

A Man of Parts

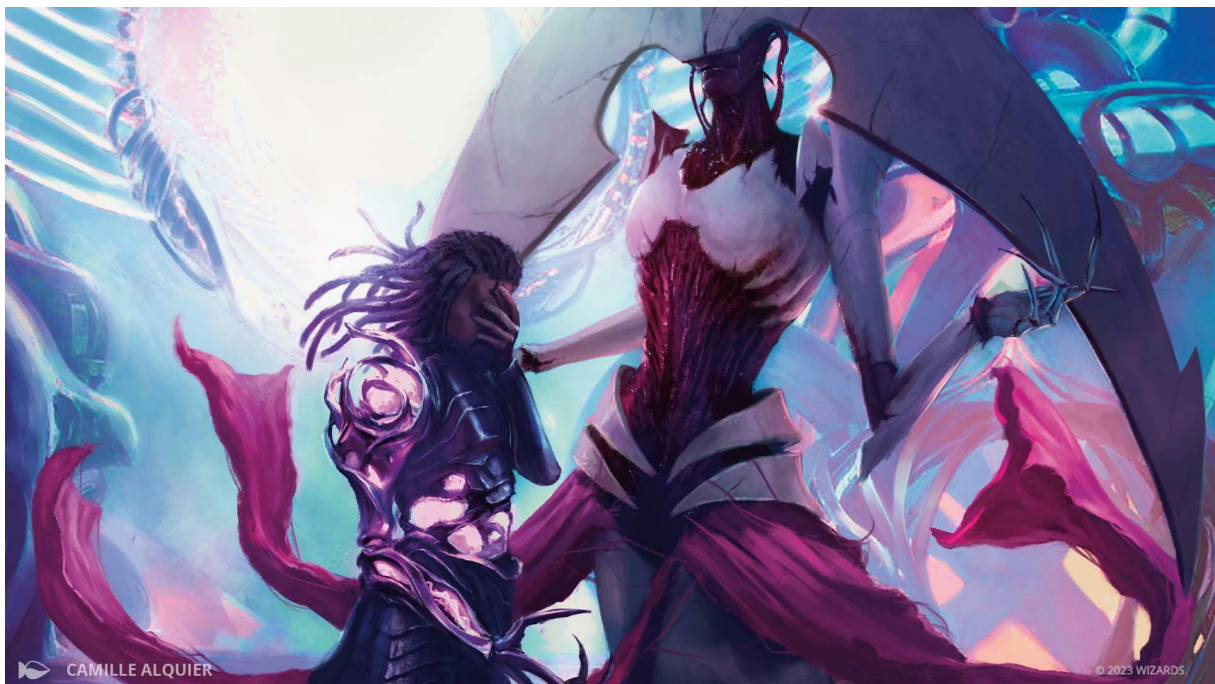
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Unless ordered to do otherwise, all denizens of the Fair Basilica moved in predefined paths according to their station. Aspirants circulated among the vertebral towers like blood coursing through arteries, each step an invitation for the apothegms of the Argent Etchings—Elesh Norn’s word made metal and flesh—to seize them with spasms of convulsive delirium. High above, angels on mute pilgrimages between mist-bound aeries soared on wings of patchwork cartilage. From their vantage point, the constant motion of the aspirants was not the assemblage of thousands, but the handiwork of a great mover, the crafting of a single divine sigil umbilically writhing into existence. Back down upon the grounds of Elesh Norn’s cathedral, chancellors swaddled in oil-soaked pinions and skitterlings possessed by ecstatic frenzy filed in and out of the Grand Annex like lathering maggots proclaiming the wisdom of their beloved Mother of Machines.

Exempt from these endless cycles were those chosen from the armored legions of the Alabaster Host to guard the avenues into and out of the cathedral proper. Their role, unlike all others in the Fair Basilica, was to stand perfectly, inhumanly still, for they were the unblinking gaze of the Mother herself. Woe be to the legionnaire who shirked this distinction to so much as wipe away a blemish on its armor.

So it was no surprise to Tezzeret when the twin centurions standing watch over the front gate didn’t flinch when the Planar Bridge fractured, then tore open the hallowed space in front of them. He was once again on the accursed plane of New Phyrexia, the charred endoskeleton of Rona in his arms.



Art by: Camille Alquier

"I must see Mother," he barked to the guards, the energies from the Planar Bridge eating away his flesh like a murder of ravenous carrion birds. Neither moved nor acknowledged his presence. "Is she here or in the core?" Still no response. "Answer me, damn you!"

"Bring him to us," a voice boomed out. Her voice. "Send the other to Jin-Gitaxias for reconditioning." At that, the guards stepped aside, one taking Rona's remains away, and the other accompanying him on the long march through the internal courtyard. A steady hum filled the area, as did the stink of the sickly sweet, slightly acrid incense burning in the central brazier. There was a fervor that Tezzeret hadn't observed before, the thrill-engorged moments before a ritual sacrifice.

