

Episode 1: Triumph of the Fleshless

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *March of the Machine*

It is good to be Phyrexian.

It is good to be Elesh Norn.

This has always been true, but never more so than now. Three worms—Kaya, Kaito, and Tyvar, the others called them—are before her begging for mercy. Oh, they don't do it out loud, but Norn sees it. Norn understands. Fear haunts their eyes and their too stiff bodies. Weapons tremble in pale-knuckled hands. How misguided they are. If they submit, she could do away with all of their faults, but she knows they'd turn down such a magnanimous offer, such an act of benevolence. There is no point in asking.

Just as there is no point in their efforts.

All will be one. And it won't be very long, now.

"Stay with us," she tells them. "Behold the glory of New Phyrexia."

"Go to hell," says the smallest. The largest moves toward her—but the other pulls him back. Typical. Discord lives within the hearts of the nonbelievers. Even when there are so few, they are never truly united.

If only they could see that.

A mere flick of Norn's wrist is enough to summon the portals—everything in this place is keyed to her will. Metal clicks and slides and rearranges around them. Five irises open on five alternate planes. No matter how their skies started—warm violet, slate gray, or coal black—they now pulse with red light. Phyrexian symbols blaze among the clouds. It is from these portals that she now watches the invasions. Realmbreaker's massive, barb-tipped limbs burst forth, anchoring themselves wherever they please. Rivers of blessed oil run onto the earth. Pods fly from the secured barbs, soaring in all directions—but always in perfect sync. Some birth centurions, some birth golems, and some lie in wait for the lost souls they will soon welcome.

To the three lost creatures before her, a sunrise is beautiful. Phyrexia knows better. Thousands of mouths speaking with one voice; thousands of eyes with a single vision; thousands of minds with only one thought. That is beauty.

And they've created it with their own multitudinous hands.

"Have you ever known such unity?" she asks.

The smallest one opens her maw. Before the words come out, another far more pleasant voice cuts her off. "We've done as you asked."

Lukka—that is his name, isn't it? One of the humans retches at the sight of him, but to Phyrexia, he's a shining example of the future that awaits them. Oh, so he was rough around the edges. They'd smooth those soon enough. Flesh trembles at its own destruction; it's only natural.

Norn turns toward her holy evangels. Jace slips off—he knows what Norn wants, of course, knows before she has to say a thing. Three more arrive in lockstep: Lukka, Atraxa, and Ajani. Nahiri trails behind, the newest member sent to fetch her fellows. Carried like a trussed up offering between them is the once powerful Sheoldred. Out of her armor, she is pathetic and small—an overgrown Newt who once dreamed of praeterdom. All of Phyrexia knew she was only a pretender to the title. Now it's finally laid bare.

Lukka and Ajani present their quarry. Sheoldred spits, her black spittle falling well short of its target. Tied as she is, her natural inclination is to try and wriggle free. How satisfying to see her reduced to this.

"What shall we do with her?" asks Ajani. His eyes flick to the prisoners. "Or do they need dealing with first?"

Norn beholds the little worms, so afraid. Already they're skittering backward. Their plans are as obvious as their terror: leave New Phyrexia, tell the others, gather their meager forces and mount a counterattack. So the efforts of the flesh-bound often go. Where has all that struggle gotten them? Here in the inner sanctum, hopelessly outnumbered, they still think there's a way out of this.

It's amusing—in the way that death is amusing once you've transcended it. "You want to leave, don't you? Phyrexia shall permit it. On one condition," she says. "Nahiri—restraints."

Stone springs from the ground, encasing the three imperfect Planeswalkers. Only their heads remain unimpeded. It won't work forever, Norn is well aware—she saw the smallest one phase through solid matter earlier—but it will serve its purpose. And if they spit on her benevolence, then they've earned their fates.

"You shall be the prophets of our coming," she says. "In time you shall tell your unbelieving brethren what you have seen: a united future."

