

Episode 5: Inevitable Resolutions

Seanan McGuire

From set *Phyrexia: All Will Be One*

16. 01. 2023

The sounds of battle faded behind them as Jace, Kaito, and Kaya delved deeper and deeper into the miniaturized recreation of Elesh Norn's citadel built inside the Seedcore. The space was airy and infinite, filled with shafts of buttery, obscenely golden light untainted by the horrors it had filtered through. Try as she might, Kaya couldn't even guess at the light's origin; there was no sun so far below the surface of what had been Mirrodin, no obvious source of the illumination, but still the halls and rooms around them shone, the air glittering with the dissonant harmony of the unseen Phyrexian choirs.



Art by: Marta Nael

Jace didn't look good. He was moving under his own power, but the wires growing through his flesh and bone were starting to break the skin, piercing through it and weaving themselves together in delicate loops, waving like cilia, even as they formed a shell around his arm. He had shifted the bag containing the sylex to the other side of his body, resting it against his hip as they hurried.

Kaya thought the worst sign was the fact that he was letting them see how far gone he was, rather than casting a soothing illusion over himself. He was like a cat that way; Jace never wanted anyone to see when he was hurt, preferring to mask the damage and present himself as perfectly fine. And now, he was walking wounded.

But then, they all were, in their own ways. Kaito walked with quick, efficient steps, his attention split between their surroundings and the hexgold-gilded drone on his shoulder, which made cooing noises and rubbed against his cheek, clearly trying to soothe the anxious Planeswalker. Kaya might have cracked a joke about needing a teddy bear to cope with the stress of battle, but honestly, she wished she'd brought a friend with her. Even a small one who couldn't speak.

Of course, she *had* brought friends with her. She'd come with Tyvar, Vraska, and the others. And now here she was, moving through enemy territory with a stranger and a dead man, to help detonate a bomb that could murder countless strangers. The Phyrexian threat was very real, and worse than she had feared.

Even still, there were people like Melira, who held hope in their hearts and blades in their hands, who were unwilling to surrender the fight. The deaths had been unfathomable. The cost to the people of Mirrodin had already been more than could ever have been fairly repaid. They deserved so much better. Kaya knew, without question, that the Multiverse had no glorious architect, no kindly divinity making sweeping decisions about how things would play out, because no architect with a hint of kindness in their heart would have done such a thing to the innocents of Mirrodin. Even if someone were to argue that Phyrexia had as much right to exist as the rest of them, the fact was that the machine contagion was parasitic at best, predatory at worst. A Multiverse which contained Phyrexia would inevitably *become* Phyrexia, consumed by their terrible One. Only one version of reality could survive this conflict.

She knew which one she wanted it to be.

The sounds of battle faded behind them. Kaya was direly afraid the three of them were all that remained. Realmbreaker—out of respect for Tyvar, she couldn't even think of it as a World Tree—was compleated. Their friends were dead. There hadn't been any time to mourn, and the time they had left was so short that she wasn't sure there ever would be. If she died here, would she be mourned? Would any of them?

"I hate this place," said Kaito, voice low as he shattered the harmonic semi-silence. Kaya glanced at him, almost surprised. Jace didn't. He kept looking straight ahead, clearly forcing himself to keep going through what must have been unspeakable agonies.

"It's not right," said Kaito, looking directly at Kaya. "I'm not particularly sensitive to spirits, but Bo-seiju, the great tree in Kamigawa, exists in harmony with everything around it. It's filled with kami, with spirits. Everything in Kamigawa is. This place the spirits must have been consumed along with everything else, or they would be screaming without end. I don't think you'd have to be sensitive to pick up on that."

"No," Kaya admitted. The spirits Kaito talked about didn't sound like the sort of spirits she was used to dealing with, who were born from death, not naturally born immortals. With as much death as this plane had seen, she would have expected the air to be so thick with ghosts that it became hard to breathe, but there was nothing. She couldn't call any aspect of Phyrexia sterile, not when even the dust was designed to infect and consume the unwary. And yet "sterile" was the only word that came to mind when trying to describe the spirits of this place. Phyrexia didn't release its victims, not even in death.

