

Alone

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A little crab walked over Teferi's hand.

The waves—what did he say?

"I think our time is up," Urza said, pointing into a void above Teferi's head. "I can see something out there."

The Destroyer of Dominaria talking with the Destroyer of Zhalfir—always in that goat's shadow, old man. Wonder what he saw out there.

Get up. Get off the beach. Forget it. Blink, and it's gone. This is probably the second time you died, but anyway, you're back now—what are you going to do about it?

There is a war coming. What are you going to do about it?



Art by: Chase Stone

Naked, alone, Teferi walked inland from the beach.

The day was mild and warm. The sun shone through a low bank of clouds or fog on the horizon—hazy, gold, diffused. The memory of a sun, how Teferi saw the light in his dreams.

Teferi paused where the sand gave way to tough coastal grass and the leading edges of a dune forest. The wind was steady off the water. Fine grains of sand brushed his ankles. There was a stone arch here, red stone from somewhere else, blasted by grains of sand dragged daily across it for untold time.

Regular depressions in the arch's surface may once have been writing, language, a marker of where he was, but were too worn now to say anything. Beyond was a well-traveled trail, marked by standing columns and the root nubs of others that had toppled.

Teferi leaned against the stone arch, catching his breath. Pain flooded in where moments ago there had only been pleasant nothing. Breathing hurt. His lungs felt tight, banded, like he'd just finished running for miles. His body ached. From core to extremity, he felt wrung, like a wet rag twisted dry.

What did he know? Teferi's thoughts raced as he took inventory.

You're no longer connected to Kaya. You're whole, not a spirit anymore, which means something happened on their end to make you wind up like this on your end. Wasn't planned, wasn't accounted for: not good. Try to get back.

Teferi reached out, reached *in*, summoned up the familiar movement of a planeswalk and found nothing. A limp twitch, the spasm of a numb limb. He squatted down, turned, and sat. A wave of panic, nausea. He rested his head against the archway and stared out to sea, squinting to see through the day's light and glittering water.

A haze clung to the horizon. The waves were gentle, crumbling instead of crashing, rolling up the beach where shorebirds and crabs scuttled, dancing, hunter and prey. Distant, Teferi thought. Beautiful, like nothing at all.

He watched the light over the ocean. He reached out to an imagined sun and willed it to plunge below the hidden horizon, for day to slip effortlessly into night. Time did not respond to his will. He dropped his hand back into his lap.

"That's it," Teferi said aloud, speaking to the wind, the birds, and the crabs. "They win."

Night fell. Teferi slept. The cicadas' calls were buzzsaws, nightmares. He dreamed things he won't remember but will carry with him when he wakes up:

Kroog. A field of mud scarred with trenches, a pox-marked face leering up from Dominaria's darkest history, crater lips wet with fresh and rotting and reanimated dead, wires running under its skin. Argoth, burning, streaked in oil, elves and humans crushed under the feet of metal beasts, whose buzzsaws rattled his molars, who were just the cicadas outside of his dreaming.

Things he will remember when he wakes:

The cold pressure when the Phyrexian stabbed him. The dark halls of Urza's Tower under siege reminded him of the halls of Tolaria all those years ago, fire-lit, chorused with agonies.

What hurts the most:

Subira doesn't wander anymore; he does that now. See you on the road sometime, Subi.

A cold fog rolled in off the sea, prickling Teferi's skin to gooseflesh. He woke to see the tide had come in, and where the waves had crumbled, they now crashed, silver-blue dark under the moonlight.

Teferi picked himself up. There were no moons. Nevertheless, pale blue light illuminated the landscape, hard-edged. Odd, but he needed to move. Head somewhere inland, warmer. Follow the tracks. Where there's people there's hope—people must eat, must sleep, must laugh. Must have a spare set of clothes as well, he thought, as he hugged himself against the cold. He rubbed his arms to build some heat and followed the path inland. The dune forest protected him from the worst of the wind, and the farther he

walked, the warmer the night grew, the more still the air. The rich odor of rotting wood, tidal wetland, life, and death.

Teferi emerged from the dune forest into a scrubland dominated by low, wide-canopied trees. Insects and the wind filled the night, a sound so droning that it may as well have been silence. By the hazy, non-moonlight, he could see the landscape rolling away into the far distance, dark features breaking the horizon into a lumpen border—mountains, low and old, many miles away.

The path continued here, more defined. The pale sand shone like a beacon under the moonlight, a ribbon that stretched for a dozen yards into the grassland before giving way to a packed-earth path, rutted with light cart tracks, dry veins further eroded by the rain.

Teferi crouched down and reached out to the sand. He hovered a hand over an old footprint and, with a slow, looping gesture, reached into time, pulling history from the dust.

People came here, once. The beach beyond the dune forest used to be a happy place, where families would spend long afternoons relaxing in and near the gentle surf. Children would run screaming with joy down this path, jumping as they passed under the red archway, hoping to grow tall enough one day to slap the keystone at its zenith. Parents followed, hauling hand carts or soft knit bags filled with the day's supplies: dried and cold provisions, water, blankets, written stories, baskets in case they found mussels or caught small fish, coins to haggle with the vendors that patrolled the shore.

Teferi closed his eyes. With his other hand, he described a larger loop. Casting the net wider, back to the breakers and the water's edge. Visions came to him like memory, like dreams.

Long, wide-bellied, brightly painted fishing boats once lined the beach. By the afternoon, most of the sailors would have returned with their catches and made their way to the markets farther inland. Some would lounge on the beach with their lovers and friends, others might stay behind, chipping barnacles or painting fresh color onto the curved hulls of their boats. Huge nets fluttered from drying towers. Some of the laborers and sailors slept the long day off here, in the shade under their belly-up vessels, under the soft rain and heady ocean scent of their drying nets.

Another rotation. Bring the past closer.

Fewer families came here. Those that did walked together, close together, and some of the parents wore old weapons—daggers, staffs of hard wood capped in iron. The boats did not have any barnacles on them, and their paint was sun-bleached. It had been some time since any sailors had taken them out to sea; the older hulls were beginning to crack. The nets, hung to dry, had whitened, stiffened, grown brittle. The sailors didn't take their nets out anymore because they didn't need them. The sailors' fear was the same as the parents' fear, and it was Teferi's fear, the same that wriggled around at the base of his skull, that inner voice that whispered: be afraid of the sea. Be afraid of the night. Be afraid of what you can't see.

Another rotation. Closer.

Fear. The buzzing of insects in the present blended with the crashing of waves back then and the horrible sound of screams high on the sea-borne gale. Cataclysm. The ground shook under the stampede. The ground reached up, lurching, moving.

Another.

Empty. Rain washed over waves that beat against the flanks of the dunes.

Another.

The beach returned. The water was still as glass. A gentle wind tousled the dune grass, and then died.

