

Chapter 4: The Dark

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From set *The Brothers' War*

Bathed in hallowed light, the infidels looked upon the impurities of their souls and despaired.

—*The Book of Tal*

Dearest Elspeth,

It is quite natural to forget. Survival lies in the forgetting. To remember all things in perfect order requires so much attention and energy. Too much. That is the object of this missive to you—to alleviate the burden of either forgetting or remembering, as each robs you of the benefits of the other. Instead, let these words remain close to your heart.

Sleep had not come easy to Elspeth since she arrived on Dominaria almost a week ago. She had rested, taken time to bathe in this lonely tower's facilities, and meditated by reciting her old knightly vows. But not even the steady patter of rain could usher her through the gate of dreams.

To fill the listless hours between dusk and dawn, she'd drill in the grand hall of the tower, moving through the battle stances she'd learned as a squire in Valeron. When she'd first arrived on the plane, the hall was empty, allowing her all the space she wanted to swing her sword. But in a matter of days, the hall had become increasingly crowded with Saheeli's metal soldiers. Elspeth accepted command of this mechanical garrison at Teferi's request. It made sense—she had the most battlefield experience of any Planeswalker in the tower. Still, these constructs were poor substitutes for real knights. What did they know of wounds suffered in another's defense, of prayers uttered on another's behalf to well, *some* divine being?

Nothing. Steel only knew steel.

Elspeth positioned the spade-shaped blade of one of the soldiers, a construct that resembled an armored, bipedal beetle. Then she settled into first guard, holding a buckler she'd wrenched off one of the soldiers' arms. *First guard to second.* She swung a backhand sweep from the left, her blade clanging against her silent adversary, then returning up to her temple. *Second guard to third.* Elspeth swung again, bringing her sword back down, the blade so close to her ear that she heard it sing. *Third guard to fourth.* Arcing her sword high once more, she tapped the metal soldier's head. *Fourth guard to fifth.* Finally, she brought her sword down in a hard chop, sweeping the point of her blade behind her.

Acceptable. Now do it again.

One two three four five.

Again. Faster.

One, two, three, four, five.

Not fast enough! Do it again!

Onetwothree—

Elspeth stumbled, her sword falling from her grasp and clattering onto the floor. Exasperated, she threw the buckler as hard as she could across the room. There was once a time when she didn't have to think about *how* to fight. The motions were grafted onto her muscles, engraved into her bones. No extra thought necessary, no hesitation conceded. But after all her experiences on New Capenna, her movements had felt sluggish, her sword arm shaky.

"Your trinket," said a soaked Wrenn, stepping in from the rain. Seven, the dryad's partner tree, also dripping wet, held Elspeth's shield out for her.

"Thank you," Elspeth said curtly. She took the buckler and retrieved her sword, then resumed her stance opposite the metal soldier to start the sequence again. Wrenn hovered, watching her.

"Is there something you need?" Elspeth asked.

"You inhabit two melodies. How is this possible?"

"What do you mean?"

"Every being is part of a song," said Wrenn. "A melody that contributes to the whole. But you—there are two melodies in you. One is a single note, constant and unerring. The other is cleft, an aria throttled midway."

"I—" she began. "You must be mistaken."

"There is no mistake. It is as if you live two separate lives. One in light, one in shadow."

"You're wrong," snapped Elspeth, slamming her sword back into its scabbard.

"Very well," Wrenn said, Seven obliging by stepping away to give Elspeth space.

Elspeth grimaced. She hadn't meant to be so short, but she disliked the way the dryad proclaimed things about her, as if a handful of days was enough to dissect her soul.

"Wrenn, forgive me. I—"

"Hold," said Wrenn. "There's a disturbance in the rain's rhythm. Someone is outside."

Elspeth unsheathed her sword and approached the massive entrance at the front of the tower. She rued the existence of such an open thoroughway into the tower's interior. A drawbridge would have been tactically superior. A barbican with a moat even better still. Anything to bar the way of an advancing army.

"Can you tell how many?" Elspeth asked.

"Two. Human in size."

Two people was no invasion force. Nevertheless, Elspeth erred on the side of vigilance.

"Wake the others, Wrenn. I'll investigate."

"We will go out together. I suspect the noise will act as a suitable alarm."

Elspeth and Wrenn marched into the rain past the courtyard, down the shallow scalloped stairs and onto the stone pathway which had been reclaimed by the grass and dirt.

"Show yourself!" Elspeth yelled. "Who is out there?"

No answer. If there was danger, Elspeth didn't want to take any chances.

"Stay close to me, Wrenn," said Elspeth, casting a light spell onto her shield. Then, with the tip of her sword, she scratched a circle around Wrenn and herself, speaking a word of power. At the first sign of aggression, she could empower the circle to ward against any hostile magic.

She shined her shield out into the darkness, revealing two figures approaching. They stepped forward without weapons drawn, without a threatening gait. Not only that, but Elspeth could feel the presence of magic—evidenced by the faint green glow surrounding the figures—as well as the subtle tug of Planeswalker sparks.

But were they friends or foes?