The halls around them were empty, which felt less like a stroke of luck and more like one more inescapable piece of the massive trap that this entire mission had become. Kaya took a breath. Jace hadn't turned yet. They still had the sylex. All was not yet lost. They moved in helpless hope—a helplessness that had only grown stronger since leaving Elspeth behind. Something about the other Planeswalker made it easy to believe the impossible might be possible after all.

That was gone now, along with Elspeth herself, and even if they won the day after this, they would still have paid far too dearly for their victory. Nothing was going to wipe clean the damage that had been done by Phyrexia.

Nothing.

The ceiling above them gave way to clear panels, like the wings of some great slumbering fly, translucent and organic and—like so much else in this terrible place—oddly, vitally alive, split by slightly darker veins that pulsed with glistening oil. Damaging the “skylight” would shower them in infection. Through the panels, they could see bridges of red sinew leading to the great invasion ships, endless ranks of Phyrexian warriors in the red and white of Elesh Norn’s faction filing into the increasingly gravid holds of the waiting vessels. They were pregnant with Phyrexia, ready to spread this terrible seed throughout the Multiverse.

Red mist drifted down from the ships as they prepared for launch, adding a bloody cast to the skylights. The clear membrane absorbed the red particulates, cleansing itself every few seconds only to be smeared once again, an endless cycle of recovery and besmirchment. Kaya shuddered.

“This is a dead end,” muttered Jace, darkly. “We’re going to have to go back and try another direction.”

Voice soft, Kaito said, “I don’t think so. Kaya, Jace—over here.”

They moved toward the lithe ninja, joining him around a hole in the floor. It looked like it was meant to be the entrance to a stairway, only someone had forgotten to construct the stairs. Instead, a roughly ten-foot drop led to a hovering disk of polished white metal, distinguished from the floor on which they stood by the absence of walls around it.

The hole was echoed by a larger hole in the disk below, exposing Realmbreaker’s trunk as it vanished into mist marbled with lightning. This was as close as they were going to come to the core root of the tree.

“This is a plane designed for falling through,” said Kaya, trying to make it sound light, as she phased herself intangible and dropped to the disc below.

The smell of ozone, mycosynth, and what seemed like a horrible perversion of sweet Kaldheim air addressed her nose as soon as she landed, and she shuddered again, moving to position herself beneath the hole.

“Come on,” she said, positioning herself to catch Jace when he dropped through. “Let’s get this done.”

Kaito eased Jace into a sitting position at the edge of the hole. The exhausted telepath slumped, still clutching the sylex, legs dangling like a child preparing to jump off a swing. When he finally pushed off the edge, Kaito stabilizing him the whole time, Kaya had a brief, shameful flash of wanting to step out of the way and just let him fall. He was already lost; she was inviting a monster into a bolt hole from which there was no escaping. But she held her place, and when he fell into her arms, she managed not to cringe away from the wires on his arms.

She couldn’t stop herself from phasing as they nuzzled at her flesh, already carrying the Phyrexian need to spread the infection, and Jace looked at her with understanding, even as he stumbled to catch his balance.

“*It’s almost over,*” he said, voice echoing inside her head without passing through her ears.

Privately, Kaya doubted that, and to Jace’s credit, he allowed her to have her doubts without commenting on them. He moved to unpack the sylex, revealing it to the Phyrexian air for the first time. Kaya

took a step back. Kaito, who had dropped down unnoticed by either one of them, took a step forward, stopping only when Kaya grabbed his arm.

“Let him have his space,” she said. “This is delicate.”

“Are you sure it’s safe for us to be this close?” asked Kaito.

“Urza detonated the first one in his lap, and he lived,” said Kaya. “We’ll be fine. Probably.” Assuming the plane survived.

