

MAGIC

The Gathering

PLANESHIFT



INVASION CYCLE • BOOK 2

J. Robert King



CHAPTER 1

Every Claw, Every Fang



Multani traced the damage done by the ray cannon blast. The bolt had struck *Weatherlight's* hull where the figurehead should have been. It had torn a wide gash through seven inches of solid magnigoth wood and had vaporized the first forecastle rib. In the hold beyond, the energies had hit an ensign's pack and burned it and its contents away to nothing. If not for that pack, the bolt might have ripped on through a bulkhead and into the crew's berths. Even so, the damage was severe.

Multani did not peer at the hull breach as would a mere man but felt it from the inside, for he was a nature spirit. He had no true body outside of plant life. He took his form from wood

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grain. Cellulose fibers were his muscles, heartwood his bones, sap his blood. His true home was the forest of Yavimaya, where he lived in the endless magnigoth trees. That homeland had won its battles, so Multani had taken up residence in the living hull of *Weatherlight*. Her battles were only beginning.

Multani moved through the wood. The laceration seemed a wound in his own flesh. It brought pain, of course, but it also empowered him to heal the ship.

Charcoal sloughed from the edges of the breach. Sap oozed out in golden beads. Dead wood grew green. New fibers extended into the emptiness. New rings appeared where old ones had been burned away. The growth of centuries replenished itself in minutes. Soon, the first forecastle rib was solid again, and the seven inches of magnigoth gunwale above it had filled in. The rent was healed.

Multani continued his work. What was a ship without a figurehead? Wood flowed with waxlike ease, seeming to pour itself into an invisible mold. A torso took shape, feminine and muscular. A pair of powerful arms swept dramatically backward. Wood formed a long mantle of hair that twined vinelike about strong shoulders. A face—beautiful, mysterious, and clear eyed—appeared within those rampant locks. Any crew member who gazed on that face would have thought the features belonged to Hanna, former navigator of *Weatherlight*. Certainly, Multani had used Hanna as a mental model. The woman he sought to represent had Hanna's strength and courage and could borrow Hanna's face, for she did not have a face of her own. The woman was a goddess so had no face and all faces.

Residing in every vital impulse of the living grain, Multani shaped the likeness. He was sculptor and sculpture both. In mere moments, the masterpiece was complete. He did not need to step back to examine his work. He inhabited it and knew its perfection.

It was just as well. He could not have seen the figurehead anyway. Beyond the bow of *Weatherlight* was only desert darkness.

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The ship rested on her landing spines in the midst of sandy Koilos. All around her spread a slumbering army. The festival lanterns had been extinguished. The torch stakes had long since burned out. Not a fire smoldered among the coalition forces. Soldiers—Metathran, human, and elf—slept in their tents. Dragons slumbered beneath the canopy of stars. They slept like the dead, though these were, in fact, the survivors. These mortals had stood against hundreds of thousands of Phyrexian monsters, only later to be laid low by a three-day victory celebration. Wine and revelry. Mortals must be allowed their excesses.

Multani was no mortal. While elves sang, Multani had mended a shattered keel. While humans danced, Multani had grown longer, stronger spars. While Metathran slept, he had fashioned a glorious figurehead, which, in desperate straits, could be a brutal ram for the ship.

Hanna, is it? came a voice in his mind. The words rumbled like a distant waterfall. It was Karn, peering from the ship's forward lanterns. As Multani lived in every wooden part of the great ship, Karn lived in every metallic one. A golem fashioned of silver, he was the ship's engineer and, in some ways, the ship's engine. *The face is certainly Hanna's, but the hair. . . ?*

Yes, replied Multani. Smooth, hard magnigoth bark thickened across the figure. *It is Hanna, and it is not.*

Who then? asked Karn.

It is Gaea, the world soul, Multani responded reverently. *This is her war. It is she who is squared off against Yawgmoth.*

There was silence for a time. Karn was as much an immortal as Multani, and together the two had been reshaping *Weatherlight*. Through intuition and inspiration, they transformed her toward her final configuration. She was to be the ultimate weapon in this ultimate war.

