

# Episode 2: Holding Your Breath

K. Arsenault River

From set *March of the Machine*

Chandra hates waiting.

She hates everything about this: the safe house they're all cooped up inside; the daily check-ins from other walkers waiting to hear the worst; the excruciating agony of knowing a blow is coming but not knowing when or where it will strike. For the past week they haven't been living in any real sense of the word.

They've been waiting.

That's the plan, after all. For two weeks they'll wait here in one of Liliana's cabins on Dominaria. Though she swore these were simple placeholders for the soon-to-be reconstructed Vess Manor, they were crawling with the sort of wards that'd make a demon think twice. Chandra had no idea Liliana even knew so many wards. When pressed, Liliana simply said she'd learned to protect her investments.

At the end of these two weeks if they've not gotten any word, then they're to assume everyone's died and proceed accordingly. If they get news before then—well, they'll act according to the news. If it's good, they'll spread the word to the others that there's nothing to worry about.

And if it isn't good, they'll tell the others to get ready for war.

Some take the waiting better than others—better than she does. Vivien's out more often than she's in, which gives everyone a little breathing room. Her cooking's incredible, too. Wrenn's also usually out, but never too far away. Waiting's fine for her, so she claims, but Chandra knows she's getting listless. Wrenn might be a dryad—but there's a fire within her, too, and fire's always hungry for more.

And then there's Liliana, who hates waiting as much as Chandra does.

They don't really talk about it, because talking about it is like tearing open a wound, but it's something they've sensed about each other. When Chandra returns in the afternoons after her talks with Wrenn, Liliana's often got a story ready for her. Sometimes it's quiet company—she'll sit there reading some ancient tome or reviewing plans for the renovation while Chandra *waits*. How can she even focus on something like that right now? Everyone's trying to be normal, but nothing's normal, and no one wants to talk about it.

She never asks if there's news. And if someone arrives asking to hear some, it's usually Liliana who answers, sparing Chandra the trouble.

But every day it feels worse. It's like there's a knife against her skin and every day someone drags it a little further along. Every drop of blood is a thing she hasn't spoken out loud, a thought she's too afraid to think.

Phyrexian weaponry. Black oil. Ajani and Tamiyo, lost to them forever, so different from the people they'd been only a few months ago. A plane full of people like that—people who'd do that to others. Maybe it's wrong to think of them as people at all.

She wants to strike back. At least if she was in the thick of it, she'd know what was going on, even if the answers weren't good. Lately none of the answers have been good. If Nissa was

More than anything, she wants the waiting to be over.

For now, she'll pass the time with Wrenn.

"You have to focus on your breathing. Fire needs air just like we do," Chandra says. Jaya used to tell her that to calm her down when things got bad: if she could control her breathing then she could control her fire, and if she controlled her fire, everything would be all right.

Jaya's dead, Ajani killed her, and Chandra's not sure if anything is going to be all right again. But she has to hope that it will be. Wrenn's not great at breathing. Chandra doesn't hold it against her—she's a dryad, after all. Most of them don't have lungs.

"Comparisons to human breathing are a little hard to grasp," Wrenn says. Flames lick up between her barky skin. In spite of the pain she must be in, she sounds cheerful.

"Right," Chandra says. She scratches at the back of her head. Nissa spoke tree. She probably had tons of dryad friends, even. She'd know what to say—but she isn't here. "Think of it like the fire's something you have to shape. You've got to find the parts of it that aren't helpful and cut them off."

"Better," Wrenn says. The fire does flicker—but it doesn't retreat as much as Chandra wanted.

She sets a hand on Wrenn's shoulder, feeling like it's the thing a mentor should do, but without much of an idea how to mentor. Jaya left her with so many lessons. Chandra's not sure she's internalized all of them. How can she pass all of that on to Wrenn? Somebody else would be better at this, someone older, someone

Someone like Ajani.

Chandra extinguishes the thought.

"Let's do it together," she says. "I'll be right here with you. Some fires aren't worth the air; the trick is knowing which ones."

"All right," Wrenn says. "Although that seems terribly rude to the fire."

Chandra closes her eyes. She takes a breath. In the back of her mind, she can hear Jaya's steady voice telling her to focus on the feeling of the air through her nostrils. She repeats the words, clumsy and inelegant, as they come to her. *You have to talk to the fire. Find out what it wants to do.*

And then the brash war-horn boom of Tyvar's arrival falls like an axe between them.

The two of them look over toward the safe house in time to see two figures limp through the door. Chandra's breath stops in her throat.

There are no more words between her and Wrenn; there's no need for them. Chandra makes for the safe house, shooting a flare into the murky gray sky and hoping it'll be enough to catch Vivien's attention.