Tezzeret's journey ended inside a chamber held up by struts of bone-like porcelain flaring out from the walls, a set of ribs meeting in the center to form a dais of high steps leading up to the throne of Elesh Norn. A pair of gargantuan animarchs stopped their toiling at the back of the cavern to glare at Tezzeret's approach through the intercostal spaces.

"Honored Mother," he said, kneeling.

"We did not call for you," said Elesh Norn, her voice so loud it felt like it was bursting out of his head. "Why have you abandoned Dominaria?"

"Our forces were overwhelmed," Tezzeret began.

"Not possible. Our breadth is all-encompassing."

"So true, Mother. But there was treachery. Rona, the one I arrived with—"

"One of Sheoldred's minions," said Elesh Norn. There was judgment in her voice as she rose from her seat and began to descend the steps. "Sheoldred, who is an apostate in our eyes! Her forces have moved against us in a reckless grasp at power. The flouting of our mercy despite the thanes' past transgressions. Such sacrilege pains us."

Tezzeret almost stumbled backward. Sheoldred? After the events on Dominaria, Tezzeret had been convinced that Sheoldred had been brought to heel—a wild, headstrong pet, but a pet nonetheless. He'd already planned to blame Rona for his failures. Sheoldred's betrayal was a delicious detail to add credibility to his cover story.

"Rona played her part in Sheoldred's plan perfectly, fooling even me. We were routed when our own troops turned on us."

"And the Planeswalkers?" Elesh Norn asked.

"Escaped."

"You did not follow?" Elesh Norn's shadow towered over him. Reflexively, his shoulders retreated inward, causing sharp jolts of pain from the Planar Bridge to spike, making him feel lightheaded.

"I would have, Mother," he said through gritted teeth. "But I needed to warn you of the snake in our midst. I was concerned."

Norn was close enough now to lean forward, her arm extended, and tip Tezzeret's chin up with her finger. "You love us, don't you?"

One well-placed thrust of his sharpened arm could impale her head or take it right off. Would the sweetness of that action be worth the hell he'd face afterward? Death? If he was lucky. Torture? Still, preferable to what he suspected would truly unfold—the stretching and warping of his body and mind, the victory of the oil over his own tenacious spirit, the end of him and the beginning of his everlasting

servitude. Like Tamiyo. Like Goldmane. Tezzeret closed his eyes and willed his heart to slow, concentrated on the sound of his breathing.

“What child does not love his mother?” he said, looking back up.

“Tell us then *child*. Tell us of the enemy.”

“We encountered the Planeswalkers’ new leader. She struck Rona with her terrifying weapon.” Tezzeret watched Elesh Norn’s ire fade, replaced with apprehension. “The leader’s name is Elspeth Tirel.” Tezzeret let the name linger. In other circumstances, witnessing the Mother of Machines genuinely fearful would have been a rare treat to savor. But the Planar Bridge was sapping away any pleasure he would have felt.

“The weapon—”

“A blade of gleaming white,” said Tezzeret. “Like a shard of a star. We had no answer, just like we will have no answer when she arrives on New Phyrexia. You must agree that this is now an inevitability.”

“We will be ready,” Norn growled.

“None of us is ready. However, she has given up the advantage of surprise. We must take the opportunity—” Another wave of pain swept over Tezzeret, forcing him back onto his knees in faux-penitence. “The boon that was promised to me,” he said, clutching his chest. “With a body of darksteel, I can be your invincible shield. Believe in me as I believe in you, Mother, and together, even the enemy’s mighty general cannot conquer us.”

Tezzeret’s vision dimmed. He’d gone too long without his treatments in Kuldotha, and now he was wavering on the knife edge between life and death, dependent upon the mercy—and the gullibility—of the one being he hated most in the Multiverse. How fitting that he’d found himself again in this situation. How infuriating, as well. He fell onto the floor, onto his back, unable to focus past the invisible electric fire overtaking his body.

“You’ve carried such a burden for us,” said Elesh Norn, caressing Tezzeret’s cheek with her claw. “It is time to reward your faith. A promise is a promise.” Elesh Norn’s sickeningly haughty smile was the last thing he saw before he lost consciousness.

The air was cold and wet and smelled of oil. Tezzeret’s eyes shot open. Tentacle-like cables were coiled around his legs and arms, locking him into place. Looming over his head was an iridescent orb, pincers of hardened quicksilver jutting out from its sides like the legs of a mechanical spider.



Art by: Sarah Finnigan

“Stabilization procedures have been successful. Subject is regaining consciousness.”