"What a joke," Sheoldred whispers. Speaking strains her chest against its bonds. "All of this grand-standing won't change the truth: you're only looking out for yourself, Norn. Phyrexia means nothing to you unless it conforms to your mad ravings. You've never cared about unity, you only care about yourself."

"Is that so?" Norn repeats. She slams on the arm of her throne. "Elesh Norn's cares are Phyrexia's cares. The Argent Etchings demand we spread the glory of New Phyrexia, Sheoldred. Long have you tried to rot away our holy teaching from within—but the time for that is since past. Our future is gleaming and perfect, free from your stain. Phyrexia no longer has a place for those who crave power over unity. Ajani—execute her."



Art by: Joseph Weston

For once, Sheoldred does more than whisper. Whatever her screaming protest may be, it's lost in the swift descent of the axe. Sheoldred's head bounces to a stop at her feet, smearing black ichor across the porcelain floor. Norn pays it only a moment's attention; her servants will remove the corpse for processing. One mustn't waste perfectly good parts—they will serve Phyrexia as Sheoldred could not. Muscle strains against stone as the largest of the prisoners tries to wriggle free. Given enough time, he will.

Elesh Norn counts on them escaping. There must be those who spread the gospel, after all, and they cannot do so from here. Once they understand how futile it is to fight the inevitable, they can depart.

But once more to the work, once more to the invasion.

"Rejoice, blessed evangels," she begins. "Our symbol blazes across the planes, our sacred words in its shadow. Soon, we shall awaken the Multiverse from its slumber. The glorious light of completion—of New Phyrexia!—is nigh. With the barrier of their skin removed and their minds joined to ours, the others will soon come to know the ecstasy of Phyrexia as you do."

Keening howls ring within the sanctum, carried up from the bowels of New Phyrexia. How beautifully they sing that which cannot be put to words!

The evangels try to join their voices to the masses—but they are new, their throats too delicate. A lack-luster addition. A choir is only a choir if each voice works in harmony with the others. The dissonance they cause is grating and disappointing.

"Quiet upon the congregation!" she screams.

And lo, there is quiet.

"Our work is not yet done. We stand before the untarnished glory of eternal completion; we need only take our final steps toward it. For your zealous service and devotion, we have decided to grant you the honor of uniting your homelands. Tell us—Nahiri, where is it you were born?"

The kor has too much flesh by far, but they made do with what they could given the time. "Zendikar," she says. "Many lifetimes ago, I was born on Zendikar."

Norn nods. “Nissa,” she calls. “Show us this place.”

Nissa is the finest gift the Planeswalkers have given Phyrexia. Even standing at Norn’s side, she can steer Realmbreaker’s attention. To say nothing of her combat capabilities. If things continued at this rate she might overtake Tamiyo as Norn’s favorite new servant—but there’s yet time to see. And, in truth, all serve Phyrexia in their way.

The portals shift, joining together into a long oval. Disparate images ripple and reform into something new, something whole, something *complete*. Before them: an ancient forest, the trees thick as towers. What little can be seen of the sky is as verdant as the canopies overhead. Elves move among the branches like ants in a hive, each armed, each looking up, each waiting for *something*.

They do not realize how soon it will find them. The branches they stride along bend into Phyrexian shapes; holes within trees and stone herald the shapes their bodies will take. Norn’s portal is far from the only one: Phyrexia’s thousand eyes stare down upon them as they stare up. Nahiri snarls at Nissa. “The Mother of Machines cares not for these trifles. Show her one of the Skyclaves.” Again, the image ripples. This time, the canopy of trees frames a view of a floating city. Hedrons surround it like the feathers of a withdrawn bird. Stark white against the sky, its edges harsh and precise, Norn finds it immediately beautiful. Perhaps the shorter lived could make something useful after all.

“You have plans for this?” Norn asks.

Nahiri nods. “Yes, Grand Praetor. This is a relic of my people—an ancient weapon we once used to dominate the plane. I can wake it once more to enact our will.”

A smirk curls Norn’s lips. “You wear your new purpose as well as you wear your raiment. Go to this place; our forces will meet you there.”