Assuming the shockwave traveling up the tree didn’t rip New Phyrexia apart from core to crust. It might still send the last of the Mirrans to oblivion, and all the Planeswalkers still on this plane with them. If Nahiri survived her fall and was clinging to who she had always been, she would be blotted out in an instant by the blast. So would Elspeth, and Tyvar, and all the others, even—

Kaya couldn’t even form the shape of her own name in her thoughts. She had spent years dancing among the ghosts. If she died here, she wouldn’t be leaving a ghost of her own behind.

“Wait,” she said, as Jace moved to settle cross-legged next to the sylex, placing his hands on the rim. The wires spidering from his arm recoiled from the metal, almost as if they recognized it for the looming disaster it was.

Jace glanced up at her, eyebrows raised in mild surprise.

“Are you sure we should do this?” Kaya asked. “The Invasion Tree has connected. ‘Wipe it all clean’—that’s what the sylex says, right? The carvings? When you set it off, the blast will travel along the branches. It could damage or even destroy every plane it’s currently in contact with. And we have no way of knowing which planes they are. Vryn, Tolvada, Ixalan—even Ravnica, they could all be casualties.”

“If Phyrexia has reached them, they already are,” said Jace.

“Hold on,” said Kaito. “I came here to save Kamigawa, not to destroy it.”

“The sylex obliterates everything it touches,” said Kaya. “Even *time* was fractured when Urza used the original. There was a chance Mirrodin would survive before the tree was compleated—and the explosion would have been contained to this plane. Now, if it can travel through those Omenpaths that Tyvar saw forming in the branches Jace, we could destroy *everything*. We could blow up the Blind Eternities. You have to wait.”

“Vraska is dead, and I am dying,” said Jace calmly. “My body may continue and turn the powers it contains against any of you who still live—and I would kill me before that can happen, if I were you. You have no idea how much time and energy I spend *not* destroying the minds around me just because I can, or how hard I’ve worked to find a way to move in a Multiverse of such simplicity without doing endless damage. I will be an incredible weapon for Phyrexian dominance.” His eyes flashed with an inhuman blue glow, brighter than his norm, and he grimaced, visibly composing himself. “They’re starting to speak through me, Kaya, we’re out of *time*. Every moment we wait, every second we spend dithering over your sudden need to be the hero, not just the savior, means another plane is potentially lost. We’re destroying nothing. We’re preventing greater deaths. Blame Phyrexia, not us.”

He sighed heavily, looking suddenly exhausted. “And there is no other way. Better to fulfill the promise of the sylex and scorch the branches, sweep it all away, than to lose the entire Multiverse. Bring the ending. Topple the empires to bring a fresh start. Renew it all.”



Art by: L.A Draws

He began to lift the sylex into his lap.

Kaya moved instantly, lunging forward and grabbing his wrist before he could complete the motion. He pulled his hand out of her grasp and away from the sylex, eyes narrowing.

She pulled a dagger from her belt. Jace's eyes began to glow. Neither of them said a word. Kaito looked between them, briefly confused, before pulling his sword and falling into position beside Kaya.

"I'm sorry, Jace, but I can't let you risk Kamigawa," he said.

"Very well then," said Jace, and slowly, laboriously, rose.

On the bridge over the void, Ajani's axe clashed against the blade of Elspeth's sword, pushing the smaller Planeswalker back even as she dug her heels into the sinewy surface and tried to stand her ground.

"You can't defeat me, young one," said Ajani, voice unnaturally calm and level. He spoke to her like she was a child who had tried to steal one too many sweets, who needed to be talked out of some unhealthy desire. His tone carried only affection and genuine concern under the calm, and if he had sounded any less like himself, Elspeth might have been able to bring her blade around and undercut his ankles, sending him toppling into the depths. "It's useless to try. Join us. We are the inevitable. We are the ideal. We are One, and once you come to be One with us, we'll be stronger in a way you could never have dreamt while you lived in flawed, imperfect flesh."

"Never," managed Elspeth, her defiance sounding weak to her own ears. "Ajani, if you can hear me, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," said Ajani, pushing harder against her sword, trying to move into her space. He had yet to swing at her, allowing all the attacks to come from her but now she couldn't disengage without opening herself too widely. Even defense could be a trap.

