

A Garden of Flesh

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“Here, in the Machine Orthodoxy, there is perfection. Here, there is blessing.”

As she said it, her synthesized voice echoing over the Fair Basilica’s courtyard, Elesh Norn, Phyrexian regent and Mother of Machines, felt the light of that truth deep within her sacred, mechanized body. The Machine Orthodoxy was the only path to ultimate unification, a path as pure and infallible and undeniable as her own glistening oil.

When she looked out over the gathering of Phyrexians from her dais, her armor gleaming in the milky light, Norn had never been surer of it. Here were the emblems of the might she had facilitated: the Fair Basilica, its towers, its metal spires like porcelain, grand cathedrals arching skyward, winding, delicate, and airy. Crimson banners waved from bridges and turrets, stark against the gleaming structures and flagstones of the courtyard.

The Phyrexian faithful, their mechanically altered faces upturned toward her, their consciousness woven through her own, were eager for her to speak. They were her people, grown in birthing pods. They were her adopted children, captured from opposing armies, those once poor, pitiable creatures who had lived so long covered in vile, unaltered skin, now idealized with mechanical parts. The air smelled of their new bodies. Metallic. Sharp. Clean. The distant chanting of Phyrexian prayers, hundreds of voices synchronized, flowed around it all.



Due Respect | Art by: James Ryman

How could anybody deny the beauty of this? The rightness? The absolute truth?

And yet, the Mirran she held before her still struggled. It was a foolish effort. The top of the woman's dark, tangled hair barely came to Norn's shoulder. The flesh beneath her long, clawed fingers was pitifully weak, and she merely tightened her grip to subdue her. She cried out, her arms and legs, lashed together, stiffening as blood blossomed from the wound Norn had made.

Humans were such flawed and fragile things.

Norn had considered letting the vat priests and splicers begin this Mirran's alterations while she addressed the assembly. She had no doubt they would do an admirable job. But the Machine Orthodoxy was growing and expanding rapidly.

How best to teach her children, if not by example?

"Now is the time for unity." Norn raised her voice, cool and smooth as the breeze blowing through the Basilica's grounds. "Behold this imperfect creature. Even she, an organic abomination, is worthy of the mercy of the Orthodoxy. Even she may be blessed."

Norn thrust the Mirran toward the edge of the dais. She tottered in her grip, gasping and pleading, a flailing, shameful display. Something about her, the dark hair, the angle of her eyes, the squareness of her jaw, tickled at the edges of Norn's memory. Had she encountered this human before? Doubtful. She would surely have transformed the pitiful creature if she had.

It was almost unheard of for anyone to escape the Machine Orthodoxy.

Norn tightened her hand. "Soon, this wretched human will be released from the burden of fear. We will flay her. Strip away the flesh that binds her to this weak body. Then, she too, will join us in total unification with our divine purpose and will."

There was a shift of sound, a deep rumbling Norn had never heard before, from all around her. What could that be but the power of Phyrexian faith, their synthetic voices deepening in prayer? The sound resonated as she lifted her free hand, curled her long, clawed finger, and punctured her wrist.

For a moment, the pale sky seemed to darken, as if clouded by smoke, but Norn's attention was fixed on the glistening oil flowing from her wrist, her very body, the purest possible source. The crowd swayed forward as one, their eyes glinting as they watched the oil flow from the wound and onto the Mirran's head and quaking shoulders. It slicked her hair, coating the back of her neck. She thrashed when it penetrated the wound there, and screamed, the sound shrill and organic. Irritating. Soon those vocal cords would be replaced and immaculately calibrated and her voice would join the others' in reverence.

She sputtered and choked as the glistening oil smothered her, filled her, her body twitching as the oil began to flow from her gaping mouth and the corners of her open eyes.

All around Norn, the rumble grew louder.

She held the Mirran up by the scruff for all to see. "Behold perfection."

But in her grip, the Mirran shuddered, an organic movement that bubbled up from the center of her body in sudden, uneven waves. There was nothing mechanical about it, no measured rhythm of sacred alteration. Instead, the meat beneath Norn's hand bulged. It rolled and squirmed as if the bony vertebrae knuckling against her palm were trying to shove her away.