Nahiri needs no further instruction. In three steps, she winks out of existence, the sanctum resounding with a boom. Norn glances to the prisoners once more. Gone already; they must have timed their departure with Nahiri’s to conceal the sound. What pitiful creatures, to turn away from such beauty.

“Lukka. How will you bring the glory of Phyrexia to your home?”

Sheoldred’s blood still stains his face and carapace. “O Reverend Mother, I will bring it to heel.”

“Specifically, Lukka,” she says. “That you will bring it to heel is a given.”

A grunt leaves him; he shifts his weight side to side. “The monsters,” he offers at last. “Once they’ve joined the fold, the others will cower before us.”

She does not like this answer—it implies that the humans don’t already cower before them. Neither does she like the simmering anger beneath the surface, anger which lends itself to missteps. Bloodlust is all well and good in a brute, but in a lieutenant? The Planeswalkers would exploit it. Lay a trap for him that he couldn’t ignore. Faced with staying to ensure the compleation of the plane or bolting off to settle a personal grievance, Lukka would always choose the personal grievance.

“Very well,” she says. “Go to Ikororia. Add these monsters to our ranks. But do understand what the price of failure is, Lukka, and don’t forget your true home. You have been anointed with the sacred oil of New Phyrexia—you are no longer a creature of base instinct, you belong to a greater whole.”

“And ever may it reign,” he says.

His departure is as swift as Nahiri’s, and its effects as palpable. Norn allows herself to wonder how much more quickly all this might have come together if Phyrexia had the same ability.

No, it is good Phyrexia had to carve its victory from the spine of an uncaring plane. Anything less would have left them unsuited to the job.

“Grand Praetor,” says Tamiyo.

Norn is shaken from her thoughts. “Yes?”

“He will most certainly die on Ikoria,” she says. “A bullheaded man often makes hasty decisions—I imagine you intend for it to go that way?”

“If he fails, he goes the way of Sheoldred, and one of you rains judgment upon him,” Norn answers. “If he succeeds, the plane is ours, and he will serve penance for any mistakes to our satisfaction. Either way Phyrexia is served.”

Tamiyo nods. “As I thought. You are as well reasoned as ever.”

“The Grand Cenobite does not make mistakes,” says Atraxa. The others are unaccustomed to her voice—they find it harsh and painful, a shard of glass to their delicate eardrums. Even Ajani flinches.

Norn does not. “Indeed. Tamiyo—was it Kamigawa you called home?”

“Once, before I came to understand the truth of things,” she says.

“Nissa,” Norn commands. The single word is all it takes. Once more the portals ripple and shift. The plane that greets them shines beneath a night sky. Artificial lights illuminate a glittering city. The view swings closer, as if on the end of an arrow, and soon they are within the city itself, tiered structures looming near the shore, reaching for the dark above. The people walking the streets are soft and pliable.



Art by: Raymond Bonilla

It strikes her that no one is panicking. Perhaps they’ve realized completion is nothing to fear—but it is more likely they do not know it is coming, in spite of the portals overhead. Here in the moments before the barbs make anchor, these people go about their pointless lives. A man ingesting some sort of food. He speaks to another person situated at a small stand offering more of the same, asking him a question whose answer will soon be irrelevant. A woman walking with two of her offspring. They are begging for an extra helping of the candy in her hand. She tears off pieces for each, leaving herself without—a sacrifice no one will remember in light of what’s about to happen.

Tamiyo watches, too. Her grip tightens around an iron-bound scroll. Among the evangels she is the only one not covered in blood.

“Did you love Kamigawa?” Norn asks.

“I did,” Tamiyo says. “A land of heroes and scoundrels, betrayers and champions. It seemed there were a thousand possibilities for how life might change in the future. I wanted to see them all. And I wanted to discover, with my family, which one was true. Now I love what it will become.”

“Your family,” Norn repeats. Ajani crosses his arms—he is listening intently, knowing there will be questions for him, too. “Do you still care for your family?”

