

Episode 8: Wrenn and Eight

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From set *March of the Machine*

Wrenn used to think that no matter where she went, she'd always be home. Hard to argue otherwise for dryads. So often home meant a tree they'd never leave. For her, things are a little more complicated: the trees with which she's bonded cannot survive the process for long, and she herself has matters to attend to all over the Multiverse. But she remained convinced that—no matter where in the Multiverse she ended up—she'd never be far from another place to live.

Until she arrived on New Phyrexia. In all her days she could never have imagined a place like this, scoured of all natural life; at once deathly quiet and filled with the artificial chattering of machines. If you asked any dryad to imagine their worst nightmare, they'd speak of a place like this. Wrenn hates it here.

And she hates, most of all, that this is where she's going to die.

It isn't dying that scares her. Unlike Chandra, who carries Wrenn's frail head and torso toward the Invasion Tree, Wrenn isn't afraid of the spears and barbs the Phyrexians unleash in their direction. The gout of flame and molten ore that fire over her shoulder—some from Chandra, some from Koth—do not frighten her either. If anything, she wishes that she could join them, but she hardly has the strength to keep the fires inside of herself at bay. Using them against others would jeopardize everything they've come here to do.

That is what truly frightens Wrenn: the possibility that she may not be able to do what everyone is relying upon her to do. The Invasion Tree does not sing to her anymore. He hasn't said a word the entire time she's been here—not even earlier, when she nearly managed to graft herself onto him. If it rejects her then they have no way of controlling him, no way of reaching Teferi, no way of stopping this onslaught.

And they will need Teferi if they are to stop any of this. Of that, Wrenn is certain.

From here, jostling with each step, she can see the coming onslaught: thousands of Phyrexians, with thousands more being assembled on the spot. Metal shines on each—not in the way of a knight's gal-lant armor, but in the way of churning forges and shining needles. And though there are more eyes staring back at her than there are leaves in a forest, she sees no life in any of them.

"This place should not exist," she says.

"Tell me about it," Chandra incinerates a spear before it can hit them. "We just have to hold on a little longer." Her breathing is ragged, her steps uneven; she's struggling to hold Wrenn up. Wrenn wasn't certain Chandra would ever walk again after the fall they took. Human bodies are delicate things. Nissa's vines caught them before they splattered against the ground—but sometimes the fall itself was bad, no matter how you landed. Yet Chandra stands and fights no matter how much pain she must be in.

"Are you in need of mending?" Wrenn asks.

"I'm fine," is the pyromancer's sharp response.

A rain of needles comes toward them—Koth levitates the metal beneath their feet to a shield over their heads. Needles spark as they bounce off its surface, some find new homes in the backs of Mirrans that Koth couldn't cover. He curses, the sound like quenching a blade. "Can't keep this up forever!"

"It won't be forever," Chandra says. "Once Wrenn's at the tree, everything will be fine."

Except that it will take time to graft onto the tree, to speak with it, to search for her old friend. And that's supposing she's able to do any of that at all. Will this body of hers hold out long enough? There is so little left of her. Chandra is clutching her like a wayward pet. In the face of the Invasion Tree's mighty form, she is less than an acorn. If there were others, if she had her sisters with her, maybe

A scream tears her from her thoughts. Wrenn comes back into reality and sees a sharp tendril shoot through the air over Chandra's shoulder. The scream's coming from up ahead—the other end of the tendril's gone clean through Melira's stomach.

"You should have taken our offer," comes a familiar voice. Nissa. A barbed vine slices straight toward them.

Chandra sucks in a breath. The fireball she sends back at Nissa flickers and fades midway through. She curses, and, in an act of desperation, rolls to avoid impact. Barbs pierce the ground like spears—standing just as tall as any of the warriors. If one of those had pierced them

"Got your back!" Koth shouts. He flings a craggy boulder at Nissa. One of her slicing vines splits it in two, then throws both halves back at the rebels.

Chandra burns one in midair, groaning with the effort. Her shaky breathing's becoming a rattle. Wrenn wishes there was more she could do to help—but staying awake and keeping herself alive will have to do.