Jin-Gitaxias. Tezzeret strained to take in as much of his surroundings as he could. He recognized the minutia of Jin-Gitaxias’s dimly lit laboratory, a panoply of stasis tanks preserving slices of the plane’s history. A metallic suit routinely worn by Neurok agents. A fist-sized, five-sided prism, dim yellow light oozing from its center like a darkened sun. The remains of a small black cube floating in suspension, dissected as if it were an animal to study.

“How long have I been asleep?” Tezzeret asked. His voice was hoarse, his throat dry.

“Long enough to prepare for the task delegated to me,” said Jin-Gitaxias, stepping into view. He paused for a moment to study a tablet in his hand, a device he used to monitor the integrity of his lab apparatuses, then undulated his neck to look square at Tezzeret. “Embarking upon projects on short notice is imprudent. And at such a sensitive time. Elesh Norn’s discretion is several percentiles less than acceptable.”

So it was happening. His reward, finally here. Tezzeret would have felt more elated were he not bound in the seat where Tamiyo was cut open and flayed like an overripe fruit, her organs removed and replaced with glands that swam in oily ichor, an acid liver, bones of black metal. Beholding her rebirth as a Phyrexian, Tezzeret vowed that no such fate would befall him, that he’d die before he subjected himself to Jin-Gitaxias’s mad experiments. But musing about death was not the same as facing it head on.

The door at the far end of the laboratory slid open with an almost imperceptible swish. In scuttled several tentacled skitterlings tugging a floating platform similar to the one Tezzeret had used to escort Karn’s dismembered body to Elesh Norn’s garden. Only, this platform bore something of much greater importance to him—the prize he’d long sought, streaks of gold swirling across and around its otherwise jet-black surface.

A body of darksteel. Cold. Indestructible. Invincible. Something welled in Tezzeret’s chest, overcoming even the constant burn of the Planar Bridge against his flesh. Was it hope? Not at all. Such a delusion

was fine for simpletons; Tezzeret had no use for it. What he had was *clarity*. There was nothing like desperation to renew one's conviction, to harden one's resolve.



Art by: Zezhou Chen

“There are costs to working with darksteel,” Jin-Gitaxias lectured in his characteristic monotone. “Once the metal has been forged, it must be shaped into its desired configuration immediately. The haste with which this is done inevitably requires lax standards in other areas. Urabrask condones such waste, but I do not.”

“I am well aware,” Tezzeret said, inwardly sneering at Jin-Gitaxias pretending to understand something he clearly did not. Tezzeret had seen enough in Urabrask’s domain to know that the metal was not mined or shaped in any way remotely traditional. Forging darksteel lay in forging the *reality* around where the metal would be, presaging it so that it could be willed into shape. Tezzeret conjectured that the exact magical mechanism was a chance collision of rituals assembled over countless cycles—perhaps in part cribbed from Vulshok technique and in part from knowledge gained outside the plane long ago. Despite his insight, all his attempts at replicating it had failed. Tezzeret did not like it, was not comfortable with his own inability to grasp darksteel’s secrets. But he’d learned to accept it.

“A lesson in efficiency,” said Jin-Gitaxias, beckoning a pair of slug-like assistance drones to approach. “The etherium extracted from your husk will be shaped and charged to create a bonding force stabilizing your new form.” The drones leaned forward, and from apertures on the tops of their heads came concentrated beams of energy directed at Tezzeret’s metal arm.

At first, he felt nothing, but soon the sensation of slowly rising warmth gave way to searing heat where his arm met his organic shoulder. Tezzeret watched as the embodiment of his own exceptionalism melted into slag. Jin-Gitaxias collected it in a bowl and poured the superheated etherium into a narrow channel cut into the back of the darksteel body.

“This will remain a weakness in an otherwise impregnable form, but adequate precautions can mitigate the danger to yourself.”

Ingenious, Tezzeret thought. A lesser artificer would have tried to invent a more complex way to create the bond. All the better to impress an academy of simpering colleagues. Not Jin-Gitaxias. He understood that the elementary attraction of elements—of like clinging to like—was pure, inviolate, and unparalleled.

“Now,” said Jin-Gitaxias. “Commence with the procedure.”

The operator orb descended onto Tezzeret, a ring of pincers closing around his neck. Then the orb began its work, first by implanting microfilaments into his skin, each puncture like a dagger stroke. Surgical needles embedded in his seat did the same, knitting a weave of etherium strands around his spinal column. Tezzeret flexed his fingers, curled them into fists. A numbing thrum of energy began to course through the metal threads, causing a sudden bout of dizziness to wash over him.

Then his head and spine were separated from his body, now little more than a mass of scarred meat and scorched metal surrounding the Planar Bridge. The pain was magnitudes beyond any other he’d ever felt, so much so that visions began to flood his mind—pieces of a familiar fever dream he’d experienced when Bolas saved him from the brink of death. An ocean cloaked in cerulean haze. An island of metal, grasses of burnished pewter and tree leaves like age-tarnished razor blades. Mournful contrabasso chords growing into earsplitting peals—the chimes of a titanic clock.