Tamiyo watches the woman and her offspring as they walk down the street. Overhead the first slivers of white come into view. The woman continues. She swings the hands of her children, or they swing hers.

Then, as if remembering she was asked a question, she turns. “I want them to understand what I’ve come to know about the world—about unity. If we are all compleated then we need never be apart again,” she says.

“You understand,” Norn says. “Our family is greater than any you’ve ever known. Welcome the old into the new with open arms, Tamiyo.”

There is no true silence in the beating metal heart of Phyrexia. Metal slides on metal as its denizens go about their great holy work; pistons animate beings beyond human understanding; blades cut away that which is impure. Here, too, they can still hear the distant sounds of Sheoldred’s final contributions: the crack of chitin, the tear of sinew.

Yet the silence that follows Norn’s words is there all the same. Tamiyo watches the screen and makes no sign that she’s heard Norn’s blessed command.

Realmbreaker pierces the earth. Tiered buildings shudder and shed their layers—whole floors tumble away. All around the tiles are falling like jagged porcelain snow. In only an instant the small food stand is crushed. Red spills from beneath, joining the babbling water.

The mother picks up her children, one in the crook of each arm, and runs.

“Tamiyo,” Norn repeats. This hesitation sticks between Norn’s pointed teeth.

A man in black streaks across their view. In a storm of brilliant cuts, the falling tiles are split, directed away from the family.

They see no more of what happens—Atraxa takes flight, blocking the view with her wings. When she speaks, her voice is sharper than the sword, sharper than the unseen knives at work not far away.

“Insolence isn’t tolerated here. You were given a command.”

Tamiyo starts; Ajani flinches. She turns, blinking. “I-I’m sorry, I’ve no idea what came over me—”

“See that whatever it is, you eradicate it,” Norn says. “There can be no space for it. Return with Kamigawa under your control or be recycled into something that serves better.”

“As you wish,” she says. The sense must have gotten back into her—she no longer hesitates in leaving and does not once look up toward the display.

There are only four of them in the room once Tamiyo has gone. Nissa, standing at her side, her eyes clouded with green. Ajani, who watched Tamiyo go, waits for his next set of orders. Atraxa remains airborne. With every flap of her wings her anticipation is palpable.

But patience is a valuable lesson to learn.

“Ajani,” she says, and he inclines his head. “What am I going to ask you?”

“To show you the place where I was born,” he answers.

“No. Your destiny is greater than that. We believe you know where it lies.”

It is not silence that comes between them then but understanding. When he turns toward the mirrors, it is with confidence. “You want to see Theros.”

“Quite right.”

Black covers the surface of the mirrors, black shines bright, black reflects something new.

A city stares back at them—one unlike the last. Wine-red waves lap at golden shores; white houses dot a verdant countryside. Where Kamigawa was swathed in the night, this place is brilliant under the light of the sun. Ships sail beneath the outstretched swords of two guardian statues. On their decks, fishers wonder why their catches have contorted into strange shapes. On the cliffsides, astronomers debate the meaning of the portal’s appearances.

It is as peaceful a view as anyone might imagine, if they do not look closely.

Norn’s heart brims with excitement. They are so close to perfection, so close to a deeper understanding. And she knows it will not be long: Theros is among the first wave of targets.

And it seems they’re going to get a good view of the festivities.

It starts the same as it did on Kamigawa: great white branches bursting from the portals. No trees can be seen here, but the roots find purchase all the same. Pods deploy before the tree has finished its work, so eager is Phyrexia to lay claim to this place. Some burst midair, giving birth to a swarm of insectoid convertors. The wind carries the storm of blades to the market. Metal glints in the skies above, hunks of white porcelain dropping to the earth, hulks cratering the buildings they land upon. Marble crumbles like sand; black oil streaks across the white. Temples bolt their doors only for the war machines of Phyrexia to batter them down. Winged constructs devour livestock and humans alike, some descending on the ships to find their meals. Nets do little to stop them; spears bounce off their proud carapaces.