"So stop *fighting* us!"

“Phyrexia is no one’s enemy,” said Ajani. “We only want to bring you the peace and perfection of becoming One. We only wanted to bring you home.”

“Then you’re everyone’s enemy,” said Elspeth.

“So be it,” said Ajani. “You do not need to be alive to join Phyrexia.”

Ajani finally attacked, swinging his axe in a brutal arc accompanied by a blast of destructive magical force that narrowly missed Elspeth’s head, digging a chunk out of the bridge behind her. She spun around, slashing at his knees, only for him to leap nimbly out of the way, moving with a speed that made her breath catch in her throat. The battle had already been joined. Now, it began in earnest.

Not far from Elspeth and Ajani, Tyvar used his blades to keep the twin barbs of Tibalt’s tails at bay, holding the almost bestial Planeswalker as far back as he could. Tyvar’s skin was still metallic and gleaming, his entire body having converted into Glimmervoid metal for the sliver of protection it could offer him against the glistening oil that dripped like venom from Tibalt’s body.

“Little prince,” hissed Tibalt, a vicious smile on his distorted face. “Little pretender, little would-be hero, there will be no sagas in your name. If your legend survives this day, it will be a tale of failure. The saga of a man chosen by a greatness he could never have been worthy of. How does it feel to be the last prince of Kaldheim?”

“You’re not the God of Lies,” snarled Tyvar, bringing up his arm to block one of Tibalt’s tails. “Even so, nothing you say can be trusted.”

“Perhaps not, but you’re too stupid to understand when you should be afraid,” said Tibalt, whipping one tail away from Tyvar’s hold and stabbing it toward the other man, barb glancing off the metal of Tyvar’s shoulder.

Tyvar hissed in pain, and Tibalt hissed in pleasure, the two men united for the first and perhaps only time in their acquaintance.

“Pain, yes,” said Tibalt, with great satisfaction. “*You* may be resistant to my charms, but that’s only because your head is too empty to understand when you should doubt your convictions. Not everyone is so devoid of concern.”

He looked away from Tyvar, the ultimate insult in the middle of a battle, and directed a terrible, thin-lipped smile at Elspeth as she struggled against her former mentor.

“Doubt,” said Tibalt, oily smoke beginning to leak out the corners of his mouth. “The greatest weapon of them all.”

Elspeth staggered as she blocked Ajani’s latest blow, barely keeping her footing. A wave of misery and doubt washed over her. This was her fault. Ajani wouldn’t have been infected if she’d been paying closer attention, if she’d been a better student, if she’d been less distracted by her own problems, if she’d been strong enough to save Mirrodin in the first place, rather than allowing it to fall to Phyrexia. If she’d been a better person, none of this would have happened.

If she had only fought her way down to the Furnace Layer faster, they would have reached the tree before it could connect, found Vraska before she could be compleated, saved so many others, saved them all. This was all down to her.

Ajani's next blow knocked the weapon from her hands, and Elspeth backed away, palms out, trying to ward him off. She couldn't even beg, not with the misery weighing her down.

Tibalt laughed, stabbing again and again at Tyvar, who staggered under the blows, horrified by the sight of Elspeth in retreat. Seeing her losing her faith in the fight

It felt as if all hope was lost.

Kaya lunged for Jace, or rather, for the space where Jace *should* have been, and stumbled through the empty air of the telepath's projected image, the false Jace splitting like fog and dissipating.

"Kaya, please," he said. "We're Planeswalkers. That means we owe a debt to something greater than ourselves, even when it isn't convenient, or ideal. We came here to save the Multiverse. Detonating the sylex might destroy a dozen planes. It might also just shake them a little. Either way, the *rest will live*."

"The Multiverse isn't *dying*, you heartless—" Kaya caught herself, taking a deep breath. The Jace she had always known was meticulous about the privacy of the minds around him, keeping his telepathy under tight control. He would never have gone looking for her deepest fears, nor thrown her weaknesses in her face like that. Even when he'd sparred with Nahiri, he'd been careful to avoid saying anything that would imply awareness of her thoughts.