Then blackness. Silence.

Tezzeret opened his eyes to the glare of the lights overhead on the speckled marble slab. Did it work? Was he alive or dead? He wasn’t sure. He focused on his fingertip upon the slab and marveled when it moved on command. Yes, he felt the muscles—if they could be called that—in his limbs bursting with a raw, physical strength he’d never known. More importantly, the burning of the Planar Bridge was gone, and his mind felt keener than it had in months, as if a diseased piece had been excised.

“You have outdone yourself,” said Tezzeret.

“Negative,” said Jin-Gitaxias, “This advancement was well within my abilities.”

“In any case, my admiration for your skill is sincere,” said Tezzeret. *As sincere as my contempt for your loathsome plane and everything on it.* At that, he willed himself to enter the Blind Eternities, this time as a man reforged. He relished the thought of visiting restitution upon all who had wronged him, then amassing power to attain his proper place in the pantheon of the Multiverse.

Except, he didn’t move. There was no characteristic snap of the universal edges parting, no bout of momentary queasiness that routinely accompanied his planeswalking. Tezzeret flexed his limbs, but the clamps around his wrists and ankles were made of the same unbreakable darksteel that now composed his body. It was then that he noticed a thin inlay of rippling silver metal fed into shallow crevices stretching across the marble slab he lay on. He cursed, recalling how Karn had been prevented from saving himself. Tezzeret had fallen into the same trap.

“Release me at once!” Tezzeret attempted to planeswalk away again, and again he failed. “Do you hear me?”

“Darksteel has another drawback,” said Jin-Gitaxias, paying no heed to Tezzeret’s cries. “The conversion to blightsteel requires weeks, if not months, of exposure to the glistening oil.” With a click of his claws, the praetor called the operator orb back down to hover near his shoulder. He tapped the orb, causing a slithery tentacle to emerge from within its nest of appendages. “Fortunately, advancements have been made to minimize this issue as it pertains to the task at hand.” The tentacle unfolded, revealing a small module at its tip.

The Reality Chip, a new version dripping with glistening oil.

“This was not part of my agreement with our Mother!” screamed Tezzeret. “Her wrath will rain down upon your head!”

“There is no violating an agreement already broken.” Jin-Gitaxias gestured toward the far wall, which slid open to reveal a tank of blue liquid. Suspended inside was the body of one of Urabrask’s chief lieutenants, a scrapchief, its arms stretched away from its body like a spider being pulled apart. He knew. Jin-Gitaxias knew about it all—Urabrask, the Mirrans, the impending attacks. Everything. “Such developments do not displease me. They introduce possibilities intriguing enough to let them unfold as they will.”

His own play for the throne , thought Tezzeret.

“Nevertheless, I regret not feeding your tissues to my larvae upon our first encounter. But, as oversights can be corrected, so too can the treasonous be. What is Elesh Norn’s nomenclature? Ah. *Forgiven*. “

Tezzeret tried again to break his bonds, casting spells in every direction he could. But with each incantation, the metal inlay on the slab would flare, changing color from silver to a bright opalescence, siphoning away the energy he needed to escape. Still, he kept casting, desperate for anything that could penetrate the dampening field.

Something did. *Planeswalker* , he heard a presence speak, a voice that boiled with the rage of Phyrexia’s forges, albeit one nearly extinguished from exhaustion. *How do you reach into my mind?*

It had been so long since Tezzeret had initiated contact with a telemin that he had almost forgotten how. Less a true spell than an Esper mentalist’s trick, establishing a mental bond in this way allowed the caster to assume total control of another individual, provided full permission had been granted. Useless against an enemy. But in a situation such as the present one, it was exactly the improvised weapon he needed.

Give me control , *Phyrexian* , thought Tezzeret. *I am your only means of salvation, and you mine. Otherwise, we both end here.* There was an initial resistance by the scrapchief—a natural reflex—which quickly gave way to Tezzeret’s psyche melding into his new host. He could feel the creature’s flagging rage, like a smoldering furnace, and stoked it with his own.

Beholding Jin-Gitaxias standing over his body through the transparent wall of the scrapchief’s prison, Tezzeret aimed a single hit onto the glass with the creature’s sharpened upper jaw. He struck it again and again, each time widening the fracture until the tank exploded in a hail of shrapnel.



Art by: Billy Christian

Tezzeret drove the scrapchief forward, ramming Jin-Gitaxias onto the ground, knocking the Reality Chip from his grip. Given different circumstances, Tezzeret's next step would have been to beat Jin-Gitaxias mercilessly. To break him. Instead, he commanded the scrapchief to charge past and bring the full weight of its heavy, metal-capped arm onto the marble slab, punching a hole straight through. Again and again. The more damage to the slab—and to the lattice on its surface—the stronger Tezzeret's connection to magic. He raised the scrapchief's arms overhead for one final smash when pain ripped through his—or rather, the scrapchief's—back. Looking down, he saw the claw of Jin-Gitaxias protruding through the scrapchief's chest.

