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THE DARKSTEEL EYE

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Dedication

To R.D.L. This one is for you.

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Alone in his laboratory, Memnarch closed the latch on the arm cuff and finished strapping himself in. A giant humming construct covered by tubes and funnels crouched high over his bulbous frame.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Everything is working properly.”

Memnarch eyed the straps and glittering lights covering the artifact.

“So much effort for something so simple,” he said. “Would it have taken so much if you had built it?”

He listened.

“I thought not.”

He cleared his throat and fingered a tiny lever. Gargantuan articulated arms on the back of the device unfolded then unfolded again. They moved with a practiced precision, a simple grace that belied their size and the bulky tubes attached. The metallic limbs enveloped Memnarch in his cushioned restraints. They buzzed with magical power.

“You see that,” he said, admiring the leather straps that held his body. “These bonds, Memnarch, endure in your name. The self-imprisonment of worship. If ever you doubted, now you know. Memnarch is a true disciple.”

Memnarch’s right appendage moved. Three red beams issued

from each of the mechanical arms, crisscrossing his flesh. Tiny pinpricks of light moved over his skin, illuminating the tissues and vessels underneath with an eerie orange glow. A soft click echoed through the laboratory, and the arms shook a bit as they locked into place.

“But you never doubted. Memnarch knows.”

Memnarch closed his eyes and leaned his head back into a padded cradle. The soft curve held him firmly, and for a brief moment, the being strapped inside his device relaxed, breathing a gentle sigh. This would be the most peaceful instant of his day, and he wanted to enjoy it. In that brief moment, there would be a balance of pleasure and pain, darkness and light, good and evil.

After that, there would be work to do.

With a deep breath, Memnarch focused on the mana that would start the infusion. He felt the warm glow of power flow up his spine and out his finger tips, and he braced himself against the restraints. The hum of magic filled his ears then the sound of bubbles coursing through thick liquid filled his laboratory.

The serum transference began.

The magical process did not hurt, but the infusion was not without pain. The liquid was thick, thicker than his blood, and it took a while to enter his blood stream. As it crossed from the storage vessels into his body, he could feel the strain on his body. It felt almost as if he were drowning but from the inside out.

Slowly the serum made its way through his body. When it hit his heart it burst into flame, and he felt as if he were being burned alive, an excruciating pleasure that both exhilarated and tormented him. This was the moment he had built the artifact for—the reason he strapped himself in before each dose. After several pumps of his heart, his whole body was flooded with the

serum. It hadn't been like this before. It hadn't taken so much effort, but he hadn't needed so much of the serum then.

Every muscle tightened as he tried to hold back the unbearable pleasure. He screamed, or at least he thought he screamed, lost in the overwhelming sensation that he couldn't honestly say what the rest of his body did while he suffered. After a moment more, the fire entered his brain, and he opened his eyes.

Every morning he followed the same ritual. Rarely did he see anything—nothing definitive. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. The dark gray tiles lining the floor of his laboratory swirled together with the blue of the walls. Light coming through an enormous window mixed in reds and yellows. The artifacts, weapons, and scrying instruments inside his laboratory were invisible through the pleasure. What Memnarch saw resembled a puddle of liquid silver, reflecting and distorting the colors of Mirrodin.

“Master, you've come.”

Memnarch held his eyes open, fearing that if he blinked the distorted image before him would disappear.

Then the burning would peak, climbing to the point where it could get no better—or no worse.

Lingering at the height of pleasure and pain, he held his breath. The serum's effects receded slowly, leaving him soaked with the memory of its presence.

As the burning slipped away, turning back into a knife blade and drifting again into the dull sting of an insect, it revealed to Memnarch a new power. His mind became clearer, his thoughts more brilliant, his understanding of all things more perfect. His overlarge, bulbous felt more nimble, less burdensome, more alive. His four hydraulically enhanced limbs felt stronger, and his six magically perfected eyes now revealed the true secrets of the world.

The tears ran away, clearing his sight—his vision of the creator,

his master, slipping away. The floor and walls took shape. His scrying pedestal rose up from the ground, cradling in its basin a pool of silvery liquid, and the massive window that formed one whole wall of his laboratory came back into view. Beyond it, the glowing blue-white ball of pure mana at the center of Mirrodin pulsed, and its rays warmed his face.

Memnarch gazed out the window. Crystal-shaped chrome spires rose up from the curved ground, reaching for the mana core like plants to a sun.

“Odd how organic life copies artifice,” he said. “Is it the same on all the other planes?”