She couldn't *know* that he was reading her, but it certainly felt as if he were, and she didn't like it one bit. She narrowed her eyes. He had positioned himself between her and the sylex, his slight figure presenting little barrier.

And then, abruptly, there were three of him, and none were the original. Kaya's physical form flashed translucent purple as she phased slightly out of touch with the rest of the plane. She couldn't detect thoughts, not the way Jace could, but she could detect spirit energy, and two of the Jaces didn't have spirits. They weren't real. Only the third, the one farthest from her current location, actually existed.

She turned toward Kaito. "That one," she snapped, gesturing toward the Jace in question. "Stop him."

Kaito didn't need to be told twice. Producing a handful of shuriken from inside his shirt, he flung them at the true Jace, his telekinesis catching them and driving them straight and true toward their target. He had aimed to stop, not to slaughter, and as the projectiles found the flesh of Jace's injured arm, the two false images flickered and died.

Kaya shoved her dagger into its sheath, stalking toward the true Jace, and the sylex.

"Wait," said his voice. "*Please.*"

Kaya stopped, eyes narrowed, glaring at the real Jace.

He looked back, pale and wan and younger than she had ever realized he was; he looked less like an all-powerful Planeswalker, and more like a man on the verge of collapse. The waving wires on his arm—which were, she finally saw, surprisingly like the tendrils of Vraska's hair in their sinuous curves and languid waving strands—had started to light up at their tips, like their eyes were opening, even as they wove their basket-like lattice more and more tightly around his arm. Soon, they would cut off all circulation, if they hadn't done so already.

Kaito's shuriken had severed several of the strands, leaving them to writhe and die on the floor, and cut shallow, bloodless lines into Jace's skin. The speed of Phyrexian compleation was a nightmare the likes of which Kaya had never considered, and she wanted nothing more than to wake from it.

"*We have to do this,*" he said.

“No, *you* have to do this,” said Kaya. “*We* have to preserve the Multiverse. All the planes Phyrexia *hasn’t* touched are connected to the Blind Eternities as well, just like this damned tree—we blow it up now, we could wipe out everything.”

“The emperor,” said Kaito, sounding horrified.

“Any Planeswalker currently in transit,” said Kaya. “All of us. I won’t let you do this.” She lunged for the sylex, grabbing it with both hands. “It’s over, Jace. You lose. We all lose.”

Elspeth fell back another step, unable to stand her ground against the waves of despair and doubt washing off Tibalt. She had failed, they had all failed, Ajani was lost, and New Capenna was lost, and she was lost, this was how it ended, this had always been how it ended, she had been in denial to think she could do anything to stop it—

The doubt ripped at her, tearing away the veils of virtue and compassion that she had worked so hard for so long to construct, until the core of Elspeth Tirel was exposed. The child who had defied Elesh Norn on a plane without any prayer of hope; who had been able to stay unbroken before Phyrexian horrors. Ajani, seeing his opening, swung his axe at the exposed back of her neck.

Elspeth’s sword blocked the blow, unexpectedly raised between them. He paused, blinking in surprise, only to realize that the look in her eyes was that of a cornered, feral creature.

Not far away, Tibalt laughed. “Oh, the pretty do-gooder fights back, does she? A pity you didn’t find her sooner, Prince of Foolishness, she might have been sufficiently useless to sit beside you. Although your brother would only have snatched her away as he does everything else worth having. You could have been great without him.”

Tyvar snarled. When Tibalt stabbed the barbs of his tail at him again, he dropped one of his daggers and grabbed the offending appendage directly behind the stinger, bending it backward even as the Glimmervoid metal that covered Tyvar’s own body began to flow out, sweeping across Tibalt’s flesh as the transmutation spread to take him, almost Phyrexian in its own way.