Phyrexia is hungry. Elesh Norn is hungry. Every clamp of their jaws brings the taste of blood to her tongue—an offering from the chorus to her. She is with them, and they are with her, and soon this place will be one.

“It seems our forces are doing well without me,” Ajani says.

“At slaughtering the weak and capturing the useful,” Norn says. “They will be far more efficient once you are there to lead them.”

“You wouldn’t be sending me there for such trivial reasons.”

He has seen more than he should have, then. Commanders are best when they’re clever, but also at their most dangerous. To be clever is to be individual, and within Phyrexia all are one.

Elesh Norn will have to remind him of this. Possibly with new modifications.

“Theros is important to the future of New Phyrexia.”

As if to help deter further questions, the battle on the other side of the portal escalates. Nissa’s shifted the view to that of someone standing on the shore. Partially submerged in the water is a temple. Atop that temple is a hand swathed in the shifting black of the night sky, dripping rivers onto its steps. Only when their unseen observer looks up does the full picture become clear: there is *something* guarding the place. Part woman and part something else. Strangest—and most tantalizing—is the way parts of her fade in and out of existence.



Art by: Johan Grenier

A creature of that size could conquer whole planes on her own when compleated. Still, if size was the only thing that interested Phyrexia, Norn would have sent someone more trustworthy to Ikoria.

No—whatever this thing is, it’s more than just something huge: it is something Elesh Norn *wants* .

“That,” she says, pointing with one porcelain finger. “You are to bring that within Phyrexia’s embrace.”

Ajani studies the creature. Nodding once, he looks to Norn. There is something like a smile on his muzzle as the plan becomes apparent to him. “Ah—now I understand, it’s the gods you’re after.”

That’s one of their gods? Norn expected more of deities. Not that there are any in existence who could hope to challenge Phyrexia now that it’s taken its proper place. While this creature is majestic in a way, it’s far from pure. Already Norn’s mind races at the possibilities.

“Bring priests with you,” she says. “Bring the Argent Etchings. We will defeat these gods on every possible battleground. For those wise enough to realize the truth of the Multiverse, lend them the power to enlighten their former friends.”

“The etchings will make it easy. It’s belief that makes gods on Theros, not the other way around,” he says. “Once the people understand the truth, the gods will follow.” He looks once more over his shoulder. The creature—the god—has driven a bident through one of their attack ships. On the shore what sailors remain throw their arms around one another in celebration. Wide smiles break out across their faces, made strange by the fear that clings to their eyes.

Deep down, they know it will not be enough.

And this brings Norn an untold, ineffable joy.

“Go,” she commands.

He does. Ajani, ever loyal, does as he is told. As he winks out of existence, she allows herself a moment of pride in his recruitment and creation.

And pride, too, that he did not discover the real reason she’d sent him to Theros. That’s fine enough. Even ignorant of his goal, he’d accomplish it.

Only Atraxa and Nissa remain in the sanctum with her.

“Mother of Machines, highest and holiest of authorities, I live to serve,” Atraxa offers.

“You needn’t waste your time on such inefficiencies,” Norn says. “You’re well aware there’s a reason your task has come last.”

A slight flinch at the reprisal, visible only to the woman who shaped Atraxa’s body with her own two hands. The others could lay claim to whatever parts they wished—but Norn knew Atraxa best, and Norn had her heart. Nothing remained of her former life save that which made her perfect. “Whatever New Phyrexia asks of me shall be done.”

“Nissa—our missionaries once went aground on a place called Capenna. Show us what’s become of it.”

It takes longer for the visions before them to change. Frustrating, but not unexpected; this isn’t a place Nissa knows well. When at last the view comes into focus, they are staring at a golden gate surrounded by white marble. Inscriptions surround the rim. Norn can’t read the language and has no care to. Not that she could even if she’d been familiar with it to start: a shimmering golden haze renders all the fine details fuzzy.

Atraxa says nothing, but she does look up toward Norn. How like a vat-slick, freshly born Newt.