Tezzeret's mind snapped back into his own body in time to see Jin-Gitaxias throw the scrapchief's corpse down to the ground, a lifeless pile in front of him. No words came out of the praetor's mouth. The time had passed for intellectual cogitations; both praetor and Planeswalker understood this. One moved—Jin-Gitaxias lunged forward, armed with the Reality Chip—and so did the other.

Tezzeret planeswalked away.

Filth. Darkness. Desolation. Many words have been said of Tidehollow, the forsaken underground where the Esper elite relegated the dregs who reminded them of their sins. *Tidehollow the heartless! Tidehollow the unmerciful!* The longer you lived there, the longer and more complex the phrasing. *Tidehollow, who impales the skulls of the forgotten with spikes of machined perfection! Tidehollow, whose plumes of trash fire soot gag the toxic hopes of the young, the acidic pleas of the old! Tidehollow with teeth like window shards, sarcophagus bones hollowed of marrow and force-fed to infants!*

Tezzeret, on his knees, dug between hunks of broken pavement and scraped up the dirt underneath. He brought the soot and soil up to his face, smelled the blood, the sick, the hopelessness. Then he leaned back and howled with laughter. The poets could choke on their verses. For Tezzeret, there was only one word associated with Tidehollow that truly resonated.

Home .

“Oy!” he heard a voice say behind him. It echoed off the walls of the condemned buildings lining the grimy alleyway. “Looks like someone’s had too much of the piss. Probably don’t have a lot left in your pockets, but we’ll take what you got!”

Tezzeret turned his head to see a gang of cave brats, the tallest and oldest out front armed with a knife. He had the steely look of someone who’d been on his end of a weapon before, who’d carried out forced transactions like those up in Vectis enjoyed their afternoon tea. Long ago, before planeswalking dragons, plane-churning confluxes, and biomechanical scourges, Tezzeret dressed in the same tatters, bore the same scowl on his face that these youths now wore on theirs.

“I am at a moment of weakness,” Tezzeret said, calmly. “I will permit you to leave.”

“I think we’ll stay, thank you very much!” said a girl, the lead boy’s second-in-command, Tezzeret guessed. “What are those things floating around him?”

The lead boy smirked. “Magic. Decorations rich folks spend a fortune on.” He jabbed his knife in Tezzeret’s direction. “C’mon. Give us your stuff, and you won’t get hurt.”

“I have nothing for you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said the lead boy.

“You would judge me? What makes you think you’re worthy?”

“Got a knife in my hand, see?”

“Yes,” said Tezzeret. Then, in one movement, he turned, stood, and cast a spell to animate the knife in the leader’s hand. It wrested itself from the boy’s grip and then plunged into his palm, nearly severing his fingers entirely. “I see.”

“Aether lich!” the girl screamed, sparking a stampede, the lead boy holding his wrist as he scampered away. The gang scattered, its bigger members trampling over the smaller ones who made up the back ranks, leaving behind a lone, blond child, pushed down into the gutter by his erstwhile fellows. The boy huddled against a nearby building—one that Tezzeret recognized. He’d brought himself to the threshold of his childhood home, the abysmal station he’d been born into.

“Why is this building boarded up?” Tezzeret asked the boy. “And what of the man who lived here?”

“No one’s ever lived here, far as I know.”

Had his father died? It wouldn’t have been surprising. When he wasn’t cursing other scrappers for “stealing his rightful claim” or screaming at his son to allay his frustrations, he was in his cups babbling to the phantom of his dead wife—Tezzeret’s mother—before passing out in a pool of his own vomit. Before he knew better, a young Tezzeret would wait until his father was asleep, then wipe the table dry and lay his father down upon his cot with blanket drawn. *Imbecile*. He’d merely enabled his father’s cruelty toward him. Only when Tezzeret was older, after he’d learned about the power of mages, did he see the role he played in his own suffering.

“What is your name, boy?”

“Estel,” the young man stammered out.

“Come.”

Tezzeret tried to reshape his arm into a bent edge to pry off the wooden panels nailed across the doorway, only for his body to ignore his command. He grunted, realizing that for all the strengths of his new form, there were tradeoffs. *With time*, he thought as he tore the panels down as if they were scraps of paper.

Inside didn't look much different from what he remembered. Two rooms, one a kitchen area with a shallow fireplace and a table and the other used as sleeping quarters. Both were stripped of anything of value. The only things visible implying his father's existence were bits of twisted metal—all cheap alloys—scattered across the floor and a heavy cloak that smelled of mold and sawdust.

But what of things invisible? Tezzeret pushed the table aside and, counting three tiles from the back wall, he inserted a finger into the crack between the third and fourth. Underneath was a small metal door locked with a heavy deadbolt.