Another.

At the far end of the path, at the edge of where Teferi's recall failed and the darkness became absolute, a finger of mist probed forward. It curled, then faded, plucked by an unfelt wind.

The path had a heartbeat of its own, once: the footfalls of people bound for the sea and those returning home. Wrenn would have called it a song, Teferi thought. He stood and closed his spell. The stink of chronomancy faded. Teferi looked behind him. The path, too, was a body. A dead body he knew, stretching toward a distant horizon, beyond which there was nothing. A void, empyrean, severed from time and everything else.

Zhalfir. Nearly four hundred years later, he was back in Zhalfir.

Zhalfir

Miles inland, the simple path Teferi followed joined with a broad, cobblestone road, running horizon to horizon, parallel to the coast. Without the sea breeze, the night clung to the day's heat. Tall grass lined the road, and the calls of insects drowned out thought.

Teferi, with little direction, turned to the left and started walking.

Hours later as dawn approached, the clattering of carts and hooves woke him. Teferi had settled just off the road to sleep; he could not now. Aching, he moved closer, using the thick brush for cover, and watched as a caravan trundled past.

It was a long train of ten wagons each pulled by a gang of docile beasts—oxen or buffalo. Caravanners rode atop the wagons on shaded benches and wore light, layered clothing, cloaks in earthy tones of green and red. Their demeanor was calm, if tired—many held steaming mugs of coffee or some other hot drink. Teferi guessed them to be the day shift, having risen within the hour to take over from their compatriots who now slept in the tall, canvas-covered carts among the boxes and sacks of goods they transported. He waited, watching the lead carts roll by, taking measure of the armored guards that rode in the rear, some asleep sitting up, lashed to the support beams of their wagon so they did not tumble out. These guards were not the akinji that Teferi remembered—their armor was not uniform, their weapons were plain iron, and they wore undyed cloaks. Likely road-bound mercenaries hired cheaply by the caravanners.

Teferi's stomach growled. He was shaking, he realized. Hungry, tired, thirsty, lost—he was alone. He needed help, he needed to risk trust.

Teferi let another wagon pass, and then stepped out onto the road.

"Hello," Teferi called to the approaching caravanner. He raised a hand and waved.

The approaching caravanner screamed, waking her co-pilot with a start. He jumped, flailing his arms, knocking his companion's coffee into the air. The oxen hauling the cart were unfazed, happy to come to a stop. The lead bull snorted, swung its head to look at Teferi, and blinked.

The commotion brought the caravan to a halt. Shouts, cries of "halt!" and "attack!" rang out up and down the line of wagons, and with a great cacophony, the guards spilled out of their posts, some tangling themselves in their sleeping lines, most moving with enough speed that they had Teferi surrounded and at spearpoint within the minute.

"Who are you, naked man?" One of the guards shouted. She was a hoarse-voiced woman around Teferi's age in used but well-maintained armor. A fur collar over a repaired royal blue cloak marked her as

once being a member of a warband. Likely the leader of this party, then. Like the rest of her guards, she held her spear aimed at Teferi's chest.

"A traveler," Teferi said. "I was attacked by bandits," Teferi lied. "Two days ago, near the coast. They took my clothing and my food and left me for dead. Please—if you have anything you can spare."

The guard leader relaxed. "Bandits," she said, waving for her compatriots to stand down. "Someone find him a cloak. Near the coast? Then don't worry, traveler—they won't trouble you anymore. We dealt with that clutch of traitors just last night."

"You did?" Teferi asked. He hid his surprise well. One of the guards passed him a spare cloak. Teferi pulled it on, taking a moment to look over the guards. Many wore bandages around their limbs, sides, and heads. It had been a rough fight.

"They're getting bold now," the guard leader grimaced. "People can't live under a hanging sword—they get angry. Hungry. No stomach for sacrifice."

"Times are hard," Teferi agreed. No stomach for sacrifice? How long had it really been for them, he wondered—moments, or years?

The leader looked down, firm, considering her next words. "We didn't find any of your party alive," she said. Direct, matter of fact. "Their bodies are in the last cart—we're taking them back to Kiingal. You can come with us and speak for them." The guard leader nodded. The decision made, she clipped a short, sharp whistle: back to work. As the caravan got underway, she started walking and motioned for Teferi to follow.

Teferi fell in line, holding his cloak closed. The dawn had fully broken now, and the day's heat rose with the sun.

"You look familiar," the guard leader said. "I am Eshe. Where are you from? What is your name?"

"Sefu," Teferi lied again. "I'm from Kipamu. I have one of those faces," Teferi said, smiling. "It makes me a good trader—everyone trusts their friend."

"Indeed."

Eshe and Teferi walked in silence, keeping a steady, comfortable pace alongside the large, rolling carts.

"You haven't asked about the dead."

"The dead?"

"Your comrades," Eshe said. "How many of them were there, again?"

Damn. Teferi couldn't turn and check, the cart was too far back. Instead, working quickly, he channeled a subtle spell and pulled the answer from Eshe's memory. He was never the best at scrying. Among the old guard of the Gatewatch, mind-reading was Jace's purview. Opening the realm of inner selves as one does an encyclopedia—it made Teferi uncomfortable to plunge into that private place, to risk plucking the wrong strand and unraveling the puzzle box that was the human mind. Moreover, he found it wrong, an invasion—but there was a need, he was desperate, and time was against them all.

A slight ringing in his ear. The acrid stink of burning grass. A single scream, cut short by a leaf-blade spear.

"Ten," Teferi said, the memory fading.

"Ten dead?" Eshe shook her head. "A tragedy. But don't worry," she said. "We will take good care of you."

The caravan halted that next morning, a day out from Kiingal.

“Line up, line up,” the guards called, urging the caravanners to form ranks at the side of the road. “Hurry, there might be bandits,” they cried, admonishing the bleary-eyed traders.

Teferi lined up with the caravanners, swaying a little as he tried to stand at the attention the guards demanded. It had been a fitful night of sleep, even after his nightmares passed. He yawned, responding to the caravanner at his side, who trembled with the strength of her own yawn.

“This a normal morning?” Teferi asked the caravanner.

“No,” she said. She shook, not from the cold, as it was a warm morning, but fear. “Do not trust these bandits,” she said, whispering, speaking quickly. “They killed our guards and took their place, they plan to sell our goods to—”

“Quiet,” Eshe hissed. The caravanner started, surprised. Eshe looked between the two of them.

Teferi met Eshe’s stare, and in that moment understood. She looked at him with pure hatred, with recognition. She knew who he was.

“Back in line Sefu,” Eshe said to Teferi. “Not another move.”

Teferi nodded and stood in line. What happened next was not yet written; there could be a way out of this that was not just a collision. He stayed silent and waited.