Elspeth held her sword fast. She'd be ready either way. When the figures were only a few feet from the circle, one of them—a woman with fiery red hair—raised her hand and called out: "Are you Elspeth?"

Solid. Constant. Loyal. Commitment in a squire is commendable, especially when skill is lacking. More than once, you chided Aran on his handling of a blade. You knew that he could never be a true knight of Bant. Strong of arm, good for a few well-placed sword blows in an arena. But a member of the Sigiled caste? He'd never be worthy.

You let him take to the battlefield anyway. No wonder he fell, the boy playing at being a man. When you brought him back with your healing magic, he looked upon you as a hidden goddess. You've given us hope, he told you when you visited his recovery bed. I trust you. And why not? Mentors do not forsake their charges when they need guidance the most.

But you did. You cast down your sword, discarded your armor, denied your duty. These days, he spends his mornings hobbling down the pretty garden paths of the monastery he serves at. The pain that racks his body is nothing compared to the emptiness in his soul. He has finally learned your true lesson: Do not hope. It is not for you.

Nissa Revane and Chandra Nalaar walked into the light. Two more people on the list of those who knew more about Elspeth than she did about them, thanks to Ajani. She and Wrenn welcomed them into the tower, allowing them to dry off and get their bearings. To their credit, they were kind, exuding as much warmth as anyone had ever shown her. But they were not her friends, as much as they seemed to desire it. Perhaps in time, but that time had not yet come.

So, Elspeth smiled. She smiled, said nothing, and after handing them off to a bleary-eyed Kaya for a debriefing session, didn't look back to wave goodbye. She had her duties, after all, which didn't include sitting in meetings sipping tea. As she exited the tower, it was abuzz with activity, much of it localized to the grand hall where a team of servant automatons shined and polished the ranks of mechanical warriors.

Outside, the downpour from earlier had relented enough for Elspeth to journey to the watchtowers located along the perimeter of the vale, the remnants of an ancient defense grid. She'd been carrying out upgrades over the past few days on behalf of Saheeli, who was happy to have the extra help so she could concentrate on working with Teferi, Kaya, and the Temporal Anchor. The job suited Elspeth just fine. Being away from the noises and discussions at the tower let her ruminate upon everything that had happened to her in short succession—clawing her way up from Theros's Underworld, finding her home plane, losing Ajani.

No. Not simply losing him.

He's one of them—a Phyrexian, Teferi had said. I'm sorry.

Pushing the thought from her mind, Elspeth slung her sack over her shoulder and scaled the rocky outcropping at the foot of the watchtower. She rested briefly when she reached the stone rungs carved into the side of the tower itself, then climbed all the way up and over the railing onto a small ledge at

the very top. At the center of the covered platform were the remnants of a turret that once fired harpoon-like projectiles at any intruders within range. Now only its base remained, a heap of crumbling stone.

Elspeth pulled a steel-clad cylinder from her sack, then turned to give a couple of swift kicks to the old turret, toppling it easily. She set Saheeli's cylinder in its place and inserted a small yellow crystal into a depression on its top. In a matter of moments, the cylinder rolled over of its own accord and unfolded itself twice over, forming a tripod base and a short barrel from which bolts of energy could discharge.

"That's it," she said to herself, and sat back against the wall of the turret chamber. She closed her eyes, breathed in the cold air, and cleared her mind. Out of habit, she began to recite the Prayer of Asha, Bant's guardian angel.

"Stray not into sin," Elspeth began. Then she stopped. No matter how hard she practiced, no matter how many mantras Elspeth recited, Asha had no obligation to heed her. Elspeth had thrown away her oath when she deserted Alara. Then what of her other patron, Heliod? A petty tyrant, a malefactor and murderer unworthy of her devotion, now deservedly chained to a rock in Theros's Underworld. Other gods waited in the wings—Serra right here on Dominaria, to name one—all promising favor for faith.

And that was the problem. *What faith do I have to give? Everything I love is gone. Everyone gone. Nothing to believe in.* Then she remembered that wasn't altogether true. There were some left. Koth was alive. Vivien had proven herself a true friend. And then there was Giada. She wondered if Giada could see her now, somehow. If there was any chance

"You told me that I had everything I ever needed," Elspeth said quietly. "But the Phyrexians—all they do is take. Take, and twist, and destroy until there's nothing left of you but hate and despair. And I hate them so much for what they did to Ajani. You said my failures don't define me, but when I lay my head down to sleep, all I see are those I wasn't able to protect."

If Giada heard her, she didn't answer. Elspeth didn't expect she would.

How much would you give up for love? Ask Daxos of Meletis, as he has given up everything. Who he was, what he stood for, that which he adored—none of these are within his grasp any longer. For him, there is only Heliod, his fallen lord whose punishment did not relieve Daxos of his duty. By day, he is forced to carry out the sun's will, his restored life an eternal yoke. But at night, in his dreams, he wanders unshackled, calling out your name into Erebos's infinite meadows of six-petaled asphodel made of the sharpest glass. As the edges slice his legs, causing them to weep blood, he pauses to feel the pain, for in his waking life, he feels nothing at all.