It is a good change, Multani.

Thank you. No sooner were these words formed than something shifted in the gloaming darkness beyond the ship, something massive. *Did you sense that?* Multani asked.

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Yes, was all Karn said. There was no time for more. Already he was drawing back from the main engine core. Metal conduits slid free from the neural nexuses of his hands. He broke mental contact with the engine. Massive and slow, the silver man rocked back on his heels. He rose, a bit unsteadily, and turned to climb to the deck.

Multani was faster. He withdrew from the figurehead and coursed up through planks to rise on the forecastle deck. He assembled a body for himself out of a splintered rail and the living hemp of a frayed rope. Fashioned of plant life, Multani stood at *Weatherlight's* prow. With knothole eyes, he stared out across the desert of Koilos.

Around the ship in every direction spread dark tents and drowsing soldiers. They numbered fifty thousand. Their empty wine jacks and strewn armor told of the recent revels. Beyond the encamped armies stood the nine metal giants that had helped the army win the Battle of Koilos. These titan engines seemed gods of old, poised at the rim of the world. As huge as ships, as deadly as armies, the titans had left their gargantuan footprints across this barren wastes. Imbedded in those footprints were carapace and bone, all that remained of the creatures that had opposed them. Now the titan engines stood empty, staring darkly at the camp they guarded.

The sudden, massive shift had not occurred within the sleeping camp nor among the titan engines. It had happened beyond them, on the sere rills of Koilos. Though morning was still hours away, an otherworldly red light gleamed on the distant horizon. It lit the eastern hills, and the north, the west, and the south. The full compass of the desert glowed with that horrible light.

A word came to Multani, a word he had sensed in the dying mind of a Phyrexian invader: Rath. It was more than a word. It was a world. It was a twisted other-world built of flowstone, forever expanding, forever mutating into a perfect match of Dominaria. The Lord of Phyrexia had made Rath and filled it with machines of war and demon armies. But why?

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Karn strode up behind Multani. Weird light glinted from the silver golem's burly shoulders. Eyes like fat washers peered out at the feverish hills.

Karn rumbled, "It's the planeshift. It's the overlay."

"The overlay?" Multani echoed hollowly.

"The Rathi overlay. A world of monsters is fusing with our world. Rath is overlaying on top of Dominaria," Karn replied quietly. "We have no time."

Karn cupped thickset hands around his mouth. His jaw dropped open. From the cold hollows of his chest came a terrible sound. It seemed the toll of a gigantic bell.

"Awake, Dominaria! Dread is upon you!"

The sound tore out above the sleeping army. It riffled the tents like a cyclone. Elves clutched their ears. Humans lurched up from bedrolls. Metathran staggered into the light of the unnatural morning. The roar crossed the camp and echoed from the circle of titan engines, awaking lights in their skulls. It bore onward over empty sands and into the glowing hills. There it met another roar, more horrible, more inhuman.

No one who had survived the Battle of Koilos would ever forget that sound—a Phyrexian battle cry. When last they had heard it, the noise had risen from hundreds of thousands of fiendish mouths. This morning, it rose from millions.

That second roar woke any whom Karn had not. Every last soldier yanked on clothes and armor, belted on swords and fetched up pikes. Trumpets sounded to-arms. Fighters scrambled to their divisions. Metathran warriors formed up on Commander Agnate. Elves flocked to the banner of Eladamri. Humans and Benalish irregulars streamed toward *Weatherlight* herself. The once-still camp boiled in confusion, but one fact was clear. They would all be at war again in mere moments.

From the chaotic camp rose a singular figure: Urza Planeswalker. He soared into the air. His lightning-bright robe trailed magnificently away beneath him. Under a mantle of ash-blond hair, Urza's eyes beamed like twin stars. In one

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hand, he clutched a gnarled war staff set with glimmering gems. His other hand cradled a sphere of shimmering blue power. That enchanted orb drew him up above even the heads of the titan engines. It also sent his voice out to the armies forming up below.