A couple dozen Mirrans are all that remains of the fighting force, and the only ones in the way of Nissa's unstoppable charge. As Chandra makes a break for the tree, Koth, Melira, and the others cover their escape. Hard enough when it was only Phyrexian soldiers with which they had to contend—near impossible in the face of a killing machine like Nissa. Vines and blades alike slice through flesh as easily as paper.

"Koth!" shouts Melira. Blood spills like sap into the hand she's using to cup her wound. "Koth, we need a barricade!"

He glances over toward her. Even Wrenn can read the concern on his face. "Coming up. Chandra, you're going to have to bolt."

"Got it!"

Koth drives a fist into the platform. Orange flares throughout his form. Metal groans up and grows, forming a barrier to stop Nissa's approach.

But it's not done growing, yet, and Nissa isn't going to take this lightly.

She stalks toward them, lifted high above the surface of the bridge on a tangle of cable-like roots. Copper branches pierce the bodies of those that stand before her—Phyrexian and Mirran alike. One of her steps is three of anyone else's. Though Chandra is running as fast as she can, there's no way that she'll be able to evade all of Nissa's questing strikes.

If Chandra wanted, she could melt those roots in place. Send her crumpling to the ground. But Chandra hadn't looked over her shoulder since Nissa appeared.

"You don't want to hurt her, do you?" Wrenn asks.

Chandra says nothing.

"I understand. It's difficult, with friends. But you aren't really hurting her. I'm certain she'd never want to hurt you—so isn't keeping her from doing that exactly what she'd want you to do?"

Chandra clenches her jaw. "Wrenn."

"Yes?"

"It isn't that—"

Before Chandra can finish, she's torn backward. Wrenn tumbles from her grip, landing on the cold metal bridge in time to see Chandra dangling high above, Nissa lifting her by the ankle with a long and brassy root. One of the Mirrans catches Wrenn and keeps running.

"Get her to the tree. Keep her moving!" Koth shouts. He, too, has turned his attention to fighting off Nissa.

This Mirran only gets a few steps further before one of Nissa's spears nails them in place. They hurl Wrenn through the air. Two of his comrades look on in horror—but a third has the presence of mind to catch Wrenn and keep her going.

From hand to hand she passes, tossed through the air to keep her out of Phyrexian clutches. The Phyrexians think humans know little of unity—but Wrenn knows otherwise.



Art by: Jason Rainville

By the time she makes it to Melira's arms, Wrenn's nearly to the Invasion Tree.

And Chandra's still in the air.

"Still with us?" Melira rasps.

"I am, but " Wrenn says. "I can't—I can't do this on my own, I need Chandra's help—"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think you're going to get it," says Melira. How is she running, wounded as she is? A pang of guilt shoots through the dryad. There's too much resting on this to stop, but

"We told you," says Nissa. Her booming voice carries all the way up to the platform. "We warned you this would never work!"

Vines wrap about Chandra's throat. Wrenn feels them, too, as Melira helps her up onto the observation platform.

Higher and higher Chandra goes, writhing and fighting, her body swinging. How long can humans go without breathing?

"How do I set you up with this tree?" Melira asks.

Below them, Koth and dozens of Mirrans hold off the rest of the Phyrexian army at the barricades. Nissa might have been able to walk straight over it—but the others will have to go the hard way. Soldiers climb to the top of the barricade and hurl recovered quills back at the teeming Phyrexian army. Some are plucked right from their positions, taken screaming into the mass of metal and oil on the other side of the barricade.

Still, they fight.

Wrenn's tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth. "Just leave me by it, but I need help with the fire—"

"I'm sorry, that's more than I can do," says Melira. She picks Wrenn up and places the gnarled roots of her waist against the tree. "But I can help you with this, at least a little."

Before Wrenn can ask what she means, magic ebbs from Melira's hand, glowing a faint white. Strength seeps into Wrenn's bark as the glow fades—but not just strength. Something about this feels as crisp as rain, as vital as sun.