The guards stood across from the caravanners, outnumbered but armed and armored, waiting for Eshe to finish her slow review of their prisoners. She walked with stiff precision.

“Listen to me,” Eshe said, as she reached the end of the line. Her voice carried over the lonely stretch of road, rising above the morning’s drone of insects, clear and bright. “You have been patient with us. Kind to us despite how we have treated you. Now, I am asking for one more act of charity: among you, there is a snake.”

The caravanners risked worried glances between each other.

“Zhalfir is at war,” Eshe continued. She turned and started, slowly, pacing back down the line of assembled caravanners. “We have been at war for generations. First, it was the Mirage War, then the Keldon War, and now this long wait. Preparation for the Phyrexian War, the defense of Dominaria against Yawgmoth’s hordes. Our fields, our cities, our lands, our people—bent to war, for generations.” Eshe stopped next to one of the caravanners. Without looking, she pointed at them. “You,” she said. “How many of your family have you lost?”

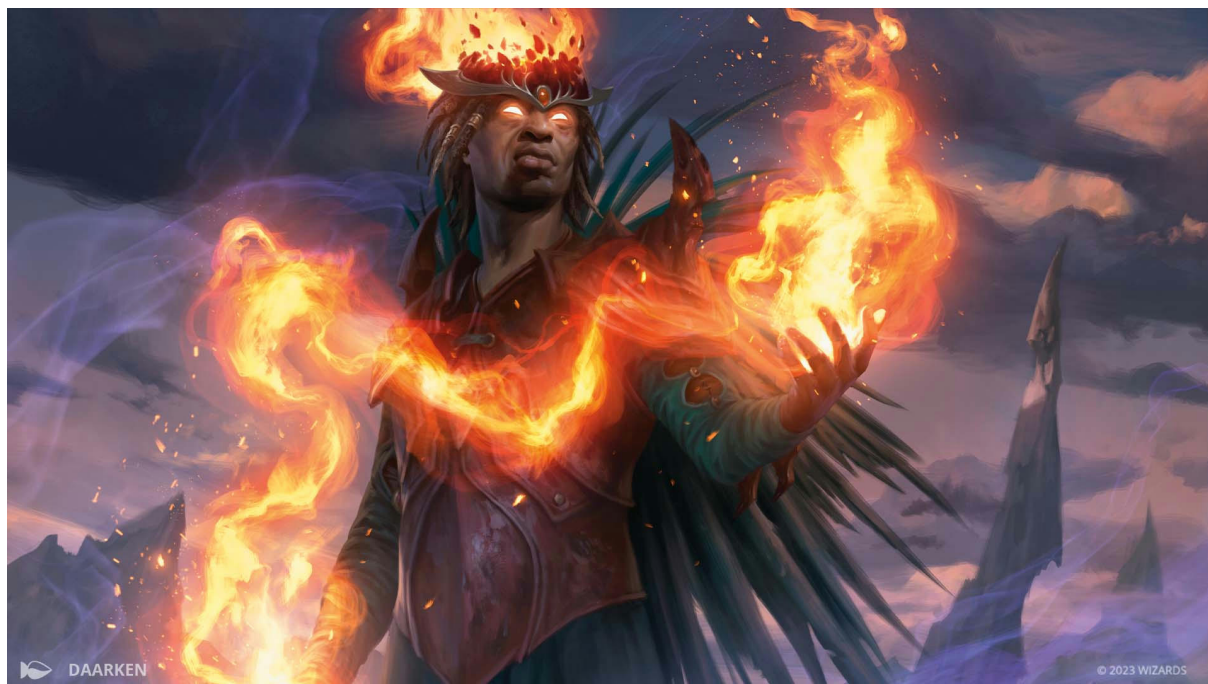
“Three during the Mirage War,” the caravanner said, stammering to croak the words from her fear-dried throat. “My mother, my grandmother, and my grandfather.”

“And you?” Eshe pointed to the next caravanner.

“Two, when the Keldons attacked,” they said. “My husband and my brother.”

“You?”

“My brother, my sister, and both of my daughters to Kaervek’s armies in the Mirage War. And I was wounded at Tefemburu.”



Art by: Daarken

Eshe nodded. She reached out to this last caravanner, overcome for a moment. Resting her forehead against his, she whispered something quiet and private to him. Then, she kissed his forehead and stepped away. She looked to her bandit comrades, pointed to them, and then back to the caravanners.

“Every one of us here is linked in grief,” Eshe said. “We are brothers and sisters and siblings in loss, hunger, and fear.”

Teferi looked down at the red earth beneath his bare feet. No tears. They were not his to cry.

“Zhalfir alone, us alone, stopped every blade aimed at us.” Eshe’s voice shook with emotion. “No matter how many dead, no matter how fearsome the enemy.”

Silence. Eshe tapped the base of her spear against the packed dirt of the road, a rhythm meant to calm, meant to steady unquiet hearts. She walked the few more steps necessary to bring her to Teferi.

“Alone,” Eshe said. All other sound seemed to have fled the warm morning. “One of us here did not suffer that pain. He slipped away. But he has returned,” she said. Eshe raised an arm, pointing at Teferi. “Here is Teferi, the snake.”

The caravanners and guards both broke out into a commotion, shouting and gasping at the revelation. All order was forgotten as caravanners stepped away from Teferi and guards stepped toward, drawing their weapons. Some of the caravanners stalked toward him as well, balling their fists. Teferi did not resist as they grabbed him, he simply held his hands up.

“Eshe, please.”

“No,” Eshe said. She lifted her spear, coiled her strength, and thrust for his heart.

“Stop,” Teferi said, and time obliged.

He sighed. Carefully, he untangled himself from the time-locked caravanners who restrained him, then crouched down, exhausted. He sat.

"I didn't sleep well last night," Teferi muttered. "Eshe, can you hear me?" He asked. He looked up at Eshe, who was not quite frozen, but moving almost imperceptibly slow, still trapped in her thrust. She did not acknowledge him. A low moan rumbled from her throat—her killing cry, slowed.

"Right." Teferi gestured, waving a finger in a lazy arc. Eshe's stab sped up, and Teferi could hear her cry pitching toward normal. Confusion started to bloom across her face as her eyes finally told her mind that Teferi had vanished.

"Down here," he said.

Eshe heard him minutes later. Confusion was turning to anger, but now she was looking at him. Teferi watched her struggle against slowed time, trying to turn the guard on her spear, trying to bring its blade down in an ugly but functional chop.

"I loved a caravanner once," Teferi said. "Her name was Subira. She, like you, thought I was a murderer when she met me. An idiot. She thought many things about me. But she gave me charity. She listened to me," Teferi said. He looked up, not to Eshe but to the sky, blinking back tears. "She listened when I did not deserve to be listened to. We loved each other, and we made a family together." He wiped the tears away. "She didn't lose anyone when I sent Zhalfir away. She grew up on the road, as her family had for generations—Zhalfir was only a story to her." He winced. What he would say next hurt, but he needed to hear himself say it.