Once a moon, his mind is further freed to traverse deeper into Kruphix's realm. And what do his oracle eyes show him? They bring him to you—a facsimile to be sure, but real enough for Daxos—standing atop the multi-headed corpse of Polukranos, the World Eater, its black blood still fresh upon your hands.

"Why do you deserve a life without suffering?" he demands to know. You answer by mocking his tears, then thrust your blade through his chest, into his heart.

Daxos wakes up soon after and prepares for the dawn.

The rain returned just as Elspeth arrived back at the tower. She made her way past the glares of silent metal warriors back to her room but stopped short when she heard voices coming from the corridor

outside her door. Peering around the corner, she recognized two people seated on the hallway floor. Chandra. Jodah. A jug of wine between them.

"She was so mad," said Chandra. "Threatened to drown me! I didn't even burn the whole forest down! Just one teensy-weensy part of it. I mean, trees grow back eventually. Oh, and don't tell Nissa any of this."

"Drowning. She stole that threat from me," said Jodah. "Ah, Jaya. Always good at destroying. Not quite as adept at creation." He took a long drink from the jug. "Heavens, you didn't taste her cooking, did you?"

"Ugh." Chandra yanked the jug from Jodah and gulped down several mouthfuls. "Don't get me started on the quiche."

Jodah burst out laughing. "She made the quiche? *Again?! " "After that, eggs were forbidden within five miles of Keral Keep. I'm not kidding—we paid a priest from Zinara to cast a ward to keep chickens away from the place."*

"Let me have one turn on Saheeli's time machine, and I'd go back " An abrupt sullenness gripped him, and he remained silent for a while before speaking again. "I'd go back and eat the whole damn thing."

Elspeth watched as Chandra placed her arm around Jodah's shoulder and held him tight, futilely attempting to prevent her own tears from flowing. It wasn't necessary to know who this Jaya person was to appreciate what she meant to Chandra and Jodah. The closest of friends.

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Now, while they were distracted, Elspeth made her move. She hoped to appear in a flash, walk by, get to her door, and disappear behind it before Chandra or Jodah could realize she was there. Such a silly expectation.

"Elspeth!" Chandra called out, wiping the last of her tears on her sleeve. "Hey, care to join us? Believe me, you'd be doing us a favor."

Elspeth turned away from the door handle and mustered a half-smile. "No thank you. I need to study the area map, make sure that everything's accounted for."

"Study?" asked Chandra. "What are you talking about?"

"Elspeth has been developing defensive actions in case we get attacked," said Jodah. "It's quite a bold strategy, if I do say so myself."

Bold? She wasn't so sure. *Desperate* seemed more accurate. In addition to setting up the watchtowers, she'd been working with Jodah, Kaya, and Saheeli on measures to take in the event of an assault on the tower. It would happen eventually—that was certain. So, it was imperative to have a plan in place. Even a plan that had a remote chance of succeeding was better than having none.

"Thanks." She pressed down on the latch and felt the catch on her door give way. "Anyway, I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Wait," said Jodah, suddenly serious. "I know things have been odd for you here." He motioned to the empty space on the opposite side of the hallway. "You're among friends. Please."

There was something about Jodah that she couldn't deny—a strange familiarity that she couldn't peg but nevertheless pulled at her. Perhaps it was as simple as his kindness to her when she arrived at the tower, the mere act of telling her that she was welcome no matter what, that whatever difficulties she was having, she had the space to deal with them as she needed. For that, Elspeth could relent. She pulled her door shut and sat down on the floor across from him.

"I'm sorry about your friend," she said. "With all this madness happening, it must be difficult to mourn."

"We're not mourning," said Chandra, offering Elspeth some wine. "We're celebrating who she was. That's the way Jaya would have wanted it."

Elspeth pushed the jug away. "I didn't know her."

"Then tell us about someone you did know," Chandra said. "Someone gone too soon."

Elspeth thought about the names. There were many. Some she couldn't bear to consider dead. Others whose fate she didn't know. And still others in the murky in-between. One name emerged from the recesses of her mind, one she hadn't uttered since before Heliod struck her down.

"I knew a man," she said. "An artificer from Urborg who fought beside me on New Phyrexia. He was exasperating and pretentious." She couldn't help but smile when she thought of him. "But he was also brilliant and brave and loyal—the kind of person who would venture across planes on the shoddiest of information because he thought his friends were in trouble."

"Venser," said Jodah, taking the wine and gulping some down.

"You knew him?"

"Long ago, when he was very young and I was somewhat younger. I'm ashamed to say that I punched him in the face for circumstances that weren't his fault. I told him I was sorry, but that didn't make it right. I wish he were here to tell his idiotic jokes. I'd even pretend to laugh."

"You'd think after decades of fighting so much death I'd be used to loss," said Elspeth. "But I can't escape the names of those who fell to save me. Of those whose blood is on my hands because of my failure. Their ghosts haunt my dreams."

"Well, it's been centuries for me, and I'm only barely hanging on."

"Centuries?"

"Did no one?" Jodah straightened himself up and cleared his throat. "You are in the presence of a four-thousand-year-old man. I know, I know—I don't look a day over twenty-five hundred."