Tibalt hissed, trying to pull free. Tyvar didn’t let him go. The Glimmervoid metal spread out to cover more and more of Tibalt’s body. The flesh that had yet to be transmuted seemed almost to pull away, trying to flee the toxic change.

“What are you *doing* ?” Tibalt demanded, in clear alarm.

“My magic suppresses whatever it engulfs,” said Tyvar, and smiled, baring metal teeth like a threat. “Your doubt can’t touch what it can’t reach.”

Indeed, Elspeth’s stance grew in confidence by the moment, until two things happened: the Glimmervoid metal swallowed the last of Tibalt’s flesh, and a pulse of hope strong enough that it felt like it should have burned the infection entirely from Phyrexia, like it should have lit up the Blind Eternities, surged from her body.

“Doubt is nothing,” said Elspeth. “Doubt doesn’t change what’s right. I will not join your One. Neither will anyone else.”

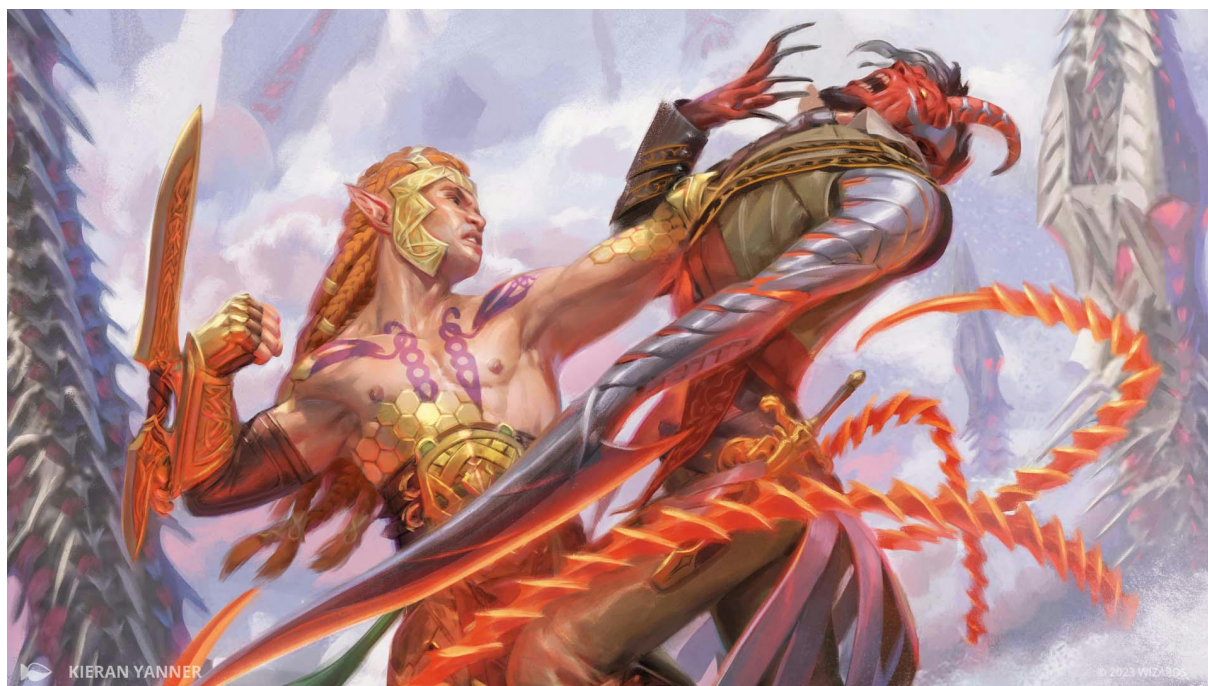
White light blasted outward from her blade, sending Ajani rocking back on his heels. She stood, falling into an offensive position.

The fight wasn’t over yet.

Ajani cried out and staggered. Elspeth slammed the hilt of her sword down across the back of his neck, driving him to the ground. The axe tumbled from Ajani's suddenly nerveless fingers as he slipped from consciousness.

Eyes wild, Elspeth turned toward Tyvar and the struggling Tibalt. Tyvar shook his head.