“Behold, Dominaria. The foe!”

The words were like a thunder stroke. The coalition forces turned to see.

Beyond the shifting legs of the titan engines, Phyrexians took shape. They resolved out of the red haze. In the front ranks came shiny-shelled beasts that seemed gigantic horseshoe crabs. Behind them charged biomechanical centaurs with four arms and glinting pikes. Next came enormous fists of muscle that galloped hungrily forward, floating beasts the size of clouds and the configuration of jellyfish, ambling artifact engines that bristled with blades, and every other imaginable death. All of them approached at a heady charge. They would reach the encamped armies in moments.

Urza’s voice rang from above. “Koilos is ours. We have won it. We have destroyed the portal from Phyrexia. That victory can never be taken from us. Koilos and Yavimaya and Llanowar are ours. We have broken Yawgmoth’s hold. His world cannot overlay completely on ours. These are our strongholds. Koilos. Yavimaya. Llanowar. From these we will win back the rest of the world—for indeed, the rest of the world is lost. Even now, the plane of Rath overlays it. Even now, the denizens of Phyrexia are as plentiful as the denizens of Dominaria. Every native claw, every native fang must fight, or die. . . .”

A savage shout rose from the fifty thousand coalition forces there—not a war cry but the half-shriek of a trapped animal. As Urza continued his harangue, the troops rallied as best they could.

The Metathran—who were forty of the fifty thousand there—formed a wall of powerstone pikes and glinting armor. Commander Agnate stood in the vanguard. His pike was set and

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his jaw as well. The tattoos that marked his forehead and cheeks were drawn in tight drums. He had lost his blood brother in the Battle of Koilos, and now, staring down the converging armies, he knew he would lose himself.

The Steel Leaf elves of Staprion gathered around Commander Eladamri. He was Agnate's equal in battle prowess and strategy. Square jawed and sharp eyed, Eladamri and his lieutenant Liin Sivi had fought their way out of Rath once. Now Rath had come back to them. They beheld old terrors. The savage-shorn elves around them had never before seen the red and tortured world. They nocked arrows to long bows and braced for the charge. Through slitted goggles, the Steel Leaf elves gazed at their coming doom.

The dragons had been slower to rise than their warm-blooded allies. As they roused, the old antagonism between the disparate nations had slowed them too. Only the ancient Shivan fire dragon Rhammidarigaaz could unite them. He stood in their midst, his wise eyes drawing them. The staff he held shone with a crimson power that warmed the cold-blooded beasts. The magic talismans around his neck sparked with possibility. Rhammidarigaaz need not speak a word. He only spread wide his wings and heaved himself up into the air. A surge of leathery skin, and another, and he lifted away from the ground. Like a startled flock, the dragon nations took to the air. They circled the camp, preparing for the all-out onslaught.

The Benalish irregulars meanwhile had crowded about *Weatherlight*. Most of them were human warriors, rescued from the military brig during the initial attack on Benalia. Many others were military prisoners of various configurations, goblin and ogre, dwarf and reptile, porcine and bovine. Lastly were Tolarian helionauts and the pilots of Benalia's ravaged air defenses. These troops lacked the precision of the Metathran and elf forces, but they knew how to fight with their backs to a wall, and they believed in this ship and its commander: Gerrard.

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Black bearded and bold, Gerrard stood now on the forecastle deck beside Multani and Karn. He lifted his sword, drawing a shout from the gathered throng. They were ready to fight. They were ready to die.

“Do not fear,” Urza continued. “You will not die here today. You will live to fight across this globe. This is the new war, the true war. I knew this day was coming, and I have prepared. Now go, fight for Dominaria!”

The shout that answered was at last unified, at last fierce and warlike. The coalition forces braced to receive the charge. Their war cry was drowned out by the omnipresent shriek of their foes.