The Mirran's body heaved, a convulsion so violent Norn nearly dropped her, and a pulpy cord of organic material, a fibrous wooden root, sinuous and alien, burst from the human's belly. Blood, unnaturally thick and foul, oozed onto the dais. It pooled beneath Norn's feet, a twisted abomination of her

own glistening oil, even as more roots bulged from the human's open mouth, wrenching teeth, and tongue aside, breaking through her eye sockets and squirming into the air.

Elesh Norn was so perplexed, it took a moment for her to react. With a crackle and flare of white light, she transformed a piece of her porcelain armor into a narrow blade and sliced the Mirran's throat with a single stroke. Her lifeless body crumpled at Norn's feet, a pile of unnatural roots, blood, and offal.

There was no sign of change or machinery. There was only unnatural corruption.

This should never have happened.

Beneath her, the Phyrexians' chants faltered, though that deep rumble remained, rolling low through their confusion.

Norn gathered herself, standing tall as she reabsorbed her porcelain blade. "Witness this example and pity her," she said, her voice calm, though her mind was reeling, ticking through every probability, every possible explanation for what had just happened. "She was a vessel so corrupt, not even our glistening oil could save her. Here is proof that we must spread our doctrine swiftly, so that all can be saved."

But even as she said it, Norn had to fight to compose herself.

None of what had just happened, made sense.

The glistening oil should never have failed.

The pale light of the Fair Basilica was gleaming over its domes and spires, turning them a cold silver-white, its banners an inky black, when Elesh Norn returned to the courtyard.

She had not lingered after the incident with the Mirran woman. She had only remained long enough to order the bloated body with its fleshy roots removed, to be dissected and disposed of. Norn had walked gracefully from that dais to demonstrate that she was, indeed, still in control. She had moved with easy purpose back into the Basilica as though she had anticipated the failure of her demonstration, the eruption of those roots from that human's twitching body. But she had never seen such a thing.

Even when administered by a Phyrexian without her considerable power, the effects of glistening oil were predictable. It erased useless things—memory, attachments, desires—and reordered chaotic, organic minds into perfect patterns. While the oil often leaked from the eyes and nose and other orifices before the splicers and vat priests did their work replacing organic matter with machinery, the oil itself never induced seizures. It certainly never thickened the blood or caused the body to rupture.

The oil was the holiest of elements. Its grace was self-evident.

So, what, exactly, had gone wrong?

No human would ever have been powerful enough to resist the glistening oil themselves, despite what Norn had told the gathering.

Elesh Norn walked across the courtyard, the distant hum of Phyrexian prayers the only sound to accompany her measured footsteps. She ran one long finger over the lip of the dais. She thought to ascend the steps, to revisit the place the Mirran had collapsed and attempt to determine what might have caused the disruption, when she noticed a small blemish on the flagstones.

Elesh Norn paused.

There, where the Mirran's blood had run over the dais and onto the courtyard, was a small, inky weed, sprouting through a crack in the flagstones. Its stalk was twisted, a mottled jumble of greens and browns. It was fully organic. Hideous. Offensive.

Elesh Norn reached down to pluck it out, to rid the otherwise perfect stone of the weed, but it was slick, giving beneath her touch like the soft flesh of the Mirran's neck. Norn scowled. Whatever was happening, whatever this abnormality was that had crept into the Machine Orthodoxy, it would not be tolerated. She had worked too hard to cultivate this place, to assure the furthering of the Phyrexian cause to have it soiled, even a little bit.

Norn twisted her wrist, intent on uprooting and crushing the weed in one swift movement, but it resisted as if clutching the underside of the stones.

"Heresy," Norn breathed and yanked the weed viciously upward. It broke loose, far larger than anticipated, the flagstone rupturing at the force of its dislodging. But no roots were hanging from the small intruder. Instead, a human forearm dangled, disproportionately large, half-rotten, bone swinging like the clapper of a cracked bell in the dislocated slop. Its limp fingers were splayed wide as if still reaching toward the very soil she had plucked it from.

"Abomination." Norn lifted the offensive thing to study it, her head cocked.

Was this a result of the Mirran's contaminated blood flowing onto the flagstones?

It made no sense.



Elesh Norn, Grand Cenobite | Art by: Igor Kieryluk

Norn flung the weed away in disgust. She needed to uncover the meaning of this heresy, to stamp out the true cause before it could take root again. She was about to order the priests to dispose of it when she saw another strange plant by her foot. And another further along the path. And there, another.