"I can handle this devil," he said. "He owes me a death for what he did to my plane. Go. Find the others. I'll be fine."



Art by: Kieran Yanner

The Glimmervoid metal was fading from his skin, and from Tibalt's as well, as the well of Tyvar's magic neared the point of running dry. Tibalt stabbed at him with his free tail, and Tyvar grabbed that one as well, bending them both backward with a strained grunt. Realizing what he was about to do, Tibalt tried to jerk away.

The last thing Elspeth saw before she ran off the bridge, following the trail the others had taken, was Tyvar driving the twin barbs of Tibalt's tail into the space that should have held the Phyrexian's heart. Tibalt screamed, high and agonized, and was still screaming as Tyvar shoved him from the bridge. There was a sickening crunch as Tibalt slammed into the bridge below, followed by silence.

Elspeth ran.

Kaya grabbed the sylex, relaxing at the solidity of it before she dismissed her phase and turned solid once more—only for the sylex to dissolve in her hands like mist. She had fallen for another of Jace's illusions.

"Kaya!" shouted Kaito.

She spun to face Jace just in time to see the wires spidering across his face, eyes glowing a brighter blue than ever before. "No," she gasped.

Jace, face grim, looked at her across the rim of the real sylex, still held in his hands, and replied, quietly, “Yes. Kaya, I’m sorry. Kaito, I’m sorry. Everyone,” and there he chuckled, dry and dark and unamused, “I’m so sorry.”

He disappeared, shielded from view by his own magic.

On the other side of the illusion, Jace ran his thumbnail across his forehead, almost amazed by how quickly the skin parted although what dripped from the wound into the sylex wasn’t blood, not exactly. He sighed. So much lost. So much left to lose.

With an almost physical effort that caused him to flicker into momentary visibility, he forced his grief and fury into the bowl. Not only his grief: the suffering and sorrow-drenched agony of all Mirrodin. Regret for the Multiverse. The love of Vraska. It poured into the sylex like the finest honey, so thick and pure he could almost see it.

The words didn’t matter. Jace knew that, but they felt right anyway. Urza had said them so long ago. Teferi had seen it, and Kaya through him, and Jace through her. An unbroken line—then to now. One end, to another. “Wipe the land clear. Bring the ending,” he murmured. “I’m sorry.”

His voice echoed in the enclosed space, impossibly loud, as light bloomed inside the bowl of the sylex, crawling upward like a living thing, nearing the rim. Kaya cried out, fear and despair, as Kaito moved to put himself between the blossoming light and the other Planeswalker. Neither of them saw Elspeth drop through the hole in the ceiling and race across the room toward Jace.

Jace turned to face her, his eyes ablaze with merciless blue light. Somehow, in that moment, she understood everything—what Jace had resolved to do, what was about to happen not just to Mirrodin but to the Multiverse itself. Elspeth saw, with perfect clarity, what needed to be done.

She didn’t hesitate. In a single convulsive motion, she drove her blade through Jace and shoved him aside, letting his body take the sword with him as he fell and grabbing the sylex in her own hands.



Art by: Magali Villeneuve

She had time to glance at Kaya and Kaito as light crested over the lip of the sylex and a sharp crack echoed through the room, marking her disappearance. The sylex went with her, bound for some unknown destination, some point beyond the Blind Eternities.

Tyvar, bloodied and once more flesh, dropped through the hole to join Kaya, Kaito, and Jace's fallen form, moving to Kaya's side. She turned to him, eyes wild.

Whatever Tyvar was going to say was washed away as a series of massive booms consumed all sound, a wave of pressure washing down the trunk Realmbreaker as it pulsed with light. Each pulse lit the air with an oil-slick array of impossible colors, yanking the world around them through a cycle of nights and days as quickly as a heartbeat. The tree had been fully activated and was transmitting across the Multiverse.

The shock knocked all three of them to the floor, and in the rapidly pulsing light, none of them saw the moment when the wall irised open like an eye, allowing the smell of aether to fill the previously sealed room.