"I think," Teferi said, the words thick and cold in his mouth, "that I let her love absolve me of the great pain I caused you. The pain I caused Zhalfir, our home. Subira accepted me, which took a great deal of grace. But her accepting me, loving me—" Teferi shook his head. "Love like that saves a soul, but it doesn't heal this." Teferi plunged his fingers into the red earth, pulled two handfuls up, and let it spill between his fingers. The color painted his palms, dug under his nails. It would never leave. "She passed before I could find a way to fix this."

Eshe's spear finally turned, edge on. It was a foot or more away, and Teferi could stop it without so much as a gesture; he was in no danger, but still Eshe fought. He wiped his palms on his donated robe, then reached up and grabbed the spear's blade.

"I cannot be forgiven," Teferi said. "I can only do what is right." He squeezed the blade, letting it cut his palm. His blood, bright red, ran down his arm, fell from his elbow, and mingled with the dirt. Zhalfir in him, and he in Zhalfir, and the pain the cost. "I loved her as I loved this land," he said. "And I will see Zhalfir safe through what comes next. This is my promise. That is how I fix this."

Could Eshe hear the pain in his voice? Trapped in that moment trying to kill the Destroyer of Zhalfir, a desperate man from the future telling her that her war would not end here. The echo of his own recent experience with Urza was not lost on him; he wondered if those dark shapes outside of the little lake they had swum in were looking in now. If they were turning their vast and unfathomable minds to this moment. If they were going to break in here, too, and send him somewhere else.

Later, Teferi thought. Phyrexia, again, first.

"Eshe, I am going to stop this spell," Teferi said. "But I need you to promise you will let me go." Being known to Zhalfir was unavoidable now. All Teferi could do was buy himself time before greater authorities came searching for him; this party may have been composed of bandits and their prisoners, but bringing news of his arrival would likely cause a storm that would erase their transgressions—or cause enough turmoil that they could escape in the clamor.

Eshe's moan continued. Teferi released the spear and stood, checking his cut palm. He stepped a few paces back from where he had been standing, away from the caravanners that had restrained him and well outside of the range of Eshe's spear. He raised his hands, summoning up a fearsome blue light, a

raw channel of mana that rankled the nose and set even the hairs on the back of his neck on end—this was the bared fang, the crackling core of a fire, something deep and primal not tied to any art but raw, searing power. A demonstration, just in case.

Teferi let time resume its normal course.

Eshe finished her cry, turning from anger to anguish. She stumbled backward, lifting her spearpoint from him. Teferi shook the bluing power from his hands, sending it back into the land.

“Eshe, thank you.”

“Go away,” Eshe said. Sweat slicked her dark skin, and she heaved from the effort of fighting against his magic. She worked to catch her breath, and her arms trembled.

Teferi raised his hands, palms open to her. Eshe did not flinch, but many of the caravanners and guards scurried away, taking cover behind the wagons.

“There is nothing more you can say to us,” Eshe said. “Just go away.”

Teferi nodded. He stood, slowly, and started backing away. Eshe did not look at him. She stared at the ground where he had sat, at the disturbed earth where he had pulled handfuls of soil.

Teferi went away, hurrying down the road, alone. After a long while, Eshe and her caravan departed in the opposite direction, together.

Elsewhere

Teferi slept and dreamed.

There is a great chain of happening, first forged in fires long distant and dead. All things are linked to this chain and travel along it, but they travel backward, only able to see the chain that was and not how it will be. Teferi recalled he tried to explain this to Urza in their moment away, but articulating reality was difficult. Maybe he could have summed it all up better before he gave up his spark for the first time.

Most beings in this great heaving mass of sentient creatures across time and the Multiverse never have the luxury of revelation or witness, much less the chance to grab history itself and bend it to their will; Teferi had given up his spark and then restored it—the power he held might as well be godlike. Time was his, alone.

Anyway, this chain was made by many hands, and a rare few find themselves at the right moment of history to stamp their mark. The further back one goes down the chain, the more faded these marks become. The inverse, then, is true: the closer to the raw edge of the chain, the clearer the maker’s mark is. The signatures of those who have forged a link, spliced a connection, or forced a diversion, all glow, cooling as if set in iron.

Teferi, dreaming, looked down at the chain rattling through his core. No pain at all, just an infinite line, stretching down, down, down into the darkness of the past, each link stamped with his name.

Zhalfir, Months Later

The river water was cool and clear, carrying a welcome chill down from the Little Teremko Mountains. Even as the light dimmed, the vast plane clung to the day’s heat.

Teferi worked, stripped to the waist, wading through the river at the middle point of a long line of other laborers, trousers rolled up above their knees, hauling together a finely meshed net across the breadth

of the river's long and shallow inner bend. Beyond the last fisher, the riverbed dipped, plunging deep as it reached the opposite bank where the current carved steadily away at the sandy loam. This was their final net, the last of the day.

Minutes and hours mingled together. All moments were one: the gurgling water around his legs was the distant rumble of the mighty river. The gentle current was the coarse rope in his hands. Hauled in tempo with the simple song the others sang, then added his voice. The song from his lips was the air from the lungs of his comrades who also pulled the coarse rope, who kept their backs to the gentle current, who, too, heard the distant rumbling river and its soft gurgling.

Labor, shared, time, shared. Beauty at the river, this simple work, this laboring of many arms pulling, many throats singing, many hands on this net crafted by deft-fingered artisans years before, hauling to catch fat silver fish from the cold clear river. Hope in the hands that pulled the fibers, the deft fingers that stitched, the sun-dark arms that pulled hope across time. One net that wrapped hundreds of lives in one unbroken length of time and labor to produce, at the end of it all, life.

"Shaper," the laborer to his side called out to him. All up and down the line, under the song, little conversations carried on. Like the river, the song contained eddies and whorls. "When the war comes, will you march with the warclans, or will you stay here in the village?"

"I would stay," Teferi said. He grunted and worked with his section to haul in the net, hand over hand. "But I serve at the pleasure of the queen. Where she says, I go."

"You live like these fish," the laborer said. "I will join the akinji along with my sisters when the war comes."

Teferi looked over to her. She was young and wore painted shoulders for strength. What she learned in this labor would guide her spear, draw her bow.

"How many sisters do you have?"

"Three," the laborer said. "Neema, Kani, and Amana."

"And your name?"

"Oyana. And I know who you are," Oyana said. "You are quiet, but you do not have to speak to be known. You should speak more."

Teferi smiled. It was kind of her to suggest he speak more, but he felt he had spoken enough. Keeping quiet was prudent and penitent.

"The others said you came to our village to hide," Oyana said. "Kani told me that that you were spit on and cursed when you went to the city. I cannot imagine the beautiful people there doing that, but Kani also says the beautiful people of the city speak with their mouths closed."