An unfamiliar tightness coiled deep in Elesh Norn's belly.

Norn strode across the courtyard, ripping another weed from the marble. It was the remnants of a human lung, a rootless, sagging lump, the upper lobe wrapped around what should have been the

plant's stalk. She crushed it in her hand. It could not have come directly from the Mirran's body. The vat priests had dissected her corpse and found nothing abnormal, save those roots, and no reason for them to have sprouted from her human body in the first place.

The tightness in her stomach grew.

One after another, Norn ripped the abominations from the ground. She unearthed a thick, dismembered thigh, sinew shredding between her long fingers as she ripped it in two. A heart, arteries drooping away from it. A bulging strand of spongy intestine. A single kidney. An ear. A dozen teeth impossibly strung together like jagged pearls. Again and again, she pulled them up, faster and faster, determined to purge the Basilica of impurities. And with every discovery, she felt something inside her tighten and sour.

A jitteriness spread through her limbs.

Could it be a malfunction? Impossible. She was the Mother of Machines. Regent. Infallible.

And yet, the last thing that had touched that Mirran had been her own glistening oil.

Elesh Norn grew still, her porcelain armor gleaming, her soiled hands clenched, her red robes flowing in the soft, steady breeze.

"We are the Mother of Machines," she breathed and somewhere in the distance, that never-ending stream of Phyrexian prayers seemed to quaver and that low rumbling returned, deep and almost imperceptible. What had once felt like an affirmation of power and faith now seemed to resonate with doubt. A thousand Phyrexian minds trembled.

She could not allow the Orthodoxy to fall prey to this alien sensation plaguing her. There had to be an explanation for all of this. An order to all of this.

Elesh Norn raised her head, but even the bright sky seemed impossibly dimmer now, as if the air itself had darkened, as if a cloud had descended upon the Basilica. The smoky dimness congealed and softened in turns, seeming for a small second to resolve itself into a figure floating above the Basilica's skyline, lean and dark, before dissipating. She shook her head, willing herself to believe it wasn't her eyesight failing. It must have been a trick of the changing light, Norn tried to tell herself.

Or another, unexplainable corruption.

The very idea that anything would dare dim the beauty of her glorious creation was preposterous. And yet, the atmosphere did seem darker, the world around her vaguely out of sync with itself in a way that nothing in the Machine Orthodoxy had ever been. There was an unreal quality to it, a heaviness that belied the airy nature she had tried so hard to cultivate.

This was her Basilica, after all.

This place was nothing if not an extension of herself.

And yet

Norn looked down at the plaza and recoiled. Every cavity she had cleared of those organic atrocities, every place that Mirran's blood had stained the exquisite earth, was full of new weeds sprouting. They pulsed and grew, overrunning the Fair Basilica like a garden of flesh.

Norn strode into the once-open space between the Basilica and the northern tower, where unnatural growths now coiled over the broken flagstones. She ripped them out of the earth as she passed.

She paused beside a tower where a leg had erupted from the flagstones like the crown of a burgeoning tooth. Was this really the result of that Mirran's blood? Was this what happened when organic imperfection was allowed to infect the Orthodoxy? Norn lifted the dismembered limb, holding its meat

between her hands. It was soft. Weak. Rotting in ways a machine wouldn't. It felt as though her Basilica was doing just that. Putrefying from the ground up. It was intolerable.

No.

It was impossible.

As she tossed the heavy chunk of flesh aside, Norn told herself that again.

Impossible.

There had to be a logical explanation.

If the human and her unnatural blood hadn't unleashed these abominations, what, then, would have been powerful enough to have altered the world Elesh Norn herself had created?

Norn looked down at her hand, the wrist from which the glistening oil had flowed.

Could she herself indeed have done this?

Who else would have been powerful enough to disrupt the order of the Orthodoxy so completely? What if she was the reason the oil had that effect on the Mirran's body?

Norn had always been everything a praetor should be, but what if she had somehow failed in this? What if she had been wrong? What if all this time, lurking inside of her, there had been some unseen flaw, germinating and waiting to burst forth and ruin the Machine Orthodoxy? Was she somehow intrinsically corrupt? Had the Grand Cenobite Elesh Norn inadvertently spawned something so impure and organic? Was she unfit to lead the Machine Orthodoxy?