Twenty-five hundred? He didn't look older than twenty-five! "How is this possible?"

"Oh, you know—the usual. A very, very, very long story that we don't have time for and that I don't have the patience to tell." Jodah looked at her wistfully. "In my time, I've lost people I've cherished. So many now. Like you, I can close my eyes and still see them."

"So, it doesn't get easier."

"No," he said. "Not if you let yourself love."

Chandra wrested the wine jug away from Jodah and raised it. "This is a celebration, right? So, we toast! To Venser! To Jaya! To Gideon and " Her mouth hung open with the final name, one that Elspeth didn't even have to guess. *Ajani*.

"It's okay," said Elspeth. "You can say it."

"No. No, it's not," said Chandra. "We're going to save him. And after we do, we're going to torch every single one of those Phyrexian bastards on any plane we find them on. You have my word on that."

Elspeth nodded and took the wine jug from Chandra. "To Venser, Jaya, and Gideon. To the ones we've lost and to the courageous yet to fall. Until all have found their place."

Can constructs dream? Calix, if he knew the word "dream," would tell you that he can. But what does the marionette dream of when his strings are cut, when the hands that direct his actions are taken away? The

answer is simple. He dreams about his quarry dictated by Klothys, his life consumed with the pursuit of Elspeth Tirel. Plane to plane. Haunt to haunt. He will never stop chasing you—not when he is awake, not when he is asleep.

You see, Calix must sleep to regain his strength, and when he sleeps, he dreams. He dreams of the battles you've fought, studying every move you used against him to devise the perfect counter. The man who is not a man can aspire to that—being perfect, realizing his purpose. But he is more than a puppet, you see. He also fears his own success. Once he has you, once he drags you back to share Heliod's doom as fate dictates, what is left for him? What is the essence of Calix once his aims are fulfilled?

He knows the answer and is terrified of it. Not even an agent of fate can evade destiny.

The Phyrexian attack came in the dead of night.

Elspeth was still fastening the straps of her armor as she ran through the hallways of the tower. Every other second, an explosion rang out, reverberating off the walls so each crash sounded like it was right on top of her. Reaching the door to Saheeli's workshop, she burst in without announcing herself.

The Temporal Anchor hissed and rattled. Saheeli darted back and forth, bending and twisting parts of her machine with her metalsmithing abilities to keep one step ahead of it shaking itself apart. Casting a violet haze onto the entire scene was Kaya, struggling to maintain her ghostform magic over herself and the coffin-shaped chamber that housed Teferi.

"We're under attack!" Elspeth shouted. "Please tell me you've gotten what you need."

"Not yet," Saheeli said, barely catching her breath. "But Teferi's so close. If we shut down now, we won't get another chance at going back. Please. We just need a little longer."

It was happening. Elspeth closed her eyes, and for a moment, all sound drifted away. She remembered what she said to Teferi: *If the Phyrexians are still on this plane, it's only a matter of time before they find this place. You will need someone to defend you if that happens—if they track us down.* Now they'd done just that. She tightened her buckler onto her arm and unfastened the snap that held her sword in its scabbard. She felt for the small flask of Halo slipped into her belt pouch. Then she took a breath.

It's time.

"Bar the door when I leave," she ordered, then ran back the way she came, faint shouts and clatter accenting every deafening boom. When she arrived in the grand hall, Wrenn and Nissa were already there, watching out one of the cathedral-like windows at the watchtower turrets firing bolts of blue-white energy at a dark shape floating below the storm clouds.

"What is that?" Elspeth asked.

"A skyship," said Jodah, stepping out of a magical portal and into the chamber. "Look there, our thopters."

The thopters—visible only by their running lights—streaked into view headed toward the skyship. Everyone watched as the thopters buzzed around the shadow like so many gnats, flinging explosive charges that only succeeded in revealing what they were dealing with. Not so much a ship as a floating monstrosity of tapered horns and jagged spikes, the vessel kept itself aloft by sails that resembled scaly, bat-like wings. Slowly, it changed its trajectory to aim its keel downward, aligning with the central tower. The turret fire intensified as the ship descended, only for the watchtowers to stop firing one by one.

"The defense grid," Jodah said, his voice hollow. The ship lowered itself onto the ground to rest on a set of spines spreading out from its hull like the legs of a giant insect.

Elspeth had seen enough. "They're on their way," she said. "Wrenn and Nissa, protect Teferi at all costs." Among the soldiers, she eyed a pair of mechanical dromedaries, filigree steeds built by Saheeli for this exact moment. "Jodah, are you ready?"

Jodah shot Elspeth a look. "I suppose it's too late to ask for your plan to be a tad less bold."

"You had your chance," Elspeth said. "Now we ride out to meet them. Buy time for Teferi."

They mounted up and armed themselves with powerstone lances, also prepared by Saheeli. Jodah was right to have doubts. In a siege, the defenders' advantage came from their walls. Doctrine called for them to hunker down inside the main structure, set up archers or other ranged units to attack from a distance, and break any attack through attrition. But there were two problems with that in this scenario. First, the tower was no castle—its open nature made it impossible to defend against intrusion if the enemy swarmed it. And second, the Phyrexians weren't a normal army. Their morale would not be broken by a failed assault. Somewhere out in the darkness, they were sneaking and scheming. What Elspeth had to do was trick them into obeying the rules of conventional warfare by providing an irresistible chance to sow discord and spread fear.