Teferi grunted. He never noticed that.

"My sister Neema was already in General Mageta's service when the queen called for them to prepare. Kani, Amana, and I would have had to remain here, doing this," she hauled her section of net. "Now all of us are old enough to fight, and this work has made me strong." Oyana stood and flexed. "When we return, I'll be at the front, and I'll show all of Dominaria who we are and who they are."

Teferi bent to pull the next length, working to reel the net in.

"Zhalfir is ready," Oyana said. Now she spoke with a firm voice, drawing the attention of the other laborers around them. "I am ready. My sisters and brothers are ready. The Phyrexians cannot stand against us."

The other laborers muttered their agreement, rumbling, rising with the sound of the river.

“So you have nothing to be quiet about,” Oyana said to the Shaper. “You are the father of Zhalfir. Our creeds were shaped by you. Our land was moved by you. Speak with your mouth open, Teferi.”

Teferi grabbed up the next length of netting and said nothing. He worked, conscious of Oyana’s eyes on him, of the eyes of all the laborers on him, of the setting sun and the water about his legs turning from cool to cold. He could feel the anger simmering through some of the laborers’ gazes, but more were curious, staring at him the way one would stare at a rare, majestic, dangerous creature.

“What was that?” Oyana asked. Though the other laborers had gone back to their diligent work, Oyana had not. She had watched Teferi, waiting for him to respond. He wasn’t sure if her question was because she had heard him, or if his voice—so long quiet—had been lost under the river.

“No one is ready,” Teferi repeated himself. “No one can stop them. Not even the brave.”

Oyana stepped back. She frowned, looked Teferi up and down, and shook her head. She moved away. Teferi returned to his work.

Downstream, where the catch danced and leaped, the river bent, taking with it the tall grasses and broad trees, the land and the horizon. Distant mountains caught the setting sun’s light, ridges flaring bright in defiance of the end of the day, folds already dark as the approaching night. The clouds above streaked the sky in rich, warm tones of summer. High summer, no ceiling above the plane. And beyond the sky, a blankness. A blindness, empyrean, that hid them all from the terrors beyond.

Looking up, Teferi could only just see that void behind the sky, as if it were bare stone visible under a thin layer of paint—the work of obscuring it not yet complete. He smiled. Teferi was home.

Teferi and the fishers returned to the village at twilight, the long net rolled and carried on their shoulders like the corpse of a great snake. They carried their catch with them and torches to light the way. There was little conversation—at nightfall, the day’s labors caught up to them, and all minds were on food, a return to their families, and rest.

The village blended into the earth, an orderly arrangement of clay-brick homes and long, low community buildings with living roofs. Granaries, kilns, smokehouses, cold forges, tanneries, public stables—this was a hub for the farmers, fishers, hunters, and foragers that lived in the region, and was itself a satellite of the city a dozen miles to the west. A small, squat, domed temple was the only building that stood out from the rest: the creedhall. Unlike the other buildings and homes that blended into the grassland, the creedhall wanted to be seen. It occupied a central location in the village, a humble temple to the five creeds of magic, a faith and philosophy that guided Zhalfir, and a place for members of any creed to rest while crossing Zhalfir.



Art by: Ilse Gort

Teferi ducked into the building, taking a moment to wash his feet in the tiled trough at the creedhall's entrance. A simple screen separated the inner domed space from the entryway, a baffle to dim any light and muffle any sound that might filter in from outside. Teferi breathed in the rich, faintly sweet incense that drifted out. Zhalfirin wellwood, smoldering in the mana well at the creedhall's center. He closed his eyes. A moment of reverence, of an ache mollified, of chambers of his lungs and his heart filling once more after being empty so long that he forgot they could be filled. He dried his feet. Stepped around the entry screen and into the main chamber.

The room under the dome was a pentagon, each face representing one of the five colors of magic. Opposite the entry was a dark wall with a simple door set into it; beyond were humble quarters kept ready for members of the creeds. A low bench ringed in the room, set back from the central feature: a shallow, broad, stone bowl that held a modest bed of smoldering wellwood coals. That dim heat was the only light in this space which, under the dome, felt vast, far larger than the exterior of the mana well suggested.

Teferi moved quietly and slowly, walking to his station just left of the entryway. There he paused before the arc of the Shaper Creed, knelt to grab the edge of the bowl, and pressed his forehead to it. The hum of mana resonated through him, a warm and familiar feeling that thrummed up through this well and collected into the wide stone basin. Somewhere below him, around him, through him, was a leyline.

"Kaya," Teferi whispered. "Can you hear me?"

Nothing. The coals sputtered; a wellwood log crumbling.

"My name is Teferi Akosa. I keep watch for the lost and forgotten. I am the father of Niambi and husband of Subira. I—" Teferi stopped his recitation. A shuffling, from the opposite side of the chamber. He looked over the lip of the bowl to see a young acolyte carefully closing the door behind her. She wore plain white robes, marking her as an inductee of the Civic Creed; an aspiring healer, she had stuck close to Teferi as soon as he had arrived in the village, not to learn but to make sure he did not fall into ruin.

“Adia,” Teferi said, greeting the acolyte.

“Shaper,” Adia murmured. To speak any louder in the creedhall would sound like shouting. “You’re back. A good day?”

“A good day,” Teferi said, standing. “We caught plenty for our quota—the grangers might protest, but we’ll be able to make the queen’s order and have weight remaining for trade.”

Adia nodded. “Soldiers from Kipamu came looking for you.”

“When?”

“Shortly after you left for the river. They thought to find you here.”

“Did they say what for?”

“The war,” Adia said. She spread her hands, palms up. Nothing more to be said. The queen ordered all Zhalfir to be mobilized, the five high wizards and General Mageta concurred, and so Zhalfir would be mobilized. A perfect organ, a state logical and sober, a people motivated to prove themselves, and a plane to be saved. Neat, clean, a myth waiting to be written, with monumental plazas of empty plinths waiting for statues of its heroes, bare walls waiting for mosaics of its great battles.

That alley, that city, that boy whimpering, all that blood, those bodies, the fire above it all, the engine of living steel.

“I told them you had gone to the river,” Adia said. “And that you would return this evening.”

“Dutiful,” Teferi grimaced.

Adia inclined her head, a small gesture in place of a grand bow.

“I’ll need to wash first, and eat,” Teferi walked past the acolyte, heading for his small room. “Go and find the soldiers, tell them I will be here. That’s all. Thank you,” he said, waving Adia away. He didn’t wait to see if the young acolyte departed; he needed food and fresh clothing, a moment to rest. When Adia brought the soldiers back, none of those things would be guaranteed.

