcane force to meet and negate the concussive energy; the dragon engine’s roar heightened, then died. Jodah’s shields faded with it, and exhausted, he fell to his knees. His entire body felt pummeled, like he’d stretched himself physically behind those shields to hold them. He didn’t have it in him to do it again.

The dragon engine craned its head toward them. Jodah had the nasty suspicion Rona intended to target both him and Meria more directly with her next blow. “Hurry!”

“Aha!” Meria fished a silver globe covered in delicate golden Thran trceries from the muck. “Found it! I knew I’d seen one of these.”

Meria’s eyesight had to be exquisite for her to pinpoint *and* recognize a Thran artifact amongst the roots, dirt, and debris after the dragon engine’s attack. “What is it?”

Meria twisted the globe, realigning the symbols into new configurations. It lit up. Brightness raced along the globe’s equator at a quicker and quicker pace. Jodah could recognize a countdown anywhere. Meria cocked her head. “How fast do you think you can get us out of here?”

Jodah grit his teeth and readied a portal. The effort winded him even though he’d set the portal to transport them only a short distance. But he had already expended much of his strength in this battle. It felt like he peeled open that doorway-in-the-air with his fingernails.

Meria dove through, and Jodah leaped after her. He spun, held out his hand, and clenched it into a fist. The portal collapsed—just in time. The Thran artifact flashed, a bright red light that saturated the landscape as if in warning, and then instead of a boom there was—

Silence.

Between the Yavimayan elves and the dragon engine, a thin film seemed to have formed. But it wasn’t a film, not really. On the one side—the side on which Jodah stood—the air was thick with cloudy pollen, dust the dragon engine had kicked up, and humidity. He’d never realized that air had a color: not until he’d looked from an area *with* air to an area *without* it.

The Thran weapon had created a spherical vacuum. The dragon engine stood in the center of it, and it roared—and roared—in absolute silence.

But even from here Jodah could see how the dragon engine failed: the organic pieces inside it died. The mangled remains of the woodland creatures, confronted with vacuum, froze. Inside the dragon engine, tendons snapped, organs turned to slimy ice or burst, and muscle fibers solidified. The dragon’s wires, writhing beneath its armor, seemed to have become more brittle. More than a few snapped off. The lights faded from the dragon engine, dimming inside its skull.

“I don’t think the artifact is a weapon, really.” Meria perched one hand on her hip. “I think the Thran used it to conduct scientific experiments in a vacuum. That’s what I would do.”

No, Jodah thought. This was a weapon. Perhaps even a Damping Sphere, though he’d never seen one do that before.

The dragon engine staggered toward the field’s edge, then collapsed through the barrier. It fell so that half its body was in woodland and the other half remained in the vacuum. Rona, a distant mark in the dragon engine’s head, opened a hatch and staggered out from her cavity. She half-slid, half-climbed from the dragon engine’s head down its sloping body. The speed with which she made her descent

awed Jodah—but then he supposed he'd be desperate, too. She paused at the edge of the woodlands, hands on her knees while she, apparently, breathed.

Meria made a small gesture with one hand. Spear-bearing kavu riders peeled away, shooting around the periphery toward Rona. She shot one glance behind her, then fled. Meria watched the chase, solemn. Her gaze shifted to the fallen Magnigoths. "Hundreds of years of life—lost in an instant."

Jodah inclined his head. "That's war."

"They will find us, won't they?" Meria said. "Wherever my people go."

Jodah nodded. Meria's eyes shone with both anger and grief.

"Then there's only one path for us. And it doesn't lie in Yavimaya."

"Why am I worried that you won't let them go, even if I do hand myself over?" Jaya said to Ertai. She straightened her shoulders. She didn't intend to give herself up, but she didn't have another plan, either. Maybe, if she got close enough, she could summon a molten lance to spear him through the heart or superheat the air around Ertai's head—something, anything that could get them out of this—

A sweet breeze cleared the battlefield's stink. It brought with it the clean scent of leather and oil. The horizon began to brighten—the *western* horizon—with the sheen of gold. The air gained a peculiar, unearthly quality to it, as if its particles hummed with ancient tension.

An immense but sleek golden ship tore through the mountains' rubble, rocks kicking up in the wake behind it. The shimmering vessel swooped in a circle around the Phyrexian dreadnought. Hundreds of Keldon warriors leapt from the ship, landing on the dreadnought's wide scaley back, and they drove their blades and cleated boots into the creature's hide to secure themselves.