“Our predecessors found this plane by ancient means,” she says. “Though it was thick with a holy stench, they saw within it something valuable—something worth the risk its guardians presented. For the better part of a year they lingered, taking whatever they wished, conducting vital research on the populace, spreading blessed corruption wherever they tread.”

“Until something sealed them away,” Atraxa offers. Good; she’s beginning to understand why she was chosen for this.

“Indeed. Angels. False prophets bound to stone for their insolence,” Norn says. These words must have weight for Atraxa. She lets them ring before continuing. “Fearing the truth we would bring to their people—a unity the likes of which they could never promise—they grew desperate. They gave up their physical forms to suppress our ship’s influence. For years we have been here, and for years we’ve not accomplished a thing. That ends now.”

“It will be done,” says Atraxa. “I will free the ship—”

“The ship itself is of no concern to us. Had they been faithful they would have triumphed. If you do uncover it or its crew, you are to scavenge them for parts. Completion is a gift they no longer deserve.”

“As you wish,” Atraxa says.

“Nissa—show us the atrocity they’ve constructed.”

The view shifts to another nighttime sky, and to the city glittering beneath it. No—Norn refuses to think of it as a city. The towering needle reaching for the stars is an affront in every way. Even without a haze of gold it would reek of decadence. Everywhere the eye falls there is something to appall it: golden shells mounted to vertical shuttles, a sickening worship of fur evident in their coats and dress, the foul noise they called music played by the unworthy tubes of flesh. Its height is hubris, and hubris is its height. All of this constructed on Phyrexian bodies. All of this to keep them away.

“Burn this into your memory. Never forget what they’ve done to us, what they’ve constructed here. The faithless consider themselves divine, Atraxa, but divinity exists only in unity.”

“All must be as one,” Atraxa echoes. From her grip on her weapon, she has little love for the view. “What is it you wish me to do?”

“Teach these people the price of their insolence. They could have joined our ranks, once, but they will no longer find any such mercy from us. You will harvest them all.”

“It will be done,” Atraxa says. With a flap of her wings, she approaches the bridge to the tree—but Norn raises a hand to stop her.

“There is one other task for you,” she says.

Atraxa waits in midair.

Norn points. “The angels that lent this place their protection still guard it today—albeit in a new way. The haze we see here is what remains of their ethereal forms. The faithless call it Halo, and it will be anathema to you. Until you bring the tower down and wake the angels from their rest you will be unable to escape its influence. Your most sacred duty on this plane is to find its wellspring and destroy it.”

Atraxa’s chin dips lower. She looks to the mirrors, then to Norn. “Mother of Machines, it is not my place to question you “

“Indeed, it isn’t,” Norn says. “But your question will be permitted. Speak it.”

Whatever the question may be, Norn will answer. Atraxa is already bound to the will of New Phyrexia—ultimately, it makes no matter what Norn’s answer is, so long as there is one.

“If the ship has been lost for untold years and the atmosphere is poisonous, why not leave this place to the centurions? Why am I being given the task?”

“The reasons are threefold. First: it is a glorious task, and completing it announces your worth to all. Second: your previous life may lend you some protection to this ‘Halo.’”

There are no true silences within the sanctum—but there is something like it as Atraxa waits for the third item, and Norn thinks of how to phrase it.

“Third: there exists a danger to New Phyrexia. In killing New Capenna, we strike at her heart.”

Atraxa’s wings flap once. “This danger—is that why you sent Ajani to Theros, as well?”

“Astute of you,” Norn says. “Yes. This danger cannot be permitted to triumph. You and Ajani will seal our victory.”

“Then all is for the glory of the faithful,” Atraxa says.

She leaves, then. Only Nissa remains—yet she is cold company. Norn’s lieutenant is too preoccupied with managing the tree’s growth to speak with her.

The air is not quite silent in the sanctum.

Norn hates it.

With a gesture, she calls for her attendants. They arrive to recite her own thoughts and teachings to her. In their screeching voices, Elesh Norn forgets her nightmares—and the woman who stalks them, cloaked in white.