Beyond the ring of titan engines, a million Phyrexians crested the hills. Like swarming roaches, they filled the land. Barbed legs bore black-armored bodies over the rills. Skull-white faces appeared above, with blood-red mouths and grave-black eyes. They were undead, many of them. The rest were Death personified. Claws like sickles, fangs like daggers, horns and proboscises, venom sacs and sagittal crests—there would be no defeating them. No mortal can defeat Death.

There were more than mortals at Koilos.

The first wave of Phyrexians swept down the hillside as fast as horses at a gallop. Dust rose in thick clouds from their feet. They charged Agnate and his Metathran vanguard.

The defenders braced their pikes and—disappeared. Forty thousand warriors, rank on rank, they disappeared. The five titan engines that had guarded them were gone as well. Where they had been was only trampled ground and sagging tents.

Blinking in disbelief, Multani whispered, “What’s happening?”

Phyrexians rushed in a tidal wave across the open ground.

Gerrard blurted, “The elves will be cut down from behind!” He spun toward them.

The elves too vanished. Eladamri and his Steel Leaf warriors were gone in an eye blink, along with two more of the titan engines.

“What’s happening?” Karn echoed, glaring at the empty field where they had been.

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It was not empty for long. In a black tide, Phyrexians closed the gap.

“Drop the gangplanks!” Gerrard ordered. He raced along the rail of *Weatherlight*, hurling lines overboard. “Everyone, climb on. We fight from the skies!”

As quick as rats, the Benalish irregulars climbed. They had all ridden to this battle aboard *Weatherlight*, and their numbers had been greatly reduced in the fights. Even so, they were too slow.

Karn dropped overboard, grabbed armfuls of warriors, and hurled them to the decks.

Multani made brilliant use of his woven hemp hands to pull others up.

As he hauled the desperate soldiers aboard, Multani said calmly to Gerrard, “It is Urza who is doing this. See—he charges up his titan engine. He remains to fight along with us.”

Gerrard yanked a young woman up over the rail and shook his head ruefully. “He’s got to be out of his mind.”

“A common theory.”

“At least he left us the dragons—” A sudden intuition sent Gerrard’s glance skyward, where the dragons had been. There was only the preternatural dawn. The eighth titan engine was gone too, leaving only *Weatherlight*, her Benalish irregulars, the ragged fleet of airships, and Urza’s lone titan engine. “Damn him.” Gerrard nodded sarcastically, growling under his breath, “This seems about right for Urza. A couple hundred against a couple million. Did I tell you I hated him?”

“You even told *him*,” Multani pointed out as he pulled the last of the stragglers onto the deck.

One by one, Tolarian helionauts and Metathran jump-ships buzzed into the air around *Weatherlight*. Soldiers lifted her gang planks.

Phyrexians closed on the ship.

Gerrard shouted to Karn, “Get up here, bucket head! Get us out of here!”

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The silver golem solemnly clambered up the gunwale. His feet had no sooner left the sand than a surge of Phyrexians crashed against *Weatherlight's* hull. Horns and claws tore into the wood.

"I'm needed," Multani said simply, slumping into the deck. He fled from splinters and hemp, leaving them empty. His spirit surged down through the planks to fortify the hull.

Gerrard hardly acknowledged the departure of the nature spirit. He was too busy running along the rail to chop away the lines before Phyrexians could climb them. He knocked aside Benalish warriors who blocked the forecastle stairs and stabbed a climbing Phyrexian in its fangy mouth. It fell back atop its comrades, but two more monsters rose in its place.

There were too many. They were too quick. Claws fastened around the stanchions and seized the rail.

Gerrard hacked viciously at the beasts. His sword clove the horned shoulder of a Phyrexian trooper. He skewered the scabrous mouth of a bloodstock. He split the skull shield of a scuta.

"How about a little help!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Red energy burst into being before him. Sudden flames mantled hackles and poured down throats. Plasma shattered thoraxes and flashed flesh to ash. Where once there had been hundreds of Phyrexians, now there was only fire. Bones and armor dropped in a grisly hail.

Gerrard reeled back from the rail and blinked the red spots from his eyes. His sword had melted beyond the hilt. Tossing the thing overboard, he glared to the forecastle deck and the smoking gun.