Tyvar staggered to his feet, pulling Kaya with him. Kaito had already recovered his balance on his own, and was staring upward, rapt and horrified. The others looked up and saw the branches of Realmbreaker winking out in flashes of impossible light, connected to the tree but gone at the same time. Tyvar made a small sound of dismay.

"They walk the Omenpaths," he said. "They carry disaster in their wake."

Each branch, with its heavy burden of Phyrexian invaders, had reached for another plane, and would shed their terrible fruit there, to compleat new, fertile soil.

"The sylex is *gone*," Kaya moaned. "Elspeth is *gone*, Jace is *gone*, the Multiverse is doomed, we failed, Tyvar, we failed."

"I saw hope this day," said Tyvar. "We haven't failed."

"Um, guys?" said Kaito, he gripped his sword with both hands and stepped up to stand with Tyvar, the two of them presenting a wall of resistance between Kaya and the opening on the wall. The faint sound of footsteps came from the other side. "I think we're about to have company."

The trio shrank back from the new doorway, until Kaya's shoulders were almost touching the pulsing, gleaming trunk of Realmbreaker. All three readied their weapons, Tyvar's flesh transmuting once more to Glimmervoid metal as he stood side by side with the wiry ninja. They exchanged one final glance, expressions equally grim. Nothing approaching in Phyrexia could be a friend, not in this moment, not in this space.

Footsteps echoed into the room, unbearably loud, bouncing off the walls and ceiling. A figure, almost skeletally thin, made of flensed red tissue and gleaming porcelain-white metal, stepped into the room. Elesh Norn turned her eyeless face toward the remaining Planeswalkers and smiled, even as a squadron of Phyrexian warriors slipped in after her. Kaito gasped sharply at the sight of Tamiyo moving among them, all her softness sharpened to bladed points, her eyes traced by black trails of glistening oil.

"Welcome, weary travelers, to Phyrexia," said Elesh Norn. She turned her smile to Jace's corpse, which shuddered and stood, Elspeth's sword slipping from his body as he moved to join his new master. Kaito grabbed the blade as soon as it was unprotected, settling it into his free hand.

Elesh Norn laughed. "So worried," she said. "We offer you no threat. We offer only harmony and peace. We are One. All will be One. Why resist? Your friends are already here."

She turned her smile toward the ranks of her subordinates. They parted, and a new shape moved through them, into the light.

Nahiri had clearly not survived her fall. The spikes that had been breaking through the skin of her back and shoulders were more pronounced now, turning her outline into a grotesque parody of her own floating cloud of blades. Her hands were gone, arms replaced from the elbow down with metal blades. Cracks ran through the metallic skin of her body, showing molten metal beneath, and her eyes glowed with the same terrible, burning heat.

Kaito hissed between his teeth, seeing the very opponent he had feared appear before him. "You've looked better," he said.

Nahiri didn't react. Another figure followed her on a forest of whip-thin cabling, using the root-link formations of her lower body like tentacles as she settled by the other Phyrexian's side. Extra appendages sprouted from the woody protrusions covering her flesh. Her face, like Tamiyo's, was marked with glistening oil. Kaya stared. The Nissa she knew was gone. Nothing of the soft-spoken animist remained.

Tyvar bared his teeth, adjusting his grip on his daggers. To see another elf so maimed and misused was painful, despite the shortness of their acquaintance. This was more than horror. This was an offense.

"Nahiri fought us, but she found peace, and a better way in the One," said Elesh Norn. "She and Nissa came from the same place, but they were never friends. Now they are sisters, united, finally on the same side in every way. They are One. You, too, can be One. Only yield, and it will be over quickly."

"No," said Tyvar.

"I'm good," said Kaito.

"Go to hell," said Kaya.

"Such hostility," said Elesh Norn. "It seems we have no way to an accord, then. If you would be our enemies, then very well. Enemies it is."

With that, Elesh Norn raised her hand, clicking her perfect claws together, and the invasion began.



Art by: Chris Rahn