Melira is woozy on her feet. What she's done seems to have taken a lot out of her. She sinks to her knees, then sits, her back against Realmbreaker's white plating. "Should should help, a bit "

Wrenn wants to ask Koth if he'll go save Chandra. She wants to join with any tree but this, wants to hold onto herself just a little longer. She wants to help Melira, though she doesn't know how she'd even start.

But at times like these, it's hard to get what you want.

She closes her eyes as her roots meld into the Invasion Tree. No—he has another name, one he prefers, and it'd be rude of her not to use it. Realmbreaker. Sickness floods her senses. Oil roils over her roots, swirling with evil. No song fills her, no call of the forest, only an insistence that she does not belong.

She doesn't. But no matter what Realmbreaker says, she's going to stay.

Deep in the sylvan recess of her heart, Wrenn begins to sing. Of Innistrad's storied oaks, of the floating pines of Zendikar, of maple, yew, and beech she sings. Louder and louder the staggered chant of Realmbreaker: *you do not belong* . Something within *twists* , then begins to pull.

Wrenn yelps. She rakes her fingers against the plating, unwilling to yield, not now. Pressure's building up within the hollow of her chest—the fire is all too eager to fight the tree's ill intent. It's searing the inside of her throat. If she gives into it, the fire might well buy her enough time to fully meld with the tree—if it doesn't consume her first.

But that won't work. There's too much hunger. The fire, Realmbreaker—there is hunger on both sides, and she dangles between the two predators.

All of this is starting to hurt.

Chandra would know what to do. She could speak fire. Calm it down, direct it, tell it where it needs to go, keep it from burning Wrenn as it burned Realmbreaker.

But Chandra dangles above the bridge, and she, too, is about to die here, and there will be no one else to help.

Wrenn clenches her jaw tight. *You can burn, but only the things that aren't me*, she thinks. Chandra said thinking at it might help.

A flare within her belly, the smell of burning oak. The thousand voices within Realmbreaker scream at once—but so, too, does Wrenn. How is the fire meant to tell the two apart? They are one and the same, now. Already Realmbreaker's foulest thoughts echo within her own mind: they must spread, they must claim what is already claimed, they must wake the plane to the glories of New Phyrexia. Like a fungus gone mad they continue their shouting even as the fire consumes them.

Even as it consumes her.

Flames lick at her eyes.

Wrenn opens them.

There is something behind Nissa. Something in white.

Gold flashes across her vision, so bright she mistakes it at first for the fire—but it soon fades. At the center is Nissa. The light's exploding from her mouth and eyes, the metal roots armoring her have gone white-hot. The blow staggers her—she drops Chandra.

What was ? Ah, she sees it now—the angel catches Chandra and sets her on the platform.

"Wrenn!" shouts Chandra, choking and rasping. "Are you still in there?"

"I-I am," Wrenn says. Realmbreaker is trying to convince her that there is no Wrenn—but she knows that's a lie. So long as the Multiverse is still in danger, there is still a Wrenn.

Chandra hacks and coughs—but she lays her hand on Wrenn's shoulder all the same. Wrenn can hear her breathing, even if her vision is starting to fade. "You're doing such a good job, Wrenn."

Is she? Parts of her are starting to flicker to ash.

"Do you remember what we talked about back on Dominaria?"

Chandra's voice echoes in Wrenn's head. Everything goes hazy around them, spinning like a leaf on the wind. People are screaming. Someone's hurt. There's a war going on only a few yards away, and What was it Chandra said back then?

"Like breathing ?"

Behind her seared-shut eyes, the colors start to swirl: gold, red, green.

"That isn't helpful right now," Chandra says. She lays her hand on Wrenn's shoulder. Warmth blossoms in Wrenn's mind. Instead of lingering within Wrenn, the fires now flow from Realmbreaker to Chandra, stopping only briefly in between. "Fire's going to burn, no matter what you do, but you can shape it if you try."

It's easier to think without the fire in the way. Wrenn can focus on something more than the pain. She must *shape* the fire. It's a living thing, just like her roots. Like any growing sprout, it needs guidance.

The landscape in her mind changes. Colors take shape: a twisting tree sprouts from red and gold, its branches burnished copper. An unseen wind stirs its leaves. Slowly, they are falling away, fading as they spiral. An endless lake of black oil surrounds the glowing tree. Bubbles rise and burst across its surface, each one a voice, each one pleading for Wrenn to join them.