Tezzeret ripped the door off its hinges, reached in, and pulled out a small wooden box with floral patterns carved onto its lid. This was his mother's handiwork, the last remnant of the hobby that gave her solace amid the squalor. He remembered hugging the box on the journey up to Lower Vectis to collect his mother's corpse, how his fingernail fit perfectly into the shallow grooves of the carving. He remembered her promise that morning to return with supper—a promise, he supposed, she'd intended to keep.

Witnesses told a familiar tale. She'd been begging for alms when a wealthy guildmaster's wagon hit her and didn't stop. Of course, the authorities did nothing. Humiliation and death were common enough occurrences for downslopers like her. Long after and armed with his Seeker training, Tezzeret searched out his mother's killer, only to find that he'd died years before, peacefully, surrounded by his loving family.

Tidehollow, whose claws of rags and misery drag dreams to ash!

"Do you know what this is?" Tezzeret asked Estel after cracking open the box for the boy to see. Inside were metallic scraps of all shapes—nuggets, shavings, irregular threads.

"Etherium," Estel answered, shriveling under the Planeswalker's gaze.

"This paltry amount is worth more than all the denizens of Tidehollow combined, anything that you are now or will be in the future." Tezzeret began to shape a spell, murmuring words he'd learned long ago as a member of the Seekers. "Its value is derived from its extreme rarity, its inability to be reproduced. At least, that's what you're told." He let his hand drop, the etherium suspended in the air, and watched as the liquid metal reformed itself into a thin square. "Those in Tidehollow need little motivation to fight among ourselves for the scraps we're allowed to have. All the better for those above. It keeps us out of their way." Letters began to raise themselves onto its surface, Tezzeret's mind pressing the metal into a message.

Tezzeret took the etherium, curled it into a tight tube, and placed it back into the box. He looked to Estel and intended to place it in his hands when thunder tore through the air, the sound of steel doors being wrenched apart.

Tezzeret ducked outside to see an angular crack, flaring with bright crackles of energy, breaking the cave ceiling. Tearing through it was a column of white material that he at first thought was a building falling through from the city above. But upon closer inspection, he spotted creatures moving across the column's surface, scampering down like insects to street level. Then he realized what he was looking at.

Bone-white metal. The Phyrexians had arrived.

"Too soon," Tezzeret snarled. He clutched Estel's arm and dragged him inside the hovel. He forced the boy to take the box, then spotted the small dagger strapped to the boy's belt. "Give me your knife."

With a shaking hand, Estel drew the knife from its sheath. Tezzeret grabbed it and looked it over. Cheap make. Loose handle. Chipped tip. Still, it would suffice for Tezzeret's ends. A beginner's spell solidified

the knife's handle; another filed the edge down until it was sharp and tapered. One last enchantment made it quasi-ethereal such that its cutting edge could cleave through a well-forged sword.

"The cistern at Bellow's End," he said. "Do you know of it? There is a passage leading to a forgotten house in Upper Vectis."

"Aye. We use it to watch the parades."

As did I in my youth. "Go there—stick to the Shadow Way, the narrowed passages."

"How do you know—"

"Be quiet and listen. You are to leave the city, taking supplies as you come across them. Do not stop moving. If something gets in your way, use this." Tezzeret placed Estel's refashioned knife back into its sheath. "Make your way to Bant."

"Bant?"

"Follow the shoreline northward, keeping the silver wind at your back to guide you to Valeron. Approach the first outpost you see and find the knight decorated with the most sigils. Request an audience with Knight-General Rafiq and give him the box. Am I clear?"

The boy nodded, but his expression was one of worry and confusion, exacerbated by the shouts and screams—not to mention the inhuman roars—from outside. "What is happening? What were those things? Who are you?"

"I am the one giving you a chance to live," he said. "When you see Rafiq, tell him that an ally of Elspeth Tirel sent you."

Tezzeret pushed Estel away, and the boy turned to leave. But before exiting, he looked back, nodded, and said, "Thank you."

"Wasted words," he spat, heat rising behind his eyes.

"But sir—"

"Just go!" he screamed, prompting Estel to run out the door. Tezzeret stood, his body trembling. *I have not fully recovered from the grafting*, he told himself as he regained his composure. *If the boy dies, he dies.* Death would have been Estel's destiny anyway had he stayed in Tidehollow. But if he managed to live, if he got word to the Knights of Bant that they alone possessed a way to defend themselves—a legion of angelic warriors, just as New Capenna once boasted—then Alara could become a quagmire slowing the Phyrexians' spread. All the more time to re-establish his networks, gain resources, and enact his plans.