Soldiers had been a dramatic understatement. Teferi had expected a handful of akinji following some middle-seniority askari like ducklings trailing behind their mother; the party that greeted him when he stepped out into the creedhall’s main chamber was closer to a war council. A dozen muscled sidars in rich blue robes and finely tanned armor waited for him, tall warriors who wore their swords ready to draw, rich furs across their shoulders and steel in their eyes. The sidars surrounded their leader, an officer in shining silver armor who clutched a red-winged helm under his arm.

“Teferi Planeswalker,” the general roared, spreading his arms wide. “You bastard, I found you!”

“I am just Teferi *Akosa* now, Jabari,” Teferi said. He allowed himself a small smile, relieved for the moment. If the queen had sent his executioner, at least he was a friend. “It has been so long.”

“Has it?” Jabari asked as they embraced. He slapped Teferi’s back, squeezing him, then pulled back, cupping the back of Teferi’s head. “Maybe for you,” he said, pointing, “but for me, no. A few more gray hairs, but not so many as you.” Jabari laughed again and let him go. “You’re back, but where is the rest of the plane? Our sailors still say there is nothing beyond the shore, and our rangers who climb into the mist do not return.”

“Zhalfir is still on her own,” Teferi said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t do that now. No more apologizing,” Jabari said. “I’ve heard stories of your penitent pilgrimage, it sounds exhausting.” He waved for his retinue to part and led Teferi out from the creedhall. “The great

mendicant, always a step ahead of us. Pick yourself up. You are the archmage of Zhalfir, and Zhalfir needs you.”

“Queen Wezna will kill me.”

“Well, yes,” Jabari nodded. “But after you help Zhalfir, first.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Teferi said. “I’m not sure I can even help myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how I got here. I shouldn’t have been able to. Zhalfir is “ Teferi waved a hand, searching for the words. “Lost. Alone. As you said: there’s nothing beyond the shore.”

Jabari considered this, arms crossed, chin dipping to his chest. He frowned, walked a few steps away, stopped, and beckoned for Teferi to follow.

Teferi and Jabari walked together away from the general’s askari and the creedhall. The village was alive around them, full of the sound of song, laughter, and happy noise. The catch had been rich, just as Teferi thought—enough for the village’s tithe to the war effort, and plenty to celebrate.

“You need to know this,” Jabari said, speaking quietly. “My askari only know that we are to recruit new soldiers and to retrieve you for the queen, but they do not know why.”

“Well?”

“You are not the only one from outside to come here.”

“What?”

“Zhalfir is not so alone,” Jabari said. “Old friend, this is how you will help us; you will come with me to Aku to see this other wanderer like you.”

“Aku.” Old memories came back to him: the pillar fields and the tombs, the ancient city of Aku, listing above the steaming quagmire that was the vast swamp of Uuserk. “Not Kaervek?”

“No.” Jabari said. “This one is a woman of regal bearing. We have her secured in amber as well, but before we did,” Jabari reached out to Teferi again, tapping him on the chest to emphasize each word. “She asked for you.”

A woman of regal bearing. He knew too many. Could Kaya and Saheeli have devised some way to cross the void and reach Zhalfir? How long had it been outside of this space? Time inside this place passed differently than time outside of it, he knew that well enough by now. Perhaps they had rebuilt the anchor, maybe they had found Karn, or sent this other Planeswalker as he had been sent, but in a way that they could reel them both back.

“Describe her to me.”

“Young, but with white hair,” Jabari said. “A thin sword, fine golden armor. The loremasters tell me that she looks Madaran. Also, this—” He looked past Teferi and whistled to one of his soldiers, gesturing for him to come over to them. The soldier, who had been carrying a cloth-wrapped object, hustled over. He bowed and offered the cloth to Teferi and Jabari.

Teferi took the bundle. He unwrapped it, revealing an exquisite, wide-brimmed hat. It was armored in glossy, lacquered gold and green—light, but sturdy, balancing defense and ornament.

“A strange hat, but good for travel,” Jabari said.

“Good for wandering,” Teferi muttered. He recognized the woman’s description. Not just any wanderer: the Wanderer. Another Planeswalker, here on Zhalfir. Not Kaya or Saheeli, but another who knew to look for him.

“How soon will we leave?” Teferi asked.

“Tomorrow,” Jabari said. “We will have to hurry: the queen is already there, and she awaits the arrival of her archmage.”

“Tomorrow,” Teferi repeated. Tomorrow they would set off to Aku, to meet the Wanderer and see what message she brought. What was this feeling? Hope, Teferi realized. Hope for a moment, followed by the cold whisper of truth: this was a happy revelation, but not a good one. Zhalfir connected to the Multiverse once more meant Zhalfir would be in danger.

The next morning, Jabari’s sidars were up before the dawn, attending to their supply carts and personal packs. Later, as the sun began to burn away the morning’s steamy haze, a brace of new recruits—youths finally of age to join the warbands—joined them. Teferi arrived with this group, along with the rest of the village. The fishers had already made for the river well before dawn, leaving only a quiet population of elders and dry land artisans to see them off.

The journey would be long, crossing the Mtenda Plains to the rocky plateaus that bordered Zhalfir’s north. In his youth, Teferi knew of roads that wound up into the mighty spines of the Teremko mountains, but he supposed the road they followed diverted west along the coast, crossing the shores of Buleusi Bay before wheeling back south. At the end of that road was Aku, the tomb city, tucked away in the remote Uuserk Marshes far from the light of Kipamu.

“Shaper?”

Teferi looked up from the ground to see Adia, the acolyte of the mana well, approaching him with a bundle of cloth.

“I thought you should have these,” Adia said. She held the bundle out to Teferi, a soft frown on her face.

“What is this?” Teferi asked, accepting the soft bundle. He unrolled it, holding the robes up before him.

“The old Shaper’s robes, before you,” Adia said. “They are clean. I mended the moth and mouse holes. They’re appropriate for your rank. An older style, but”—she shrugged—“so are you.”

Teferi smiled. “Thank you, Adia.”

“I live to serve the creed,” she said, her voice even. She bowed, stood, placed her hands in front of her, still didn’t look at Teferi.

“I have a daughter, Adia,” Teferi said, kindly, as he rolled the up the robes. “She was your age once, too.”

“What?”

“You seem like you have more to say.”

Adia nodded.

Teferi finished securing the robes in his pack, letting Adia take the time she needed.

“If Zhalfir is to return, that means the war is going to start,” Adia said. “Really start. No more waiting or training. ‘Zhalfir Alone’ will end, and we’ll be back in the real world.”

“That is true,” Teferi said.

Adia looked to the side, checking that no one else could hear. All others were engaged in small conversations—elders seeing off their adult grandchildren, eager recruits showing off to Jabari’s askari, Jabari talking with his attendants. They had privacy in the middle of all of that.