And for all that she hates waiting, Chandra finds herself hesitating at the threshold.

Only three of them came back. Maybe the first three, maybe not. But which three would they be? She runs through the possibilities in her head, and she hates herself for doing it. News is good to have, whatever it might be. But who waited beyond the door?

She's never going to find out if she stays out here.

Chandra takes a breath. She steps into the safe house with her eyes closed.

"We were right about the tree. They have their own. It's corrupted, twisted—"

"They out-planned us. Had an answer for everything—"

"Shaping reality to whatever they want—"

Three voices. None Nissa's. Another cut.

Chandra swallows. There's other stuff to think about—this plan's bigger than any of them as individuals. Kaito, mostly whole, leans against a bust. Kaya and Tyvar are slumped on a couch when she opens her eyes, both covered in blood and dirt and grease. Liliana, of all people, is attending to the injured—there are small vials of liquid laid out before her on the floor. She pours some onto a cloth before dabbing it against one of Tyvar's wounds.

It's Liliana who notices Chandra walking in. "It isn't good news."

"Didn't feel like it was," Chandra says. "Never seen anything fouler," Tyvar says. A haunted look comes over him. "The World Tree essence they stole from Kaldheim, they used it to make a monstrosity. It isn't even alive."

"They're using it to invade the other planes." Kaya can't stand sitting anymore—she's up and pacing. "Moving whole armies. Weapons like we've never seen before. There's almost no one left on New Phyrexia but those machine nightmares. Soon they're going to be everywhere."



Art by: Liiga Smilshkalne

"But we've still got people to fight back, don't we? We can get everyone else from the other planes, round them up, crash back to New Phyrexia and take Norn down," Chandra's babbling, and she knows it, but she can't stop. Air, she thinks, air—just keep breathing. All of this is worth the air. "This isn't over. It can't be."

There's sympathy in Kaya's eyes. "No, we can't."

"Maybe we should wait for Vivien before we go into it," Kaito cuts in.

Chandra doesn't like that at all. "We've done enough of that. How are they controlling it?"

"I'm just saying—" Kaya starts, as gentle as she can be.

"Kaya. Please," Chandra says. It surprises her, how pained she sounds. "Tell me what happened."

Kaya swallows. "They got Nissa."

And just like that, Chandra forgets how to breathe. She sputters. She knew. On some level, she knew, when Nissa wasn't with the group, that

Before she can summon something to say, the door opens behind them.

"There's news?" Vivien says from behind them. "Wait Where's Jace?"

"Fashionably late, I imagine," Liliana says. She ties off the bandage around Tyvar's chest. "He'll be here any moment now."

Kaya closes her eyes. "No. He won't."

Liliana's face, at least, shows no signs of distress. Her voice comes sharp and hurt—the same hurt in Chandra's chest. "Don't be ridiculous."

"He fought valiantly, but these beasts " says Tyvar.

"Bravery doesn't matter much when your opponent never tires, never errs," Kaito says. He can't seem to look up from the floor. "Or when you're that far gone."

"That doesn't make any sense," Liliana says. She stands, picking up a tray of vials to hide her trembling hands. "All of this nonsense was his idea. He wouldn't just fail. He doesn't *do* that."

"At the end, I don't think it was him anymore. He became one of them," Kaito says.

Liliana's taking deeper breaths, but she doesn't want anyone to notice. "What do you mean?"

"We don't have time to get caught up in the details," Vivien interjects. "Whatever happened, Nahiri's going to Zendikar, the Wanderer must have gotten away, Elspeth must have already gone ahead to Theros—"

"We saw the Phyrexians take Nahiri, too," Tyvar says.

"Elspeth didn't make it," Kaito adds. "The Wanderer's probably headed back home, but there's no way Elspeth made it out of that."

"There is no way Elspeth Tired died on New Phyrexia," says Vivien.

Kaya's brows knit together. Her eyes flick over to Liliana. "Let's just get it out of the way: the last time we saw Elspeth, her sword was jutting out of Jace's back." She pinches the bridge of her nose before continuing. "That messed up tree was already connected to a dozen planes *at least* . If he set off the sylex, we could have lost them all. The thing was ticking away to the end of days, and there wasn't any time, so she "

Kaya trails off. Tyvar picks it up again. "Elspeth ran him through, picked up the sylex and planeswalked into the Blind Eternities. A noble sacrifice—she must be feasting with the valkyries now."

"Oh, shut up," hisses Liliana.

The air in the safe room's gone cold. Jace and Nissa are both gone. Nahiri, too. Even Elspeth couldn't make it out in the end. Out of everyone they sent, only four returned, and of the four only three are here. Everything they feared is coming true: the Phyrexian invasion is underway.