Art by: Daniel Ljunggren

The *Golden Argosy*! Jaya had thought it had been lost to legend. Radha had mentioned that she'd found an artifact during the negotiations in Oyster Bay, but Jaya had never guessed Radha had rediscovered that ancient ship.

Radha herself led her warriors onto the Phyrexian dreadnought's battering-ram head. The Phyrexian monstrosities still on the ground seemed to realize that the dreadnought was vulnerable to this assault. Rather than sheltering against the dreadnought's legs, they too started to scale it to attack the Keldons.

"Archers, cover us. Knights, after me." Danitha charged the dreadnought. "For Dominaria!"

The knights roared and followed, plowing into the Phyrexians that sought to defend the dreadnought. The dreadnought, beneath the Keldon onslaught, released a moan that shook the entire landscape.

Ajani bellowed, "Archers, to me! Fire on the Phyrexians climbing the dreadnought!"

Jaya raised her hands. Her flame brightened with her renewed spirits, and she blasted the skittering creatures that had pivoted to attack the archers. Ajani pressed close to her, defending her from any Phyrexian that headed her way.

Radha had pierced the dreadnought's eye, leaving a gash large enough for Radha to stand within the socket. Aqueous humor spurted, followed by the thicker clear goop of vitreous gel. Radha hacked through the muscular iris. The dreadnought shrieked in agony, tossing its head to throw her off. Its lower jaw gaped. It dripped blood, black fluid, and pinkish organic matter from its mouth.

Ertai bellowed, "Sheoldred will hear of this!"

"I hope she does!" Jaya called.

The creature crumpled, one joint at a time relaxing into death. The Keldons on its back let out a cheer and then flattened themselves, bracing to ride out its fall. The Benalish knights who'd been fighting underneath the dreadnought scattered. Jaya and Ajani both stared up at the nearing bulk of the dreadnought's underbelly, how it blotted the sky. Jaya scrambled out from underneath the dreadnought, squeaking past its final crash into the earth. The sound resounded in the mountains. Then, after that, the roar of avalanches and tumbling stone, until that, too, trickled into silence.



Art by: Aurore Folny

Karn looked up as Jhoira entered her workshop.

“Hiding out here isn’t the cleverest way to avoid me,” Jhoira said.

Karn faced her. “I’m not hiding.”

“You never answered my letters.” Jhoira didn’t sound hurt—more rueful.

“You wished to speak about Venser,” Karn said. “I did not.”

“But you do now?”

Karn dipped his head. “It was self-centered of me to be so consumed by the personal ramifications of Venser’s sacrifice. He was also your friend.”

Jhoira tilted her head. “Yes, I’m sorry, too. I was grieving. You were withdrawing because you were, too. Nothing selfish about that.”

“Just different reactions to the same stimulus,” Karn mused.

“Ah, I missed you.” Jhoira laughed and embraced him. Her mechanical owl, disturbed, flitted away from her shoulder and landed in the workshop’s beams overhead.

Karn doubted she obtained the comfort she sought: his body had a similar heat to a human’s, but he could not offer her the same softness of flesh. He enjoyed her proximity anyway. His friends were so small and so mysterious. He could divine the inner workings of quartz, but still he would never perfectly understand Jhoira.

Jhoira patted Karn’s arm and then released him. She dug some glittering metal parts from her pocket, Thran by the look of the golden tracery on them. “These will help me install a self-destruct mechanism on the Mana Rig. It’s too powerful to ever allow in Phyrexian hands. Karn, it has been too long. We should not have let life come between us.”

“Or unlife,” Karn said.

Jhoira laughed. “I always forget that you have a sense of humor.”

His communicator to the *Weatherlight* chimed on his neck. Karn, though startled that anyone would use it when not communicating with the *Weatherlight*, grasped it to activate it. “I am listening.”

Jodah’s voice came through, clear as if he stood in the room alongside them. “I am headed toward Shiv with the Yavimayan elves. Meria was able to recruit several neighboring groups. Since we’re traveling by treefolk, it will take some time to reach you. Karn, there’s something you need to know.”

“Yes?” Karn asked.

Jodah hesitated. “There is a spy in the New Coalition.”