The Orthodoxy was righteous, therefore the glistening oil itself could not be to blame. There was no logical reason a lowly, pitiable human's blood would have spawned the horror spread before her.

Elesh Norn pressed one uncharacteristically unsteady hand against the dais as if to brace herself against her own world, twisted and inexplicable in its imperfection.

All of it, *all of it*, still felt so oddly unreal.

She remembered, once, witnessing Mirrans, captured after the insurrection, sleeping in their holding cells. They had laid curled around themselves, dreaming, whimpering, caught in the nightmarish designs of their own, singular, weak minds. She remembered how they howled and screamed through a reality that only existed in themselves, trapped and begging to wake up.

The Orthodoxy had purged them of those dreams when it gifted them with their alterations, but Norn hadn't forgotten the alien sight of them dreaming. If nothing else, it confirmed her belief that flesh was inferior. It was all the more reason to strip them of it and gift them with the mechanical certainty of the Orthodoxy.

Phyrexians did not dream.

Phyrexian minds were anchored in reality, in the predictable rhythm of machinery and righteousness. There was no reason for her mind to have wandered into a fanciful, subconscious space full of plants, fleshy horrors, and illogical assumptions. But as she stood there, her body taut, her mind trying to make sense of an improbable reality, Norn felt as though she was trapped like those sleeping humans had been. As if all would be right with the world if only she could wake up and think clearly again.

Elesh Norn grew still. She did not breathe. Her porcelain armor was as motionless as the stone pillars around her.

This world was not hers.

Slowly, Elesh Norn looked upward toward the sky where the darkness had seemed to form a figure earlier. Scowling, she whispered, “Ashiok.”

The rumbling sound that had been rolling beneath everything deepened and then, across the Basilica’s courtyard, a slender, androgynous form appeared. They floated up and over the delicate bridges and carefully sculpted towers as if gravity had no hold on them, gossamer robes trailing beneath their bare feet, the narrow angle of their face spiraling upward into a pair of horns where their eyes should have been. Black smoke curled, wraith-like and sinuous from the sharp tips of their horns, that same darkening of the air that Norn had seen when she first cut the Mirran.



Ashiok, Nightmare Weaver | Art by: Karla Ortiz

Norn’s fingers curled around the lip of the dais, cracking the white stone.

Ashiok. Planeswalker. Nightmare mage. She had heard of them, of course. Norn was not unfamiliar with the chaos Ashiok had inflicted on the Mirrans, how the nightmare mage often infected lesser minds with dreams for their own amusement, to induce fear. But she had never considered Ashiok would be so foolish as to attempt to impose their nightmarish “art” upon her.

Though Elesh Norn was a Phyrexian and a regent, above emotional outbursts, she felt enraged at the realization that none of this—not the organic slop that had infested her Basilica, not the human body parts sprouting like weeds beneath her feet, not even her improbable distress—had been real. It was simply an illusion.

An amusement.

A waste.

Elesh Norn drew herself up to her full height, her porcelain armor shining, her crimson robes trailing behind her.

“Ashiok.” This time, when she said their name, her voice was icy, the synthetic overtone of each vowel and consonant dangerously sharp. It was a voice that commanded armies, a voice that spoke truth and purity, a voice that, until today, had never doubted itself. Norn drew her shoulders back, pouring every ounce of authority and divine menace into her posture.

Ashiok approached at a leisurely pace, drifting across the courtyard, gazing down on their nightmare creation with a small, satisfied grin. They hovered just out of reach of Norn, bare feet not quite touching the spoiled flagstones, their robes billowing behind them.

Ashiok spread their broad hands outward as if to caress it all. “Beautiful, isn’t it? I worked so very long on this particular masterpiece.” Ashiok leaned forward slightly, their head cocked. “Your mind is a very unique canvas, Elesh Norn. Very unique indeed.”

“So this abomination, this filth, is indeed your doing?” Norn asked coolly.

“But of course.” Ashiok smiled. “To be completely honest, I was not certain Phyrexians would be suitable for my art. One simply cannot create a masterpiece without a proper canvas.”