But she won't. Not yet.

Within the boughs of her imagined tree is a girl. As she begins to sing, fire flows from her lips, spilling out into the black void in search of someone who will hear it. For what feels an eternity the song floats through the dark until—at last, impossibly—it hears something.

Wrenn hears something.

Faint, fading, the barest whisper of green against the darkness—but it is there.

“You can do this “ Chandra’s voice echoes.

The battle echoes, too. The crunch of metal on bone; Koth’s shouted orders; the rumbling impact of some unseen munitions.

She must focus—to tune it all out.

Wrenn sends her fires out. Normally, she’d let any sapling so shy take its time. Trees needed to come into their own. A dryad’s job was to look after that process, to make them the best they could be. Finding this poor little soul now—grafting herself onto him—goes against everything she knows.

She hopes that he will understand.



Art by: Viko Menezes

The fires quest ever forward in search of that furtive trace of green. Black encroaches on the roots of the tree—but still the girl sings, still she searches, still she hopes the distant song will return.

There: a sapling no larger than her hand, struggling against the dark.

How lonely this delicate creation! How long has he been here in the dark? Cursed spots line its edges; what green remains is pale as seafoam. This is not a place meant for the living.

As her mind reaches for him—as his song fills her ears—she shapes the fires once more. An incandescent forest springs from the oil, the burning path leading straight to the sapling. All around them the oil begins to bubble, to churn.

Join us. Bark that never breaks, leaves that never shed, a fire that never burns itself out—join us, and you will be eternal.

But Wrenn does not want to. And the sapling doesn’t either, his song going shrill with fear.

Chandra said the trick was to shape the fire. Very well—Wrenn will take a cue from the Mirrans outside. Just as they protect her, she will protect this sapling until she can sing him fully grown.

Flaming trees grow to the size of mountains, their branches interlocking like the shields of Koth's constructs. Waves of black oil thrash against them—but the trees flare bright, and the oil rolls off their sizzling surface. All the while Wrenn's flames dance about the sapling, all the while she sings with her faltering voice.

Grow, she wills. For all of us.

And though the sapling was shy, he knows now—surrounded by his larger fellows—that he is safe. Wrenn's song is a dry log upon the bonfire: he grows tall, tall, impossibly so; his song becomes a booming chant, a warrior's chant; his branches thick as boulders.

How handsome he's become. Happiness wells up within her. She feels herself smile, although she isn't certain how; her body is distant and cold. Only the fires here give her any warmth. But what will they do once those fires have burned themselves out? Wrenn doesn't know. But she does know she's got a fine new partner.



Hello, Eight, she says. Let's introduce you to Teferi.

Eight knows he doesn't have long. The same fires that protect him will soon engulf them both. With her other hosts she'd learned all sorts of things about them—which waters they favored, how the sun felt against their leaves—but with Eight, there's only room for one thing.

Letting him grow.

Perched on his branches, Wrenn shoots through the dark like a star through a moonless sky. A hundred years of growth, two, three, happen in the span of seconds. Had she a stomach it'd be lost somewhere in the rising tides of black oil beneath them. The higher they go the worse pain she's in—but she holds on tight, all the same.

The others said Eight was the kind of tree who bridged whole planes together. At first, Wrenn wasn't certain how she'd guide him on her own. She sees now that there was no need for worry. He wants to grow. All he needs is the power that she lends him.

Fires churning in his belly, Eight reaches for new planes. His branches grow, splitting here and there, each its own pathway. Something in the dark *gives*, and soon he's torn holes all around them. Wrenn can't count them all—it is as if she has stepped within the eye of an insect. Where there was once darkness there is now a kaleidoscope of light.

Everywhere her gaze lands there is something to tantalize it: a castle assailed on all sides by gilded oaks; a gleaming, towering city of chrome on the verge of collapse; a plane where trees and rocks and rivers explode with the beautiful, brutal energy of life. She sees a temple in flames, a sun that consumes all it touches, a river that flows blood red with the oil of its sailors. And yet across all these disparate planes, there is some unity: crimson skies, Phyrexian symbols, nature contorting against itself. What people she sees are always in the thick of a fight. Skulls crumble beneath mechanical legs. Soldiers have their heads dunked into vats of black oil. Blood drips from the mouths of those who will take up arms rather than surrender their homes.