Vivien settles onto the floor with them, having lost her proud bearing in face of the news. “This is worse than I thought.”

“That’s the only reason we’re here. You need to understand what we’re up against,” Kaya says. “The whole Multiverse has to understand. Now as I was saying—”

“Well, you can keep going without me.” It’s a sudden interjection, with an odd amount of force meant to detract from the wavering of its speaker. Liliana is already making for the door. “I’m going to send word to Strixhaven.”

“You should hear the story—” starts Tyvar, but Liliana is already shaking her head.

“I’ve got a good enough idea of your kind of storytelling. Noble sacrifices never sit well with me.”

Chandra opens her hand, then closes it into a fist. “What if there’s a way we can help the others?”

Chandra’s heard people say Liliana’s all sharp edges and ambition. That’s true. But it’s also true that at certain angles, those give way. The tilt of Liliana’s head now is anything but sharp; the ambition in her eyes has changed to a deep sympathy. “You want to go back there yourself, don’t you?”

All eyes fall on Chandra. She’s keenly aware of the way they’re looking at her—what they must be thinking. *Of course she does. She’s impulsive.* Chandra can hear the lectures starting, and she’s already tired of them. She’s tired of sitting around waiting for the world to end.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” she says. “There must be some other way to take the World Tree down. You’re all acting like it’s over.”

Kaya presses the heel of her palm against her eyes. She takes a breath. “I can’t let you go back.”

“*Let* me?” Chandra says. She takes a step toward her. “You aren’t *letting* me do anything.”

“The plan is to let the others know what’s going on,” Vivien says. She’s cooler, more collected, but there’s no mistaking what she thinks of Chandra’s idea. “We can rally our forces, figure out some way to fight back. But we can’t do that if we rush in headlong.”

“There’s plenty of you to go do that,” Chandra argues. “Plenty of all of us. But if we keep fighting back against what’s already there, we aren’t going to make any progress. We have to cut them off at the root or they’re going to keep coming.”

The others exchange looks. At least they’re thinking about it. Liliana, for all her earlier protestation, hasn’t left yet—she remains halfway between Chandra and the door. She understands, doesn’t she? She must understand better than anyone here what this feels like. It’s Kaya who speaks up next. “Chandra, I understand where you’re coming from. Truly, I do. But you can’t begin to understand what happened in New Phyrexia. This isn’t something you can just blow in and solve without planning. We planned for it, and we barely made it out. I’ve been an assassin for years, and I almost lost my head in there. Nahiri dealt with Eldrazi; we lost her, too. If you go there, you aren’t just going to die—you’re going to have your flesh stripped off, your bones shaped into metal, and your mind warped to their sick worldview. Next time we see you you’ll be telling us about the joys of being one with Phyrexia. Vivien’s right—the best thing we can do is try to avoid losing anyone else. Once we’re done here, you must return home to Kaladesh and tell people how to prepare. That’s the best we can do for them.”



Art by: Jorge Jacinto

The answer's coming out of Chandra's mouth before her mind's had the chance to stop it. "You're treating me like a kid."

"I'm not treating you like a kid. I'm trying to look out for you. This isn't like Ravnica. The Eternals are nothing compared to Norn's fleshless legions. I know this is coming from a good place. You want to help everyone. You want to save the Multiverse—fine. But there are better ways to do it than running off half-cocked into a job a whole team of us couldn't finish."

Kaya's saying things, but all Chandra can hear is more of the same. Kaya doesn't see the point. Tyvar has to understand, right? He loves big challenges. But when she catches his eye, he averts his gaze.

"Valor's commendable," echoes Tyvar, "but so is knowing which battles are yours to fight. Kaya and I are only here to tell you what's happened. Go where you're needed, tend to your own, and die where your bones are home."

"This is *everyone's* battle," Chandra says.

"Which means everyone gets a say in it," says Vivien. "And my say is that we don't waste any more resources on something we know isn't going to work."

"I know how you're feeling. Admitting you've lost isn't easy," Kaito says. "But we only lost the fight. If we can keep our homes safe, we win the war."

Chandra takes a breath. She feels like she's going to explode. This is the most obvious thing in the world, and they either can't, or won't, see it. "What about the people stuck on New Phyrexia? Are we just going to leave them there?"

No one wants to answer it. Not directly. The silence that comes over the safe house then is nothing but another form of waiting, and Chandra hates it as much as she hates this whole situation. If she could burn everything down right now—if she could find a new start in the flames—then she would. Standing here is making her soul itch.