“So you were testing us?” Norn said this with control, carefully calculated, even though her indignant fury had begun to boil. She refused to entertain the thought that the kernel of her lingering uncertainty might be perpetuating her doubt.

“Who else would have been a better test subject? You are the Mother of Machines, after all, are you not? Your mind “ Ashiok’s voice trailed away, contemplative and vaguely perplexed. “It does not process fear the way human minds do.”

“We are a Regent of Phyrexia,” Norn said. “We are perfection personified. We do not fear.” Until today, she would have never questioned that statement; it would not have been a lie to say she never doubted herself. But Norn refused to let that uncertainty surface completely. She forced authority into her voice, every ounce of deception and manipulation she had honed to defeat her rivals. She was not made entirely of organic material.

She was not weak.

She was not flesh.

She was not human.

Ashiok’s smile only broadened. They glided in a broad circle around Norn, toes skimming the earth but not quite touching. “Oh, if that were true, I wouldn’t still be here, would I?”

Ashiok rose into the air slowly, and the smoke curling from the tips of their horns began to flow downward, coiling around the human limbs and organs sprouting from the courtyard’s flagstones. Norn’s gaze followed the path of their ephemeral touch. There in the jumble of broken stone was a human head, growing through a broad crack like a fungus. It was a female with dark hair and light skin. White armor grew up around her chin and jaw like fronds. Her features were covered in the mire but, beneath the filth, something about her countenance seemed strangely familiar to Norn.

“I first encountered her when I was creating my art in Theros,” Ashiok said, each word somehow menacing in its softness as their smoke caressed the human head’s cheeks and brow. “Her name is Elspeth Tirel.” Ashiok rolled the name through their mouth as if tasting it for the first time. “She caught my attention, and I sought her out in the Underworld. Her fear of Phyrexians was glorious. Simply breathtaking. How could my curiosity not have been piqued? What kind of artist would I be if I did not seek out such an opportunity to hone my craft, to test it on a being such as yourself? I simply had to find out. What would a Phyrexian nightmare be like?”

Elesh Norn remembered Elspeth Tirel now from her failed assault on her sacred Basilica, and that nagging familiarity she’d felt with the Mirran suddenly made more sense.

“Elspeth escaped, didn’t she?” Ashiok said and smiled softly. “This small, inconsequential human escaped the Machine Orthodoxy.”

“Irrelevant.” Norn felt her indignation rise. “The truths we see are beyond your understanding, Ashiok. We will not be cowed. We will not be a tool for your ‘art.’” In a place deeper than any nightmare could ever penetrate, she felt the connection to her people, the collective of Phyrexia, joined together, the strength of that unity, an unstoppable force of thousands upon thousands of splendidly altered beings waiting for her command to strike.

Ashiok’s smile faltered.

“We will not abide this blasphemy any longer,” Norn continued. She took a deep breath and turned her focus inward. There was a stirring in the shadows, movement from the deep corners of the courtyard. A creak of doors being opened. Measured footfalls on stone steps. One by one, dozens of Phyrexians, as real in her dream as they might have been in the waking world, materialized from the shadows, their metal bodies gleaming, their eyes glowing red and eager.

For a moment, Ashiok looked almost confused. “They are not part of this piece,” they said. “I did not design them to be here. Not now.”

“We are one,” Norn said. “Did you think you could so easily control us with this *nightmare*?”

There was a beat of silence, all machinery still. The grinding of gears and the wet sounds of Ashiok’s nightmare garden ceased. There was only wind, carrying the smell of decay and oil, snapping the crimson banners high overhead.

“You have underestimated us,” Norn said quietly, a synthesized whisper.

And then, pure as a prayer, the Phyrexians behind her repeated, “You have underestimated us.”

Ashiok tipped their head, drummed their fingertips together, and floated backward carefully, putting distance between Norn and the rest of the Phyrexians as the white light flared, a swarm of porcelain blades forming in the metal encasing her body.

“Interesting,” Ashiok said.

The rumble became a roar, a deep, throaty, organic sound that rushed across the nightmare landscape like a wave. The smoke swirling between Ashiok’s horns darkened, thickened, and descended. The limbs sprouting from the earth shambled together in a mockery of Phyrexian beauty, the garden below merging into creatures and hurtling toward Norn, a tangle of legs and arms, half-formed heads dangling from dissected shoulders.