He listened.

“Yes, that is what Memnarch thought.”

The door slid open, and a figure entered the room. It was a metallic bipedal creature, similar in shape to the elves or humans of the outer world—noticeably lacking the enhancements and improvements Memnarch had given himself.

Memnarch recognized the creature immediately. “Malil,” he said. “Come in. Come in.”

“Is everything all right, Master? I heard screaming.”

Memnarch maneuvered controls, and the articulated arms withdrew. The straps holding his body inert during the ritual released, and the device let out a long slow hiss.

“Yes, yes, everything is fine, just fine. Is it not?” Memnarch scuttled across the floor toward his servant, the tips of his metallic crablike legs clicking as they tapped the stone tiles, the base of his gigantic abdomen dragging along behind him. “Thank you for asking us.” He could feel the muscles in his back relax and a sensation of simple calm wash away the last remnants of exhilaration from the infusion.

Malil stepped to one side, looking past Memnarch at the huge device.

Memnarch watched Malil examine the device. He smiled at the metal man’s obvious wonderment. Pride swelled within him, and he looked down on Malil’s face—a face nearly identical to his own.

“He is curious,” said Memnarch, looking away from Malil. “Shall we tell him what we have created?”

Malil turned to Memnarch and blinked. “Yes, Master.” He turned back to the device. “What does it do?”

Memnarch smiled. “Many things, Malil. Many things.”

“What kinds of things?”

Memnarch crossed his laboratory again. Looking into a glass funnel full of milky white liquid, he stroked it gently as if it were a favored pet. “To begin,” he said, not turning away from the device as he spoke, “it harvests and stores blinkmoth serum. Is not that right?”

Malil stood completely still, not making a sound.

Memnarch laughed, slowly at first. The problems he had faced only the day before seemed trivial now. Why had he been so concerned over such insignificant thoughts? His laughter became hysterical, and his body convulsed.

“Is not . . . is not . . . is not that . . . wonderful?” he asked between breaths.

“Yes, Master,” replied Malil.

Memnarch abruptly stopped laughing.

“Why must we be surrounded by such puny minds?” he said, slamming his fist against the edge of the device. “On one side Memnarch is in the presence of greatness, on the other, the presence of nothing.” Lifting himself to his full height, he moved around to the control unit, touching one of the arms. “Yes, yes, Memnarch knows. You are right.”

He turned back to his servant, continuing his tour of the device.

“Here is the delivery system,” he explained, rubbing a smear mark from the brightly polished chrome.

“Delivery system?”

Memnarch spun on Malil, his legs clicking against the tile. “Yes, the delivery system.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You see what Memnarch must deal with? How he lacks the intellect to understand?”

Malil lowered his eyes to the floor. “I see.”

Memnarch scrutinized his servant. Malil was tall by elf standards with an ordinary pair of legs and matching arms. He had a wide, strong chin, that mimicked that of a human and narrow, gently sloping shoulders. Except for the fact that he was made *entirely* of metal, Malil could pass for one of the humans on the surface.

Memnarch turned away, toward the window. At one time, he had looked just like Malil. At one time, he too had been made entirely of metal. The thought made him sad. He looked down at his hands. A line of red liquid seeped from the edge of his fist where he had slammed it against the device.

Memnarch touched the spot with his finger. He actually bled! Memnarch, the Guardian of Mirrodin, was bleeding! His sadness turned to anger.

“Is this what you intended for me?” He held up his bleeding fist. “When Memnarch was made, was this what you envisioned?”

Malil shuffled forward a step. “Master?”

Memnarch looked up at his servant. “Silence! If Memnarch wanted you to speak, Memnarch would have addressed you.”

Malil stepped back, remaining silent.

Memnarch looked back down at his arm. “This is not what the creator intended. Is it?” Memnarch shook his head. “You who *made* Mirrodin then placed it in Memnarch’s custody did not want this.”

He listened but heard nothing.

“Has Memnarch not been faithful?”

He listened again.

“Of course. Of course. So why have you forsaken Memnarch?”

Memnarch paced the lab. He ran from the room, then he paced back the way he had come, his feet making a high-pitched grinding noise on the tile as he spun.

“You have not?” he continued. “Memnarch’s perfect body, the body you gave Memnarch, created for Memnarch, is slowly turning to flesh. If this is not your wish, then whose? If you had not wanted this, why is it happening? Has Memnarch failed?”