"Arise!" screamed Elspeth. All at once, the hundred or so mechanical soldiers stomped to life, swinging their sharpened arms in unison like a set of threshing blades. Behind their ranks, a group of ten clay-covered brutes raised their arms into a boxing stance, readying their fists to smash any foes that Elspeth directed them at. The constructs' unblinking eyes, all trained on Elspeth, pulsed with a soft golden light.

"Assemble!" The company marched in perfect time out of the chamber and into the courtyard, forming three concave arcs end to end.

"March!" The soldiers advanced and fanned out, descending the central steps and stopping at the far end of the main pathway. The clay statues stayed behind in the courtyard to absorb any enemies that got past the front line. Everything was set.



Art by: Carlos Palma Cruchaga

"Now we have to hurry," she said to Jodah. The two rode double-time around the southern side of the tower, keeping close to the wall until they reached a predetermined vantage point from which to monitor the siege line. Elspeth gripped her lance, her heart racing.

"Saheeli said these lances only have one shot," she reminded Jodah. "We have to make it count."

"Artificers," he grumbled. "Would it hurt them to make these fantastic inventions usable more than once?"

Elspeth opened her mouth to say something, but a noise stole her attention. The sound came like whispers, followed the quiet slurp of things slithering through the mud. Then came the flapping of wings and a low, thunderous rumble that roared into an ear-piercing shriek—a Phyrexian battle cry. The army coalesced at the very edge of the tower's light, bending the membrane of the dark until it tore open.

The front ranks bristled with humanoid warriors armored in black plate metal, their arm clusters tapering into blades, serrated edges, and needle-like spearpoints. Behind them strode mounted units—or what Elspeth first thought were knights on giant lupine creatures. But they moved too swiftly, navigated the slippery terrain much too well to have been steed and rider; each mounted foe was a single being, rider and mount fused together.

For all their fearsome numbers and weapons, the Phyrexian ground troops did not chill Elspeth as much as what she saw next. The night sky moved, and winged knights dipped into the light. They were hideous, their bodies made of black sickle-shaped blades bound together by strands of sinew. While some maintained a vaguely human shape, others either replaced their bottom halves with a clutch of spider legs or eschewed legs altogether in favor of a spiked ball they could use to ram enemies from above.

"Dammit," said Elspeth. She hadn't counted on aerial troops, but it was too late to adjust plans; the advancing horde marched ever closer to their siege line. The mounted Phyrexians broke out into a gallop, flowing around the flanks of the main body. It was a simple strategy, but effective: a pincer maneuver to smash the defenders between waves of metal beasts.

"Wait for it."

"Elspeth, it's now or never."

She knew, but it was vital to make every part of the plan count. A second longer could mean more enemies caught in their trap. *Steady, steady.* The writhing mass had nearly reached the siege line. One more moment, and they'd be on top of the tower defenders.

"Do it now, Jodah!"

With a motion of his hand and the utterance of a single mystic syllable, Jodah unwove the phantasmal terrain spell he'd cast the previous day, revealing the staked trench that spanned from the far northern end of the tower complex all the way to the spot where Elspeth and Jodah had stationed themselves. Too late to stop their forward momentum, the Phyrexian vanguard speared themselves on a crisscross lattice of sharpened logs. With another word of power, Jodah caused the entire barricade to erupt into flame, thrusting the enemy into disarray.

The first rows of Phyrexian infantry met the same fate as the riders, which at first buoyed Elspeth's hopes. But with no hesitation, the next row used the flaming bodies of their brethren as handholds to climb over the barricade to the other side. The fliers followed, advancing up to the front ranks to carry otherwise pinned fighters safely over to the flames.

Luckily, they had one more trick in store.

“Let’s go!” shouted Elspeth. She spurred her mount down a path perpendicular to the invasion force, then turned sharply toward the horde in a flanking charge. She raised her lance, its tip glowing white-hot from the powerstone set into it, to signal Jodah to begin his own charge. As she galloped toward the Phyrexians, she set her lance to point toward the enemy and guided her thumb onto a crystal inset on the shaft. So far, Saheeli had more than proven her genius. But now was the time that Elspeth needed the artificer to outmatch anything she’d created before.

Elspeth pressed the crystal when she was mere yards away from the Phyrexian line. A burning sensation overcame her hand as the lance’s powerstone grew intolerably bright. Then it shattered, its pent-up power erupting as a band of energy that streaked across the battlefield to connect to its mated pair—the powerstone in Jodah’s lance. Elspeth spurred her steed onward, gaining as much speed as she could before ramming into the horde, the energy band ripping through the Phyrexians like a scythe through wheat. She continued to drive forward, not daring to slow down for fear of an enemy blade getting past her greaves or a grasping hand catching hold and pulling her down from her saddle.