Chandra said this affected every plane—but seeing it like this, all laid out before Wrenn's eyes, is a different story.

They need our help, Eight says.

We have to find what they haven't, Wrenn answers.

I only know the places they've seen. The places they've made me go.

I know a hidden place. But to find it, we have to get a little lost.

Eight feels nervous below her. Wrenn runs a hand over his bark, embers trailing in the wake of her fingertips. *Don't worry. We'll be together.*

These eyes of hers are not eyes; this body of hers is not a body. She can shed them if she wishes, if they slow her—and so she does. Vision will not help when it comes to getting lost; it'll only get in the way. The tangles of Teferi's magic aren't visible to the naked eye. You must feel them—feel your growth stuttering, or shooting faster, your leaves going still, your flames at last held in place. The light of a thousand planes bears down on Wrenn, but she pays them no mind, guiding Eight ever upward, ever searching. As a weaver before a loom, she guides his many branches: here a rise, there a fall; here a loop, there an enclosure. To think about any of it will set the whole thing awry. There is a place somewhere here out of sight. There is a place that time cannot touch. There is a place no one would ever think to look, a place found if only she can trace the clumsy trail of a friend

There.

Vision returns as the flames roar within her. They've found the right place: the sky is blue as a sapling's dream; the people, though armored, show no signs of fear; the rivers flow green; the trees bear the fruits of kind treatment. Beneath one such tree she sees a gathered throng of people. On gently shaped stone they sit, the clothing draped across their forms bright as jewels, their skin warmed by the sun. Among them are mages and warriors, scholars and diplomats, a queen and half a dozen farmers. In their strong voices, they give thanks to all that has come before them—to the seas, the sky, and to the grand tree who has weathered so much.

Among them—standing at the queen's side—is Teferi. There is an ease to him here she's never seen before, a calm that's overtaken him. Wrenn hates to ruin her friend's happiness—but this can't wait. He'll understand.

With a thought she calls to Eight, and Eight is quick to answer. A questing branch opens a tear into this tangled bramble. Quick as its creator the tear grows into something greater: a portal big enough for someone to walk through.



Art by: Liiga Smilshkalne

Wrenn can't walk. She doesn't have legs in either this ephemeral flame form or the physical one, grafted onto Realmbreaker back on New Phyrexia. Eight can't walk. He's the soul of the tree, after all; if he leaves, the whole thing will fall apart. Her only hope is to call out and hope the others notice what's happened.

"Teferi!"

The clatter of arms taken up, the hum of spells, the whisper of sandals against the earth. They've noticed. Wonder makes its home in the observers—with dashes of caution and bravery. All faces turn toward the queen and the man at her side. She, for her part, errs on the side of caution. "Who are you, efreet?"

But Teferi lays a comforting hand on the queen's shoulder. "She's a friend of mine." He walks down the steps, stopping at the bottom to look back toward the queen. "We might not have much time to finish preparations."

"Bold of you to assume there's a threat we cannot face," the queen answers. Her expression goes warm. Wrenn feels a pang of guilt. The queen can't know what it is they're facing—but Wrenn must hope their help will be enough.

"Wrenn, you found me," Teferi says as he approaches the portal. The kindness and charm he wore around his companions fades a little. Wrenn's not good with faces, but even she knows concern when she sees it. "I don't think we have time for reminiscing, do we?"

Something in her chest goes tight. Is it so obvious? She shakes her head. "No. I'm sorry, we don't. It Finding you was "

"You don't have to explain," Teferi says. "Just tell me what I can do to help."

For a second, she isn't there anymore—she's somewhere cold and dark and empty. When she returns, her chest feels even tighter. "We need you on New Phyrexia. Everyone's fighting back, but there are so many of them and so few of us. Any second now they're going to overtake us. We need a great hero."