Behind the starboard ray cannon, a familiar minotaur hunched in the gunnery traces.

Tahngarth shrugged. "You needed a hand."

Gerrard flashed him a smile and climbed toward the port-side gun.

As he went, the ship's engines suddenly surged. The deck pitched. *Weatherlight* lurched from the ground. Most of the

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warriors went to their knees on the planks, but Gerrard kept his feet. He'd ridden this ship to Rath and back, and he had his sky legs.

On his way up the forecastle stairs, he decked a Phyrexian in the jaw. The bone shattered, and dagger teeth drove into the beast's pallet. Its eyes went dark, and it slumped on the rail. Gerrard shoved it off and crossed to his gun. He charged up the cannon even as he strapped himself into the gunnery harness.

"Grab a gun or get below," he shouted to the Benalish irregulars still crowding the deck.

Gerrard spit on the plasma manifold. The saliva boiled away instantly. With a grim smile, he pivoted the gun about to shoot along the hull. Rays struck the air and turned it plas-matic. Crimson energy spattered across the beasts that still hung there. It ripped them loose and dissolved them on their way to ground.

On the starboard side, Tahngarth's cannon blasted. The fireball plunged to impact Phyrexians. Where it rolled, the sphere of energy obliterated monsters. The blaze spent itself eating through the invading troops.

"They're everywhere," Tahngarth snorted. "How do we defend Koilos against this?"

Gerrard hissed, "Kill Phyrexians."

A charge shrieked from his cannon. It arced down toward the moiling army. The energy column twisted like a cyclone. It touched ground and hurled blackened bodies in its wake.

"There's got to be more to it than that," Tahngarth replied even as his cannon spoke again.

"Not for me there isn't," Gerrard said, firing. "Not after what they did to Hanna."

Beyond *Weatherlight*, Urza's titan engine strode patiently across the crowded battlefield. Each footfall crushed hundreds of Phyrexians. Fireball spells from the pilot bulb paved his way. Rockets sprang from the suit's wrists and punched into monsters,

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exploding on impact. Lightning blasts jagged from an energy fork above and lanced Phyrexians. Monsters struggled to cling to the metallic legs of the titan, but periodic surges of magical energy fried them where they climbed. Flocks of falcon engines launched in silvery waves from the back of the battle suit. Urza killed with grim dispatch.

“There isn’t more to it for Urza either,” Gerrard muttered. “Not after what they did to Barrin.”

New fire woke from the edges of the world. Phyrexian cannons sent scarlet rays stabbing across the sky. The beams sought *Weatherlight*.

“They’re bringing up their mana bombards!” Gerrard shouted into the speaking tube beside him. “Stay sharp, Sisay.”

Through the tube came the captain’s reply. “I’m never dull.”

Sisay spun the ship aside, just in time. Raw power ripped the air along her stern.

“How about some help back there, Squee?” Gerrard called.

The tail gun came to life. Its goblin gunner shrieked over the roar of the weapon. Plasma belched from the end. Like a claw, it ripped the rest of the enemy flack from the sky.

Worse was coming. A ball of black mana hurtled over the hills. It welled up behind the massive head of Urza’s titan engine. The goo struck, spattering across the metal. It hissed, seeking to crack through seams.

Pausing in midstride, Urza flung off the clinging stuff. It fell across Phyrexians below and ate them away. Urza’s engine took another step, and more black-mana shots filled the sky.

“We’re not going to last long up here!” Sisay called through the speaking tube.

Gerrard answered with his gun. A pulse of plasma smashed aside another black-mana bomb heading for the ship. “Take us to Urza! See if he’s got any great ideas.”

Weatherlight banked and surged toward the titan engine. Rays darted out on all sides of the ship. Beams crisscrossed in a deadly net. As the warship neared Urza, Gerrard stood in the traces.

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He saw too late. Scores of Phyrexian cannons had drawn a bead on them. The energy that surged suddenly through the dark sky was inescapable.

“Damn him,” Gerrard cursed.