Elspeth reached the other side of the throng, decimated Phyrexians in her wake. She wheeled around, waited for the all-clear from Jodah on the other side of the field, and then stormed back into the fray to cleave her way through more of the enemy. She took a moment to look over her shoulder at the siege line. The automatons were holding their own, swarming small clusters of enemies and shredding them before they could counterattack. The few Phyrexians that had broken through the front line made the mistake of attacking the clay statues directly, resulting in their limbs being stuck inside the statues’ malleable exteriors.

Elspeth had turned her attention back to finishing off more of the Phyrexian infantry when she caught sight of a winged knight swooping down from above. She deflected the blow away from her head, but it still succeeded in toppling her mount into the dirt. She pushed herself up from the sodden earth, only for a heavy metal boot to kick her in the stomach, whipping her onto her back. As her attacker trudged toward her, raising its axe-like arm to deliver a killing blow, Elspeth saw that no head rested on its neck. Instead, it seemed to see and sense through a flesh-stripped skull embedded into its torso.

That was just the right distance for a swift kick of her own. It reeled backward, giving Elspeth enough time to spin back onto her feet and draw her sword, unleashing a pulse of white light—pure Halo—that caused her adversary to stagger back, blinded. Her opening clear, Elspeth batted away the axe head and thrust her sword clean through its midsection. She pushed the Phyrexian’s body off her blade with her foot and looked up over the chaos to see the enemy reeling and disorganized.

Now was the time to press the advantage.

“Charge!” she screamed, her voice ringing out over the din. Upon hearing the command word, the metal legion defending the keep turned into aggressors, charging over the flaming barricade and onto the battlefield. Though not spooked, the remaining Phyrexians fell back to re-establish a siege line. Those that came within reach of Elspeth fell to her swings like they were dummies made of rags and sackcloth. She wasn’t the only one to perceive this—the Phyrexians began to backpedal at Elspeth’s approach.

She gave them no quarter as she fought across the battlefield, parrying away blade and claw looking for Jodah. She spotted him pinned down against the barricade by two more flying Phyrexians. Gripping her sword in both hands, Elspeth broke into a charge and uttered a spell. A moment later, a helix of light surrounded her body, launching her high enough to cut down one of Jodah’s attackers. She swiveled upon landing in front of the other Phyrexian, arcing her blade upward to slice it out of the air.

“They’re waning,” said Jodah.

Elspeth surveyed the battlefield. The last of the winged Phyrexians had been tackled to the ground by clay statues and pulled apart. Mechanical soldiers pursued the remaining Phyrexian infantry into the muck and battered them down. High above their heads, thopter squadrons chased teams of skirges, blasting them out of the sky. Victory was firmly in hand. Elspeth turned and embraced Jodah, her knees giving ever so slightly from the sudden wave of fatigue that washed over her. All she wanted was to sleep, to dream of lands with possibility and then wake up to fight for a new day.

None of it was to be.

“By Urza’s salty breeches “ said Jodah, his shoulders going slack.

Elspeth let go of him and turned around. There, framed by the billow of green-black clouds, the silhouette of the Phyrexian skyship shuddered and began to move—to grow, to unfold like a beast arising from a long rest. Several more gargantuan legs sprouted from the bottom of the skyship’s hull, raising its body higher than the top of the tower. Blood-red arcane sigils became visible upon its black form, symbols Elspeth knew by sight even if she couldn’t read them. It was the language of Phyrexia, emblazoned on the behemoth to proclaim the coming of a new order.

It began to move forward, quaking the ground step by colossal step.

“We can’t let that thing near the tower,” said Elspeth.

“Agreed,” said Jodah, ardent resolve replacing his earlier cheer. “But I need to know—how much do you believe in your own power?”

“What?”

He reached into his robe and pulled out a small leather pouch he wore around his neck. He took it off and held it out for Elspeth to see.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Something Jaya cooked up,” he said. Jaya—the friend he and Chandra wept for. “You are powerful, Elspeth. Not because of the strength in your sword arm, and *not* because you are a Planeswalker. It’s deeper—your desire for connection, to be the hand that thrusts itself into the flames to rescue another. To have peace, family, a home. To belong.”

How did he know these things about her? A week prior, they’d never met, never even known each other existed. But like Wrenn, he’d stripped away her various masks with little effort. No, she wasn’t a knight of Bant, nor was she Heliod’s champion or New Capenna’s vengeance. She was only what was left: Elspeth Tirel.

“I I don’t understand.”

“I told you—I’ve been around a good long while. And in my time, I’ve dealt with many mages, some with more affinity for certain magic than others. Looking at you It’s like gazing at a white-hot sun trying to hide itself. No more hiding, Elspeth.” He closed his hand around the pouch, gripping it tightly. “A final gift from Jaya to Phyrexia. Chandra would be the natural choice, but the very first thing I learned about magic is that fire and light are not so distant. You can help me cast it.”

“What must I do?” she asked.

“Follow my lead.”

They wrangled Jodah’s steed, jumped on, and sped toward the Phyrexian beast. As they drew closer to it, it felt like they and the entire world were shrinking under the monster’s oppressive shadow. The elation she’d felt only minutes before had evaporated away. What were they to it but specks of dirt? What could she and Jodah do to even slow it down?