"Tell me. Are we abandoning them?" Breathing's getting harder to do, or easier—the breaths are big and sharp now, feeding the fire growing in the pit of her stomach. Heat sears the corners of her eyes.

“Chandra,” Liliana says, soft as shadow on snow, “she’d want you to stay safe, wouldn’t she?”

Why’d she have to say that? Chandra had been trying so hard not to think about it, trying to keep her imagination at bay, but Liliana’s cut it loose. It’s as easy to imagine Nissa here as it is to call fire. Chandra can see it so clearly: the determination written on Nissa’s face, her eyes gone canopy green, the angle of her ears. She can feel Nissa’s hand on her shoulder, she can smell moss and pine, she can hear the words even if she doesn’t want to imagine them.

It hurts.

Gods, it hurts.

She feels like she’s bleeding out in front of every single one of them and not a one is offering her any help at all.

Chandra takes another breath. Air, she thinks. Just keep breathing.

“When we lose someone, we have to do honor to their memory,” Liliana says.

“I haven’t lost her,” Chandra fires back.

Kaya’s exasperation increases by the second. She’s exhausted, and it’s in every line of her face. “She’s gone, Chandra.”

“No, she isn’t. If we stop the Phyrexians then we can figure out how to stop how to stop whatever happened. How to make it better. You can’t give up on—”

“This is about more than any one person,” Vivien cuts in. “We’re tending to a forest, here, not a single tree—”

“Don’t you think I know that?” she says. The faint glow at the edge of her vision tells her she’s flaring up. She didn’t intend to, but it’s fine—maybe even good. All this feeling has got to go somewhere. “Don’t you think I know how many lives are the on the line? That’s why I want to go back! We’re never going to win if all we do is run away from them!”

“Chandra—” starts Kaya, but it’s too late. She’s beyond listening now.

“I’m leaving,” she says. “You can go warn the other planes if you want to, but I’m not leaving our friends behind.”

“You’re going *alone*?” Tyvar asks.

“Since none of you are coming, yeah, I’m going alone,” she says, backing toward the door. “But I won’t be alone when I get there.”

“And what’s your plan, exactly?” Kaito calls.

Chandra doesn’t turn. “Take down the tree. Figure everything else out along the way. Nice and easy.”

The marsh awaits—with Liliana as the last of the group standing in her way. Still, Liliana isn’t quite blocking her, only leaning against the threshold, watching.

“You’re serious about this,” she says.

“Yeah. And you’re serious about running away, aren’t you?”

There are plenty of people who would kill for the chance to make Liliana Vess win. Strangely, it doesn’t feel like a victory to Chandra. None of this does—and that’s the worst part.

“Is that what you think I’m doing? I’m not running. I just know funeral bells when I hear them. I wish you all the best on your little adventure.”



“Wait,” Chandra says.

But Liliana doesn’t. She walks out onto the marsh herself, hardly casting a backward glance. “Oh, there’s no time for waiting. You said so yourself.”

Nothing about today is easy. Chandra opens and closes her hand again. She wants to argue, or make it clear what she really meant—that Liliana would be a huge help if she came, and maybe they could find some answers together, and maybe it’s good to face your fears instead of running from them.

But that’d be asking Liliana to be someone other than herself—and the two of them had always understood not to ask that of each other.

Liliana disappears in a blink of inky vapor.

Chandra Nalaar gets to walking.

The tears are hot when they leave her eyes, but the cold air of the marsh threatens to freeze them against her skin. She turns up the heat to keep from shivering. She doesn’t know how far she wants to go before she planeswalks away. Really, she doesn’t have to go far at all. She could do it here if she wanted to.

But she wants to walk for a while. Feel the wind, smell the awful marsh smell, look up at the dull gray sky. When she leaves, she may not see sky again for some time. It isn’t the vibrant azure of Kaladesh. The clouds here don’t spiral. In fact, there aren’t any clouds at all—only a morass of gray in all directions. She can’t smell ozone or stall food; she can’t hear the din of the markets. This place is not home. This place is not what she will remember.

That’s fine. She’ll come back. There will be other places. She’ll make sure of it, because when the World Tree comes down, they’re going to have so many other places to go. It’ll be fine, after.

She stops at the first tree she sees. It isn’t a very strong tree, or even very healthy: its bark has gone black, its branches empty and gnarled like claws raking against the sky. But it is a tree, and she thinks that’s probably good enough for taking a breath. Chandra sits beneath its nonexistent shade and throws her head back.

Going to New Phyrexia is the right thing to do.

But she is afraid.

It’ll be fine. She just needs a second to build up to it.