Memnarch shook his head. “No. No, Memnarch could not. Memnarch would not. Memnarch has been given the task of protecting Mirrodin, of caring for it until the creator himself returns. Memnarch has done that. Memnarch has done everything you have asked of him—and more!”

“Master?”

Memnarch looked up.

Malil blinked, watching him. “Master? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said then smiled. “Why would not Memnarch be all right?”

The scrying pedestal in the middle of the laboratory began to change colors, wavering in a dark blue. Memnarch scuttled over to it, lifting his considerable girth off the floor so as not to drag it along behind him. Settling down before the metal pool, he looked into the silvery liquid. Ripples formed at the center of its perfect circle, spreading out in rings toward the edge of the basin.

Images began to form, images of a gigantic metal tunnel.

“The blue lacuna.” Memnarch brought his head closer to the basin. “Someone is coming down the blue lacuna, coming to see us.”

Malil crossed the room and stood beside his master, gazing down into the pool.

More images began to form—fuzzy pictures, and they were moving fast. Memnarch squinted, focusing his attention on the scrying pedestal. The images grew clearer. They were bipedal and moved upright. There were several figures, perhaps two dozen, maybe more.

“Vedalken,” he said.

Malil shifted his weight. “Why would vedalken be coming now?”

“A good question.” Memnarch waved his hand over the pool. “Memnarch has not granted them an audience. . . .” His voice trailed off. “They seem to be chasing something. We do love a good chase.” He stared into the scrying pool. “This is most unusual.”

The wavering silvery liquid suddenly grew crystal clear. A tall, slender female elf appeared. Her arms and lower legs were, like most creatures of this world, covered in thick metal that seemed to grow from her skin as if it were a part of her body. Her medium-length hair was held back by a strip of tanned hide, and she wore a leather jerkin that covered most of the rest of her body.

“She is here,” gasped Memnarch.

“Who, Master?”

Memnarch looked up from the pedestal. His skin tingled with delight. His bones ached with excitement, and his mind raced over all the work he still had unfinished.

“She is here,” he repeated. “The one.” He turned to Malil. “The elf girl.”

Malil straightened to attention. “What are your desires, my master?”

Memnarch rubbed his hands together, and he ran his tongue over his dry, parched lips. “Bring her to us.”

Malil bowed his head, turned on his heels, and exited the same way he had come in.

Memnarch leaned down over the silvery pool once again. “Memnarch had not expected you so soon.”

* * * * *

Malil marched at double speed along the long, curved corridor. His path led him in a gentle downward spiral—a long way to go to get from Memnarch’s laboratory to the next level.

As he descended, he ran over the scene with Memnarch in his head. He’d spoken of the elf girl before. Malil didn’t claim to understand everything. He knew only those things Memnarch told him and the things he’d witnessed for himself, but both of those were considerable.

Memnarch’s regular scolding repeated itself in his ears, “You do not need to know everything. You need only follow Memnarch’s directions.”

The metal man redoubled his speed. Stepping off the causeway, Malil entered the observation platform. This room, by design, was completely empty, and the outer walls were made of one contiguous piece of magically curved glass. From here, he could see the entire interior of Mirrodin.

Out the window, at the center of the plane, a huge ball of blue-white mana floated above everything. Below that, the ground curved up in every direction, encircling the glowing sphere and eventually meeting itself on the other side, forming both the floor and the ceiling of the interior. Pointy chrome towers, called mycosynth, rose from the ground, reaching up like gnarled, sharpened fingers grasping for the ball of power above them.

Malil crossed the open chamber to a spot at its very center.

There a red circle marked the floor, and the metal man stepped onto it.

“Ground level,” he said.

The room filled with the hum of magic, and the floor descended, slowly at first then picking up speed. It slowed and finally stopped. Malil walked down a short ramp, stopped at a waist-high railing, and looked over the edge at a legion of metal warriors.

Each was identical. They had curved heads, each with a singular glowing yellow eye in the center. Their arms came from their sides, growing wider and thicker as they extended, ending in gigantic, razor-sharp blades. The warriors’ torsos were armored with metal plates, interlocking over the other so that they could move independently without exposing their delicate insides to harm. Where a human or elf would have legs, these warriors had two wheels tipped with heavy spikes sharp enough to puncture even the strongest metal. On their backs, every one had a short, trifold sail, which they used to steer themselves across the vast open expanses of Mirrodin.

The metallic killers crouched, quietly ready and loyal, prepared to stay where they were for an eternity or cut down an army at a moment’s notice.

Malil smiled. “Open the gates,” he shouted. “The Guardian wishes us to bring back an elf.”