They continued riding until they were nearly underneath it. Jodah hopped off the saddle and extended his hand to help Elspeth get down. The red glow from the Phyrexian sigils dimly illuminated the spot of muddy, slimy earth where they stood. Gazing up at the monstrosity, Jodah spread his arms and rose into the air, his robes billowing in the grimy wind.

He began to recite words in a language Elspeth couldn't understand. As she listened, a flood of images began to infiltrate her mind—a beautiful dark-haired woman; Jodah looking no older than he did now; the sound of shattering glass; and then *fire*. “Let go,” he said, his voice tapped into her mind. “Let go of your anger, your pain. Let go of your ghosts—they will haunt you, but allow their pleas to fall unheard for now. Stretch your consciousness past them, past the ground, past the sky, past all the boundaries of your waking life.”

Elspeth did as Jodah instructed. She closed her eyes and recalled the rolling plains of Bant, the golden grain fields of the Guardian Way outside of Meletis on Theros. No, not just imagination—somehow, she was there, in both places at once. Farther, farther she reached, so far that she could feel herself slipping—she was no longer so much Elspeth alone, as she'd become *everything*. Her eyes shot open, and she found herself at the heart of a torrent of energy surging through every part of her body.

“Now bring it all back inside you,” Jodah said. “Root it as deeply as you can until you can no longer contain it.”

Elspeth willed the storm into her heart, into her soul. The scorching energy began to tear her apart.

“Focus, Elspeth! Choose one thing—the one thing in your life that gives you strength, gives you purpose. Channel your entire being into it!”

Ajani. Part of her wanted to consider him dead and gone. At least he'd be at peace. But another part of her needed him here, needed there to be a chance of saving him like Chandra insisted. Because he was the one—that one person in her life who could give her hope, lend her strength. *Home is duty. Family is those you choose to defend. You have always had everything you ever needed*. Now Elspeth understood what Giada was trying to tell her, what Teferi beseeched her to do that first night after arriving on Dominaria. Her duty wasn't only to protect others; she needed to allow herself to be protected by those whom she loved. Her family. To trust them. Just like Ajani trusted her to rescue him.

She would do it. She would bring him back. She would believe.

A column of radiance poured out of her, blasting upward toward the sky, surging over Jodah in scintillating coils of power. She was connected to him, to Jaya's spell, her energy igniting a maelstrom of swirling, brilliant light around them both. She and Jodah were consumed by the blaze, becoming one with the storm. United, they willed themselves to expand wider and taller than the Phyrexian behemoth, melting it into slag and ichor before vaporizing it in a glorious whirlwind.

Then the light vanished. She dropped to her knees, once again Elspeth Tirel. The ground against her palms was warm and dry, cracked. She craned her neck upward, seeing no trace of the giant Phyrexian beast.

The cool, soothing rain fell onto her face.

Names are but labels that soothe us into thinking we have knowledge, and by extension, control. New Capenna? Old Capenna? No matter. You must understand, dearest, that your masters in the asylum were in pain, too. They were not “Phyrexians” so much as they were your neighbors, your families who found salvation in the oil, who desired to be reborn as voracious membranes, lashing villi, and flailing flagella bound in perfect metal.

You didn't know this, and neither did Boy.

Remember Boy? Oh, he had a name. You never asked him; it's too late to know what it was. You devised quite the plan, you two, hatched amid the baleful ravings of your jailers. You thought you could hide among the cadavers, tuck yourselves into blankets of flesh and offal and wait until those remains were tossed onto the rot-heaps outside of your prison. What you did not know was that your captors loved that gore. That the reek of viscera was a cloying incense, obliterating their memories of fresh wildflowers, baking bread, the salt of the ocean. Their old names, the things they loved.

That is how they caught you: You hid exactly where they would look. They chained you with every intention of grafting strips of your flesh onto their bones. Thanks to your Planeswalker spark, you escaped, but Boy wasn't as fortunate.

You can imagine how they reacted. Understand that he was not dreaming when his fate befell him. What they did, they did smiling, and afterward, there was no Boy left.

Only Phyrexia.

"Elspeth!" she heard Jodah call out. Searching around, she found him sprawled on the ground barely able to move. "I can't believe that worked," he said, his breath labored.

Elspeth pulled Jodah up to his feet, allowing him to lean on her, and together, they shared a moment of silence gazing back at the tower, its gentle blue glow calling them back home.

"You did it," he said.

"We did it," said Elspeth, her arm around Jodah's shoulder. "You, me, and Jaya."

"I wish you could have met her. She would have liked you. Or hated you. Bit of a coin flip, really." He smiled. "I know she'd be impressed either way."

Suddenly, bright, blue-white flashes brightened the sky by the tower, followed soon after by thunderous peals. For a moment, Elspeth thought lightning had struck the tower or its environs. But she couldn't trace any fork back up to the clouds. No, the blasts were coming from ground level.

"The tower is under attack," said Elspeth, her stomach sinking. "This army, this creature—they were a distraction."