And maybe a second to cry before she planeswalks right into the mouth of an evil empire defended by the people who were once her closest friends. People she’d depended on to take that empire down. They couldn’t do it—and now she’s going off to do it alone.

A sudden coolness and the shifting of leaves tell her that she’s not alone. Sniffing, Chandra frowns. “Go away.”

“Oh, I’d rather not. Then I’d have to return to the others.”

Ah, it’s Wrenn. At least it isn’t Kaya coming to try and talk her out of this. Still, Chandra can’t think of anything to say. She tries not to sob as much now that she’s got company—but she sobs all the same.

“I want to help.”

Chandra wipes at the tip of her nose. “You do?”

“I do. How strange it was to watch you speak with the others. I thought you were making perfect sense. If a branch has gone rotten, you’ve got to cut it off before you can assess how the tree’s doing.”



She didn't know what a relief it would be to have someone understand her. Before, it felt like her anger was steaming out of her—but it's different now. Like it's melting out into the ground. Still, she has to be sure Wrenn means what she's saying. "We won't have any backup."

"Don't speak so surely," Wrenn says. "We have Seven with us—and I think we'll have Teferi, too."

Teferi? But nobody knew where he was, or if he was even still alive.

"You're confused about that, aren't you? I think that's confusion on your face. It can be hard to tell sometimes, what people are thinking, just with their faces."

"You guessed right," Chandra says. "You should give yourself more credit. If we had Teferi with us You think you know where to find him?"

"I think so," Wrenn says. She nods, while Seven assumes a thinking posture. "He's gotten himself caught in a tangle again—but it's nothing we can't solve. I've been studying it while we've been in this place, the twisting paths he's gone down. I know how to reach him, but I won't be able to do it on my own."

"Well, you won't be on your own," Chandra says. The fear's leaving, too, as hope begins to rear its head. If she can get Teferi out from wherever he is, their odds improve considerably. "You'll have me, Seven, and whoever else we find over there."

But Wrenn looks away, her hand resting on Seven's bark. "Seven has done so much for me—but he cannot do this. He cannot lend me power he doesn't have. It must be the fire, and it must be the World Tree."

The most important thing about dealing with fire, Jaya had always said, is knowing that it's dealing with *you*. You can guide it, you can make suggestions, you can give it a safe place to be—but in the end it's always going to do what it wants, and what it wants changes from second to second. You have to be in conversation with it if you mean to get anywhere, and if you want to keep your friends safe. It's the exact opposite of dealing with trees.

Chandra used to talk with Nissa about it, too.

Nissa used to tell her that sometimes turbulent growth, the sort that happened all at once, could be like fire. At first, Chandra hadn't believed her. Fire scours, nature nurtures. But then she saw what the Roil was like on Zendikar and it started to make sense—sometimes, it was the same. She liked it when nature surprised her. And, more than anything, she liked listening to Nissa talk about it.

She'd tried to help Wrenn figure things out the way Nissa had helped her, but teaching's a lot harder than listening, and Wrenn's fire isn't any normal flame. That she's standing there at all is a testament to her strength. If she's really going to set it loose, then the World Tree just might be the only thing that can handle it. "You're sure?"

"I am," she says. "The others were wrong—that tree *is* alive. I can hear his song from here. It's distant, but pained. A howl without melody. He needs help, just as Teferi and the others do. If I were to ignore it, what sort of hero would I be? My own fright has little to do with it."



Art by: Kekai Kotaki

Chandra offers a small, sad smile. “Hero, huh? I’m frightened, too—but less, now that I’ve got company.”

“You should find yourself a friend like Seven,” Wrenn says. “You’d never be lonely, then.”

Unless that friend should happen to be lost on a plane full of vicious enemies, and then she’d be very lonely indeed.

Chandra’s smile only gets sadder—but she stretches it out, as if to hide it. She gives Seven a pat on the bark. “Let’s head out.”

Wrenn tilts her head, as if realizing she might have said something amiss, but the moment passes without comment. Soon they have left the shade of the barren tree. No one comes to see them off.

Not anyone they can see, at any rate.

But there is someone watching the clearing. There is someone watching the safe house, and the people within it huddled together in search of purpose and direction. A trick of the light might reveal them, or it might not. A keen nose might notice their scent, or it might not. But they are there, watching.

All of this feels familiar to them, like a song whose lyrics have long since faded away. Over and over, they try and remember and yet the words flit away. Only the melody remains: a lament for what is to come, a dolorous anthem.

The watcher is not alone. There are others, too, seeing and yet unseen. The watcher asks one of them: “What is it we’re seeing? Why are we here?”

The answer comes like the trumpet of warhorns: *We are here to witness the beginning of the end.*