“I’m not so sure that Zhalfir returning to the world is a good thing if return means the war begins—actually begins,” Adia said, speaking quickly and in one breath, as if spitting out a foul lozenge she had been forced to carry in her mouth. “This limbo is bad, but it is still peaceful; the Mirage and Keldon Wars took someone from every family, and those were wars against people, like you and me.” She looked up to Teferi. “I am an orphan because of the Keldon War. I serve the Civic Creed because of what that war took from me. I think our people only imagine war against Phyrexia as a test. A great examination, where they can prove their might and show Dominaria where the sun rises. I think that we’ve all lost so much that we can’t imagine losing anything else; we forget what war takes, even when there’s nothing left.”

Teferi reached out and gently maneuvered Adia to the side, a little farther from the group. The recruits were saying their last goodbyes, and the sidars were starting to file into line.

“I’m terrified of the cost of this war,” Adia continued to whisper. “I’m sick with worry—to lose means ruin, but what happens when we win?” She gestured back at the sidars and recruits. “Zhalfir has spent so long waiting and sharpening her swords that when we defeat Phyrexia, we’ll discover that war is the only thing we know how to do.”

Teferi said nothing.

“What do we do?” Adia asked. “What do I do?”

“Teferi!” Jabari called from the head of the forming column, waving him over. “Don’t try to sneak off again, Planeswalker, or I’ll use you to train my scouts!”

Teferi waved, and then pulled on his pack. Adia hadn’t moved. The acolyte waited for an answer Teferi did not yet have. Instead, all he could think of was his own daughter, Niambi.

Once, when Niambi was quite young, they had been playing in their courtyard while Subira was away. Laughing, free, and without fear, Niambi had taken off running. She tripped before Teferi could warn her, and before Teferi knew it, he had frozen her in time, arresting her mid-fall.

He remembered walking around her, trying to gauge every possible outcome of releasing her from what he could glean of that one moment, frozen in time. He could have kept her there forever if he wanted—and part of him wanted that, to keep her there, safe, away from the world—but he had shaken away that dark thought. His decision was to find a middle between fall and salvation: to catch her.

He could not catch them now, but he could be there with them all.

“Some things are so big,” Teferi said, “that there’s nothing you or I can do to stop them.”

“Not you,” Adia said. “Not bigger than you. You sent us away to protect us, so keep us away. Protect us, protect Zhalfir.”

“I can’t.” Teferi shook his head.

“But you did!”

“I was a different person back then,” Teferi said. “I was more. Less. I was someone else.” He looked to the road. All the way to Aku and beyond. “Listen, Adia, I have not been here for many years, but in my brief time back—Zhalfir is not just war. We do not just fight. We were something else before all of this,” Teferi said. “We can’t stop what is coming, but we can control what happens after.” Teferi gestured to

the soldiers, the recruits, the land. “There is a great terror approaching, yes, but it will only remain as long as we choose to hold on to it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We are not bound by fate,” Teferi said. “Only our past. We were not always soldiers. We were not always alone.”

Adia lifted a finger to respond, then stopped. She composed herself. “May you reach your destination,” she said. Adia did not wait for Teferi to reply, but left, walking quickly back to the village. Teferi did not try to stop her, only watched as she pushed through the ranks of eager recruits. Her robes, white as clouds, disappeared into the crowd.

What had he thought, back when Niambi fell? *No amount of soul-searching could bring back Zhalfir.* Well, some amount of soul-searching brought him back, only to find that no amount of apologizing could fix what he had done. It was never going to be as easy as bringing Zhalfir back; Zhalfir was not just a name on a map. It was a nation, a people, a history, a future, and nothing he could control. Nothing he could save on his own, no matter how much he wanted to. Wasn’t that the mark of a good parent? Knowing when there was nothing that they could do but be there for their child when they needed them the most? He had wronged them all, but he could stand with them now; he could teach them how to brace against the fall and help them stand after.

“Teferi!”

“Jabari,” Teferi shouted back. He waited a heartbeat. Reached his fingers to his lips, kissed them, touched them to his forehead, and placed his hand over his heart. An old gesture. Gratitude to this place for what it gave him, for what it taught him.

Teferi left with the soldiers and recruits, marching alongside them up the long road to Aku.

Aku, Weeks Later

The journey to Aku was not long, but it was fraught with danger, but Jabari and his soldiers—with Teferi’s help—had seen the road to its end without loss. Upon reaching the city, without even time to bathe or eat, runners came to collect Teferi and Jabari.

The halls of Aku were warm and solemn. The queen’s presence demanded tapestries be hung and rich rugs rolled out over the glossy floors, for braziers to be loaded with smoldering wellwood and other finely scented fuels; Aku might have been a tomb city, but it was not a scorned place. These decorations were for the living and the dead both: Zhalfir’s royal lines rested here, and the queen had come to them to seek inspiration, comfort, and spiritual guidance—solemnity was a sign of respect, not fear. Peace, to better channel the wisdom of a people.

However, this sense of peace did not extend throughout the entire city. The Amber Tombs, where the past’s dark secrets were held under guard by the strongest magics, the most ancient and powerful wisdoms Zhalfir’s ancestors could impart, bristled with unsettling energy. Extra torches and glowstones were ordered in to banish the persistent shadows that lingered throughout the corridors; this was especially the case inside of the Amber Tombs’s main dome, where one could keep watch on the most dangerous threats to Zhalfir.

Teferi and Jabari followed the runners through the winding corridors of Aku’s central district to the Amber Tombs, where the queen waited for them. Every turn of the narrow, high halls of Aku’s streets was patrolled by a pair of queen’s guard, often accompanied by a Shaper Creed or, worryingly, Civic Creed clerics wearing armor.

“Not a normal deployment, right?” Teferi whispered to Jabari as the two of them walked past a saluting pair of clerics.

“Not at all,” Jabari muttered. “Something must have happened in the tombs.”

“Maybe the queen will stay my execution,” Teferi said. “I’m joking, not pleading,” he added. “To be clear.”

Jabari grunted, not smiling, and picked up the pace.

Teferi and Jabari reached the Amber Tombs to find its entrance crowded with soldiers and clerics, weapons drawn, some facing toward them, others facing inside. Two officers, askari of some high seniority, argued with each other in whispers, their voices harsh and unintelligible in the echoing hallway.

“Askari,” Jabari said, firm, loud but not shouting. His voice cut through the noise. “What’s happening? Is the queen in danger?”

The sidars stopped arguing, both turning to Jabari in unison.

“Kaervek has escaped,” one of the askari said. She was composed, but nerves thinned her already severe face. “His prison shattered. The general is wounded, but stable.”

“When?” Teferi asked.

“An hour at most,” the askari said, wiping sweat from her brow.

“General Mageta was wounded *an hour ago*?” Jabari asked, shocked, his voice rising.