She can see herself reflected in Teferi's eyes—all flame, no real body. It frightens her to think that she has no body, no solidity now, but a lot of things frighten her, and she isn't yet done.

"A great hero? I happen to be looking at one," he says. "It took me decades to find this place, and you've done it in no time at all."

"Please," Wrenn creaks. Those words don't feel like they're suited to her. "Teferi, there isn't time."

He nods in understanding. He reaches for her shoulder, only to draw it back when he remembers there are only flames to meet him. He turns toward the others—

Again, she winks out of existence, again it is cold and dark and—

A thousand scabbards strapped to a thousand waists, a thousand spears rattling with movement, boots on the lush earth, war chants in the air—The tightness jumps up to her throat. An entire army had amassed that time. Thousands of them. She'd just been talking with Teferi, and When had all these people arrived?

How long does she still have?

Not long enough. Not long enough at all.

Wrenn presses her eyes shut. Think. If there won't be much left of her to physically join the fight, she must do whatever she can to help. And if the Phyrexians brought numbers—well, there were numbers here. Not so many as the enemy, but their bravery shone bright as their armor. Teferi's people could help. If she could bring them to the fight, that is.

But that would be a mess. This place is hidden within the boughs of the tree itself. Letting Teferi slip through is easy enough—he was only a single leaf. The rest of the army would be a mess of vines springing out, tangling themselves among all the disparate planes she'd seen.

And it occurs to her then, as Teferi turns toward her, just what it is she has to do.

You undo a tangle by moving through it. She and Eight could do the same here—if they tried, they could push the planes toward one another until New Phyrexia gave, and then leave this one in its place. Wrenn doesn't know where it'll go. Eight doesn't seem to either—all he offers is that it's some place dark, some place that isn't a place at all.

And the two of them won't have long afterward.

I'm all right with that, Wrenn says. *At least we'll have each other.*

Warmth from Eight. He's all right with it, too.

Teferi takes a step toward them—toward the portal.

"Wait," she says. "Don't come alone. Bring your friends."

"Wrenn, the effort it'd take to do that—" he starts, but she can't bear to do this if someone is going to tell her to stop.

"I know. But I want to do it. Please, bring as many as you can. I'll find some other way to live."

Teferi does not answer—but his friends do. The warriors close ranks behind him like petals, their shields overlapping. Mages fill the spaces behind, and—

Cold, dark, a place that isn't a place—

Longer this time. Too long. This is going to be the last time, isn't it?

Teferi's sent out the call. Thousands have answered, ready to rush into New Phyrexia while the two share space. All because she reached out to him again. No matter what else her life has been—she is proud of this.

"It was so nice to meet you, Teferi. I hope whatever remains of me will remember," she says.

Teferi's smile only makes it hurt worse. "Whatever remains of me will always remember my friend, Wrenn," he says. "A hero whose name precedes her."

Cold on the edges of her vision, darkness licking at her limbs. At least it won't be New Phyrexia. She's happier dying here, with one limb in Zhalfir.

Wrenn closes her eyes and does what she does best: she grows.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

The portal that springs up before the gathered warriors of Zhalfir would put a mountain to shame. Wreathed in flame, yet smooth as the surface of a lake, it is a thing of beauty—yet the images reflected within are anything but. On the other side there is only metal, only blood, only the slick black oil of New Phyrexia. There are only a handful of people left behind a makeshift barricade: a man at the gates, fighting a numberless army with whatever he can find, a woman slumped near a tree and a pyromancer at her side, fighters hurling stones for want of better weapons. A golden angel beats back the Grand Praetor—but even her heavenly blade has grown weary.

A war engine rolls to the walls. A single blow will see it toppled.

In truth, they needn't even make the blow. The monstrosity flings the angel through the gate—and the force of this alone is enough to shatter them.

The gathered armies of New Phyrexia pour through the gate and freeze, in confusion and horror. Ahead of them is a portal to a place lush and verdant, cultivated by careful hands and attentive hearts. It is a thing that horrifies them. So, too, do the warriors who cross over the portal, and the mage who stands at the vanguard.

It has been many years since they were called to war—but Zhalfir stands ready.