Tezzeret donned his father's cloak—a menial disguise, but it sufficed—and then, for the briefest of moments, stared back at the dingy hole where he was born and raised. Flecks of rotten wood and plaster rained down from the ceiling as the air filled with noises of slaughter and mayhem. *A fitting goodbye*, he thought as he entered the Blind Eternities.

Tezzeret's travels took him to plane after plane transformed, ripped apart by invading hordes of Phyrexians. Sabers snapping upon iron-clad carapaces, monstrous incisors grinding bone, and near-constant weeping seemed to bridge planes, blending into an uninterrupted symphony of suffering.

Elesh Norn's "great work" was unfolding faster than Tezzeret could have imagined. Aranzhur. Ilcae. Obsidias. All planes that contained safehouses set up by Baltrice, his second-in-command in the In-

finite Consortium. Their existence—and hers, for that matter—was one of the few shreds of specific knowledge Beleren had left behind when he scraped out Tezzeret’s mind in the Nezumi swamps. But there was nothing safe about these planes anymore. They’d become mere extensions of New Phyrexia, fresh blossoms on Elesh Norn’s debased World Tree. Other planes—Mirrankkar, Cabralin—were in the process of being subsumed. Their inhabitants would fight back, only to fail and become one with the Machine Legion.

Tezzeret had no choice but to keep moving. One more plane held a safehouse he could use as a refuge, though it was a place he was hesitant to return to. But he’d run out of alternatives. To his relief, there was no sign of invasion—at least an overt one—among the bustle at dusk of Towashi’s narrow streets. Gone was the tension fueled by the recent Upriser aggression, leaving the people to resume their normal, dismal lives.

Unaware. Cattle fit for slaughtering.

No matter. Tezzeret’s concern was finding the safehouse, resting, and claiming what materials Baltrice had stashed there. Unfortunately, the snaking layers of gridwork that marked the Towashi Undercity had proven as formidable a barrier to his reprieve as a Phyrexian horde.

“Where is it?” he muttered, emerging from yet another alleyway back onto the street. Tezzeret stiffened the hood of his cloak and kept his face low. Surveillance was everywhere. He’d long been unwelcome in most parts of Kamigawa, and he had no doubt that his enemies had renewed their hunt for him after his most recent stint on the plane.

He continued walking until he found himself in Dragon’s Well, one of the lowest sections of the Undercity, an area forever shielded from the sunlight by a matrix of bridges that serviced those who worked and lived in Towashi’s skyscrapers. It was a logical place for the safehouse’s location. Out of sight. Buried. Forgotten by all but the Undercity’s biker gangs that eke out a meager existence in petty crime. Somewhere Tezzeret would have chosen—perhaps a location he *did* choose but could no longer remember. He placed his hands on the support column of a bridge and murmured a rhabdomantic spell, sending his mind sizzling through the metal in search of a doorway with the Consortium’s magical imprint.

“It is you “ he heard someone say, a split second before feeling a surge of electricity overtake him. Tezzeret suddenly felt helpless to gravity, the weight of his body toppling him over like a tipped statue. It took all his strength to reach backward, where he felt a blade piercing the threadbare cloth of his father’s cloak, penetrating the soft etherium in the middle of his back. Lucky shot—or unlucky, as it were. A bright light then burst out of the darkness, shining down upon him from atop a hovering surveillance drone, its cannon still smoking from a recently fired shot. Stepping out from the periphery was a Nezumi, young from his stature, with gray-spotted, white fur unlike most of his brethren.

“Where is she?”

Tezzeret groaned and attempted to planeswalk away. But his mind was too scrambled to escape or to cast spells. He reached back again, this time tapping the shaft of the blade with his fingertips.

“Tamiyo,” the Nezumi continued. “Tell me where she is.” He raised a control rod, using it to command the drone to lower. “Is she dead?” With a click, the cannon chamber loaded with another shot trained on Tezzeret’s head. “Tell me now!”



Art by: Simon Dominic

“What is she to you, rat whelp?” Tezzeret said, with a dry grunt. “You’re her champion? Her hero swooping in to save her from the darkness?”

“My mother.” *Mother.* Of course. Tamiyo’s “family,” as she would endlessly drone about. It was never quiet with her around—her inane singing, a broken music box stuck in an endless loop. *Genku, my love, I will come back for you. Hiroku, my love, I will see you again. Rumiyo, my love, we shall embrace. Nashi, my love, not of my blood, but of my heart* Yes, Nashi. That was his name. “I saw you die once for burning my village to the ground,” he said, his arm wavering, fingers positioned on the buttons of the control rod. “Tell me where she is, or you’ll die again.”

Full circle. Tezzeret looked up and stared into the boy’s eyes. “Then do it.”