"Yes," Elspeth heard someone say behind her. Turning, she saw a young woman wearing a set of robes like those worn by Jodah and Teferi. In addition to the shades of red, blue, and gold, the woman's garb added one key variation: a circular star chart motif emblazoned on her breastplate bisected by a solid line—the seal of Phyrexia."

"Rona," Jodah said. "I can't say that it's good to see you again, but—"

Rona raised her glaive and sent an explosion of azure lightning at Elspeth and Jodah, launching them backward into the mud. Elspeth's world tossed and swerved like a capsizing ship. She groped for her sword, and finding its hilt, pushed herself up in time to see Rona standing over a weak and helpless Jodah.

"This is for the trouble you caused me in Yavimaya," she said as she plunged the point of her glaive into his gut, eliciting a sickening rasp from Jodah's throat.

"No!" Elspeth screamed. She scrambled to her feet, fatigue weighing upon her like a titan pressing down on her shoulders. Even though Rona looked more human than the enemies Elspeth faced earlier, she was much worse a monstrosity. She had willingly given up her soul for the Phyrexian promise of power.

Elspeth stepped back, making sure to keep Jodah's body in view. She could barely stand. Jodah's spell had left her near collapse, unable to collect herself enough to cast spells or planeswalk. All she had in the moment was her sword, which she could barely lift. With uncanny quickness, Rona leaped forward, swinging her glaive at Elspeth's midsection, an attack that should have been easy to parry. But all Elspeth could do was flail her shield arm out to bat the glaive away. Rona went in for a second lunge that Elspeth barely dodged.

"I won't surrender," said Elspeth.

Rona beamed. "Good." She was playing with Elspeth as a torture master would tease a prisoner with the faintest hope of freedom. *Cooperate and everything will be fine.* Elspeth took stock of the distance between her and Rona. Rona had reach along with every other advantage in this duel save for one. Elspeth knew the dance.

Trust, she told herself, and with that, she held up her buckler as high as she could and crouched into first guard position. Gathering every shred of strength she had left, she held it all in reserve, waiting for one more opening.

Rona gave it to her. She callously stepped forward, unleashing a flurry of swings meant more to intimidate Elspeth than land a killing blow. At the end of the display, Rona spun into a head-level thrust. Elspeth summoned her remaining vigor to block Rona's strike with her buckler, knowing that the shield wasn't any match for a direct blow. The spearpoint pierced the buckler, punching through the flesh and bone of Elspeth's forearm. Screaming through the pain, Elspeth heaved her left arm downward—*fifth guard to second*—wrenching the glaive free from Rona's hands and burying her sword deep into Rona's shoulder.

Both went down, Rona in a heap and Elspeth onto her knees. She looked over at Jodah lying motionless. *Not too late*, she thought, her head swimming. *Halo* With her free hand, she felt for her belt pouch. If any life remained in Jodah, Halo could save him.

"Tirel. I never expected to actually see you again."

Elspeth gritted her teeth. That voice—Tezzeret. She looked up to see him approaching out of the dark. He knelt between Rona and her, close enough for her to wrap her hands around his throat—one last act of defiance—but her body refused to obey. Seizing her impaled arm, Tezzeret dislodged Rona's glaive with a single jerk. Then he turned to Rona to check her wound oozing blood and black glistening oil.

"She's still alive. Pity. Next time, aim for the neck."

"And you, Tezzeret?" said Elspeth. She clutched her wounded arm to her chest. "Still nothing but a pathetic lapdog."

She expected him to lash out like she'd witnessed in her prior interactions with him on New Phyrexia. But instead, Tezzeret merely shook his head, pointing back at the flashing detonations back at the tower. "I didn't have time to disarm that side of your defenses. *Tsk, tsk.* Messy." He took hold of Rona's collar and stood up. "Whatever efforts your cohort are engaged in will be stopped and destroyed before morning. There's no avoiding it. But you need not share their fate. I suggest you take this opportunity to find somewhere remote and disappear."

"I'm going to stop your Phyrexian masters. And then I'm going to kill you."

"Hmm," he said, hoisting Rona up onto his shoulder and picking up her glaive. "If you're thinking of striking out at me now, I'd advise against it. In your weakened state, I would assuredly win. Besides, tending to your dying companion is a better use of time, don't you think?"

"Why? Why are you sparing me?"

“Small cracks, Tirel,” he said. “That’s how even the mightiest edifice begins to crumble.” He bowed his head in what Elspeth could only guess was a twisted gesture of respect. “May this be the last time our paths cross.”

Then he walked back into the dark.

Exquisite ends are the most beautiful. So let this missive end with unctuous splendor, with tooth and edge, undulating muscle and slick ichor. It truly is a sight, your Phyrexia. A land where nightmares can have nightmares. The grand cenobite—she has the sweetest of them all. Such horrors to tease from her mind and such visions to implant starting with you, the fearsome lady in white who has defied even death to have her vengeance.

There are so many things to say, dearest, but the most appropriate is this: Thank you. There is a new purpose for my work, all because of you. So, when you are alone in the dark, remember that there is one among the countless planes that has you in mind. You will always have your most dedicated admirer close by.

Yours, always,

Ashiok