The Phyrexians surged forward, slicing through the dream manifestations, the illusion made corporeal in an extension of Norn’s will. What the Phyrexians did not overtake, she eviscerated quickly and efficiently herself in a barrage of needle-thin porcelain blades flying from her body in blinding flashes of white light, crackling viciously through the air. She sliced Ashiok’s creatures to ribbons before they even had a chance to approach the dais she was standing beside.

“You have blasphemed against us!” Norn’s voice reverberated through the courtyard. She drew back her arm, preparing to obliterate Ashiok’s wraith-like body, when the thing that would be Elspeth Tiresia rose.

It heaved itself upright at Norn’s feet, sloshing up and out of the earth with a thick, wet sound, rising from the nightmarish mire until it hovered facing her, spinal cord dangling like a rodent’s tail. Ashiok’s smoke wound around it rapidly, swelling and curving, shaping the very air into a tall, solid form corded with sinuous muscle and covered with pearly porcelain metal and a curving helmet. It was a mirror of Elsh Norn’s sacred form.

Norn took a step back. Elspeth did the same. It was a twisted reflection of her own body, her posture that seemed suddenly, horribly, undeniably human. And there it was again, that tightness in Norn’s

throat, prickling the back of her neck, dropping deep into the center of her like a stone. She felt the urge to back away. To run. This was an abomination, not only of the Orthodoxy but of her. Mother of Machines, Regent. This was a twisted version of the Orthodoxy's future.

Elesh Norn did not want to call it fear, but as she watched Elspeth's hand rise to her mouth, as she watched those fingers so much like her own tremble, she knew that, yes, logically, that was how she too must have looked in that moment.

Impure.

Imperfect.

Impossible.

How could this planeswalker make her feel this way with their trickery, nightmares, and illusions? With a simple vision of a human woman sculpted to look like her, to mock her? She, Elesh Norn, who so masterfully bent her enemies to her will? She, who was the apex of Phyrexia?

With a deafening crackle and a blast of bright light, the needle-thin daggers prickling from Norn's body merged and formed a massive, deadly blade in her hand. With more power than would ever be necessary, she flung it into the nightmare version of Elspeth Tirel, slicing through her chest with such force that she flew across the courtyard, landing in a heap on the far side. A form clothed in her own white metal and crimson robes, still covered in human flesh, dead.

No, not dead.

Because it never was alive to begin with. It was all an illusion, a trick.

Norn turned to Ashiok, her internal workings pounding with this new and unfamiliar emotion, rage seasoning the fear she'd felt into something almost uncontrollable. She prepared to unleash it all upon the planeswalker, but they were already high above the Basilica, darting backward with uncanny speed until they were out of range, looking every bit as unsettled as Norn.

"You are quite the canvas, indeed, Mother of Machines." Ashiok spread their arms wide and bowed their head. "Another masterpiece."

Norn watched as Ashiok disappeared, gliding through the night sky. The veil of Ashiok's nightmare world lifted with their departure. The Phyrexians she had willed into existence dissipated. The broken flagstones resolved themselves once more into immaculate smoothness. The thick blood and unnatural plants quivered, hardened, and then crumbled to dust, easily scattered by the fresh breeze.

The body of Elspeth, still clad in Norn's armor, was the last to fade, clinging to corporeality until the regent took a step toward her. Elspeth's armor quaked and then crumbled away, fine as white sand, leaving her severed human head. The skin cracked. Lines thin as wisps of smoke formed around her mouth, spreading outward, dissolving her nightmare flesh from the inside out.

But just before the vision of Elspeth disintegrated, she opened her eyes and met Norn's gaze. She looked at Norn with such human pity, with such horrid *sympathy*, that Norn couldn't breathe.

When the nightmare had well and truly faded from the world, Elesh Norn walked carefully over the courtyard of the Basilica and touched the stones, clean now, pure and holy, where the thing that had been Elspeth Tirel had been birthed. She could not erase Elspeth from her mind. She could not unsee the pity there. She could not bear the thought of something so human unsettling her so completely.

And Elesh Norn knew then, with the same amount of conviction with which she worshiped the Machine Orthodoxy, that in order to purge this new emotion she was feeling, this fear and uncertainty, she would need to find the human, Elspeth Tirel, and rid the Multiverse of her.