Nashi’s hand shook. “I swear “

“Do it! What are you waiting for, you coward?!” A dam broke inside Tezzeret. He reached backward one more time, feeling his fingers elongate and wrap around the blade lodged in his back. He wrenched the blade out and threw it at Nashi’s drone, knocking it askew enough that the cannon shot far wide of its target. Shadows danced. Nashi tried to bolt away, but Tezzeret was faster, snatching him by the collar of his leather jacket and dragging him to the ground. “You pathetic weakling!” Tezzeret, in control of his faculties once more, lifted Nashi with one arm and threw him against the bridge support. “Fate handed vengeance to you, and you squandered it! Few *ever* get that chance!” Tezzeret picked Nashi up again and pinned him to the wall. The boy was battered, red patches sunk into his fur like blood on snow. “In this life, you take what you deserve! Others will try to stop you, so you stop them first! You *kill* them first!”

The rumble of engines erupted all around Tezzeret. He turned just as light flooded the area from more than a dozen motorbikes forming a semicircle around him. No exit.

“Let him go,” ordered the leader, a female Nezumi atop a bike styled like a dragon.

“This is no concern of yours.”

“Yes, it is—he’s one of ours,” the leader said. “You’re outnumbered. Let him go, or else.”

Tezzeret dropped Nashi in front of his feet. More threats. Always threats that tasked him for a response. Very well. Metal would be his answer, brutal and precise. *For hate's sake*. With that thought, he expanded his magic out past himself in all directions—into the bridges that spanned the iron firmament above his head, into the ground to contact deposits of ore deep underneath them. Perhaps detecting something amiss, the leader ordered three of her henchmen to dismount from their bikes and approach.

Too late. Tezzeret twitched, making the short blades in the henchmen's hands move of their own accord, impaling their wielders and dragging them away from the light. The rest of the Nezumi mounted their bikes again and revved the engines to ready for a charge. Another futile effort. Each of their mechanical steeds was a magnificent work, an artifact in its own right, gleaming and powerful and *metal*. Raising his hand in front of his face, palm up, Tezzeret slowly squeezed his fingers together.

Realization hit the gang members seconds after, as their bikes began to shake. Some tried to jump off, only to find that the metal on their persons—weapons, buckles, and pins on their clothing—had fused to their bikes, shackling them in place. They could do nothing when, all at once, Tezzeret clenched his fingers into a tight fist, lifting the bikes into the air and then slamming them together with a gruesome crunch. He gazed at the mass of metal and flesh, used his magic to rotate it in the scant light of Nashi's grounded drone. Shrieks of incredible pain. Fractured limbs skewered by chrome shafts glittering in the darkness like a jewel.

A false jewel. A curse masked as treasure. No, true power was not in either of these—in amassing armies or gathering weapons. It was in surviving, in thriving, in outliving all those who had ever come after him. With a shred of his will, Tezzeret sent the mass of crushed metal and bodies careening into the dark, where it collided with a far wall.

Then all was quiet. He looked down where Nashi lay, crouched down, and cradled the boy's head in his hand. Nashi wrapped his fingers around Tezzeret's wrist, the half-congealed blood on his palms leaving a residue, black and viscous upon Tezzeret's darksteel skin.

"Your mother still lives."

"Alive," Nashi gasped, the smallest sliver of a smile flashing across his face.

Tezzeret nodded. "She will come for you soon enough." He leaned in closer. "And when she does, you will wish I had killed her." Gently, he placed Nashi's head onto the ground, stood up, and walked away.

The safehouse was located behind a false wall in a gaming parlor, bright and raucous, where people from the lower strata of Kamigawan society sunk their money into machines promising riches but delivering little more than flashing lights and clanking sounds. It shouldn't have surprised Tezzeret. Baltrice always had a penchant for such frivolities.

Inside, he found exactly what he was looking for. A private place to rest. To strategize. To ruminate. The supplies were also most welcome: a new suit of light armor, the spine and neck area of which he magically reinforced; several denominations of currency from many different planes; a manablade—one of the very few not in the possession of the Church of the Incarnate Soul; and last, a small crystal that, when held, projected a pattern of pinpoint lights onto the wall, an esoteric telemetry that rekindled a memory long snuffed out.

Tezzeret planeswalked from Kamigawa to a plane so forlorn that even he did not know its name. The journey—the flexing of a neglected muscle still retaining the imprint of endless practice—found him standing amid an ocean of sand. In the distance rose a shallow hill made of seamless metal, and emerg-

ing from its top was a single spiked tower. Once, this was his tower, the base of operations from which he steered the fortunes of other planes as the shadowy leader of the Infinite Consortium.

“Smart, Beleren, to keep this from me,” Tezzeret mused. “But no longer.”

As Tezzeret began his trek forward, he pondered the battle happening across other planes—Beleren and his cohort against Elesh Norn. They would reach the end soon, the stage when both opponents would unleash their final salvos against each other. This was always the most important part of the game—one he was glad to sit out. Eventually, one of them would be victorious but weakened. Then—and only then—would he make his move.

In the meantime, there was much rebuilding to do.