“We only just discovered him,” the askari said, raising a hand to try and calm Jabari. “He was wounded by Kaervek’s prison shattering, but will survive—it is bad, but not fatal.”

“Let us through,” Teferi ordered. Little time for words.

The guards parted. Teferi led Jabari through into the central chamber of the Amber Tomb, a single, vast, dark dome. Sconces sunk into the wall at regular, regimented intervals, dim lights glowing deep within them. All were empty, but it was easy enough to discern what they once held: amber prisons.

The chamber was ancient, and legends whispered of dark origins, magics and rituals Zhalfir’s ancestors risked employing to ensure those who needed to stay locked away did, suspending a warding pendulum from the dome’s apex to serve as a warning system. The scholars of Zhalfir waved these histories away as myth and wishful fantasy—but few ever visited the central dome of the tombs, and all of those that did could not deny a certain unnerving quality to the room. A silence blanketed the chamber that, being a dome, should echo like a concert hall. A deep, sure feeling that, should that dully burnished pendulum twitch, ruin would follow.

With horror, Teferi saw that the pendulum had snapped and fallen to the polished floor of the dome. Its point was embedded in the ground, its large chain coiled around it like the corpse of a great snake. The floor, polished to a mirror shine, had shattered. Dark liquid—General Mageta’s blood, Teferi guessed—pooled near the pendulum, resisting the efforts of a handful of soldiers who tried to swab it up.

Queen Wezna stood off to the side, conversing with two robed figures, one in sky blue and the other in a velvet black. A third, armored in white, stood off to the side, idly examining the fallen pendulum and the shattered ground. Teferi did not recognize any of the robed figures—the leaders of their respective creed, he was sure—but the queen was unmistakable, aged only a decade since last he saw her centuries prior.

“Your grace,” Jabari called, bowing quickly as she turned. “I beg your understanding; we have only just arrived—”

“Three hundred and sixty years,” Queen Wezna said, striding toward Teferi. She did not shout—she declared, and the dome resounded with her voice. “Three hundred and sixty years gone, and it is still us against them,” The queen said. “Phyrexia looms at our borders, Kaervek has escaped, and General Mageta wounded.” She stopped a few paces away, trailed by the three creed leaders. “And you, returned to us. There is no punishment great enough to justly weigh the acts you have committed—tell me why I should not order my sentence for you carried out right at this moment.”

“If you kill me,” Teferi said, “they will win.”

The queen inhaled, exhaled. Nodded.

“Sidar Jabari,” Queen Wezna said, speaking to the old officer without breaking eye contact with Teferi. “The Civics have a hospital in the pillar district; the general convalesces there. Go and see him. You will lead the army until he recovers.”

“Yes, your grace,” Jabari said. Teferi heard him walk away, the sound of his boots hurried on the polished stone.

Queen Wezna turned and walked back to the fallen pendulum, hands crossed behind her back, thinking. She stopped before her three creed mages, back turned to Teferi.

“You were not summoned by me,” Queen Wezna said, speaking to Teferi. “I cannot have you brought to justice for your crimes—great or small—yet, but I have my pride.” She turned back around to face him. “I did not summon you here.”

“Where is she?” Teferi asked.

The queen reached into her robes, pulled out a small, palm-size amber bauble, and tossed it toward him. The amber prison bounced, skipping off the polished stone floor, and slid to a stop at Teferi’s feet.

Teferi bent to pick up the prison, pinching it between his pointer finger and thumb. He lifted it up to the light, illuminating the figure within. Small, frozen in time, likely moments after planeswalking, a warrior mid-strike. Squinting, Teferi could see on her face a look of determination slipping to confusion—a hard brow softening, her mouth opening to ask a question, her eyes wide with surprise.

The Wanderer.

“When you are done looking, set it down on the ground.” The queen said.

Teferi obliged. He set the prison gently on the ground, and then stepped back.

Queen Wezna snapped her fingers, and the white-armored creed leader stepped forward. He whispered a quiet spell, subtle and without theater. The prison began to glow.

“Another step back, archmage,” he said, looking over the rising light at Teferi.

Teferi obliged, stepping back as the prison began to spit and spark. He shielded his eyes, turning as the prison snapped, bursting open with a sharp report followed moments later by a short, sharp exhalation as the Wanderer finished her swing, crying out in surprise.

The Wanderer recovered, resetting her stance and guard, breathing hard, her composure rattled but not broken.

“Wanderer,” Teferi shouted, hands up and palms out. “It’s me.”

“Teferi?” She shouted, overloud. The Wanderer quickly took in her surroundings, guard high. “Where am I? How long has it been?”

“Aku,” Queen Wezna said. “On Zhalfir. It has been a month since you arrived.”

“A month?” The Wanderer repeated. She lowered her sword, eyes searching the space between them for something only she could see. “That’s impossible—Teferi, you only disappeared days ago!”

“The anchor failed,” Teferi mused. How? Serra’s powerstone—the potential of a plane, shunted through him—something to do with the sylex. That space that he and Urza went to after it detonated—all that potential had to go somewhere, had to find something to cling to. Chance, fate, or some combination of the two.

“We might not even have the day,” The Wanderer whispered. Her form flickered, shuddering. She was losing her hold on the plane.

“What do you mean?” Queen Wezna asked.

“New Phyrexia’s invasion is upon us,” the Wanderer said. She looked to the queen, then to Teferi. “Our attack was scattered across the plane, Nissa’s gone—I think we’re too late. I don’t think we can stop them.”

A cold moment followed. Teferi stepped back, reached behind him, and sat on the ground. He dropped his head into his hands. All around him, the tombs exploded into action. The queen shouted orders to the three creed leaders, who dispatched their attachés and lieutenants before hurrying to depart for their commands. The Wanderer crouched down next to him and tried to tell him about the battle at Urza’s Tower, the raid on New Phyrexia, the growing tree, the desperate plan, but her voice hiccupped and stuttered, and she flickered in and out of coherence. She faded, her unstable spark pulling her away.

Maybe it was the uncanny acoustics of the domed chamber, or some comforting spell he had unconsciously cast, but it all faded to the side, sloughed off like a too-heavy coat. Jabari’s voice echoed in his memory. No more apologizing. Teferi pulled his hands away from his face and looked to his palms. Though he washed them many times since that day on the road, they still were tinged with Zhalfir’s red earth. He could never wash this land away. He could never be alone.

Eshe, who had weathered the ages.

Oyana, who looked to danger with bravery.

Adia, who longed to build a peaceful future.

Subira, whom he had loved, and who had loved him.

Niambi, whom he loved, and who loved him.

Zhalfir, with whom he stood, father of the creeds, father of a nation.

“It’s not too late,” Teferi said, a fierce grin spreading across his face. The Phyrexians’ probing through the Multiverse had awoken something that their machine minds would learn to fear: Teferi, who would show them that the sun rises in Zhalfir.