

Episode 5: Cathartic Reunion

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From set *March of the Machine*

Kaya, Kaito, and Tyvar warned her of Phyrexia's endless, undulating torture chambers. To hear them tell it, New Phyrexia is less a place in and of itself and more like being trapped within the organs of a gargantuan creature. Tubes running every which way form its veins and arteries; the chrome steps leading to the Invasion Tree are its ribs; the tree itself is a foul spine. The picture she'd gotten in her mind's eye was as clear as it was horrifying.

But when she arrives, she sees something different. There's no mistaking that they're in the belly of the beast—only it's not the same beast those three saw. This place is full of blinding light illuminating the ossuary structures around them. The Invasion Tree is still the creature's spine, but it is complemented by sharp white outcroppings. Platforms, Chandra thinks, each swarming with Phyrexians going about their fell duties. Like ants along leaves, especially when seen from a platform so far below.

Chandra can't comprehend how tall the Invasion Tree is. The original on Kaldheim is supposed to be huge, but this is bigger than the God-Eternals had been, bigger than anything she'd ever seen. Even tilting her head to the point of pain, she cannot see its crown. She expected Wrenn to say something about it, but maybe her companion's silence on the subject is worse.

"Come now, we mustn't take root," is the only thing Wrenn says before she starts moving. The flames within her spit crackle against their containment. Fire is always eager to show how it feels.



Art by: Grzegorz Rutkowski

She's off toward a broken, needle-shaped structure not far from the platform where they've landed. Wrenn's noticed the same thing Chandra has: there are people at the base of that needle, people clamoring down from its height. Golden armor makes them stand out against all the red and the white

around them—and the skin beneath that armor even more so. Metal horns and spikes tell her they aren't quite human, but they aren't Phyrexian either. Each moves in their own time, and blood smears the clothes of some.

Chandra's feet carry her toward the others, each footfall heavy with anticipation. Coming here had been the right thing to do, she's sure of it, and here is the evidence: survivors in need of assistance. Teferi always said difficult times made quick allies.

"Taking that scrambler down paid off. I didn't expect help so soon," calls one of the survivors near the base of the needle. To her surprise he doesn't seem all that happy to see her. Steel juts from his skin like the scales on a serpent's brow, a stark contrast to Phyrexian aesthetics. He must have some kind of kinship with the stuff; some of the other survivors float to the bridge, clinging to rocks he seems to control. Wrenn is quick to help with Seven's tall reach.

"Came as soon as we could," she says. "My name's Chandra. This is Wrenn."

"Planning to stick around?"

"What? Of course we are. We wouldn't have come otherwise," Chandra says.

"That might mean you die here." He crosses his arms, studies her. One of the women in the group sighs. Unlike any of the others gathered, there's not a trace of metal on her anywhere. Against the hard lines of New Phyrexia's landscape, her features are soft.

"I'll take that chance. There's too much on the line to sit back and do nothing," says Chandra.

A beat passes between them—him narrowing his eyes, her staring him down. After what seems too long given the circumstances, he nods. "Koth," the man says, introducing himself. "That's Melira. Is it just you two?"

"For now," Chandra says. "I mean, maybe. I don't think—"

Koth palms the back of his head. He seems to be considering. "Two people." As his gaze falls to the ground, Chandra follows it. There are other bodies among the Phyrexian centurions—human ones. Her heart sinks.

She can't let it stay in the depths. When it comes to war, morale is as important as tactics and supplies. "Two *Planeswalkers*. And we're all you're going to need. Wrenn's got a plan."

"Is that so?" Koth asks. "A plan. Wonderful."

"Don't be so dour," Melira cuts in. "We can't abandon hope now. It might be something we haven't tried."

"She's right, you know," Wrenn says. "You can't have tried this. There aren't any other dryads symbiotically bonded to trees."

Chandra's not sure if it's a joke—sometimes, with Wrenn, it's hard to tell. She surprises herself by laughing anyway. The woman smirks a little, too, and that feels like its own kind of victory.

Koth remains skeptical. "Let's hear this idea you've got," he says.

"It's simple. We'll head for the tree. Once we're there, I'll attach myself to him, and try to guide him," Wrenn answers.

"She's good at that. Really good!" Chandra adds when Koth narrows his eyes. "We might have a friend who can help, too. Maybe you've heard of Teferi?"

"No."

“Well,” Chandra runs a hand through her hair, “he’s the strongest time mage who’s ever lived, so there’s that, and he’s a good friend of mine, so he’ll help if we ask.”

“And where is this Teferi?” asks Koth.

Chandra glances at Wrenn, who gives her an inexplicable and mysterious nod. “He’s coming. Anyway, once we’re at the tree, the rest’ll come together. We’re going to use it against them.”

Koth crosses his arms. “And you’re certain you can do this, Wrenn?”

“As certain as anyone can be.”

He makes a small, considering sound. “Right. We don’t have many other options. When we lost Karn, they took him over that way, too. Norn wanted to give him special treatment. We may as well try to gain control of the tree and rescue him at the same time.”

“We’ll have to move fast,” says Melira. “Norn probably doesn’t think a handful of rebels are a threat. We can use that hubris to our advantage, and strike before she realizes how threatening we can be.”

“Base of the tree is heavily guarded. More centurions than she knows what to do with. We try it that way, everyone’s dead before we start,” Koth catches their eyes again. “You two fine with a rough trip?”

“Whatever it takes, I’m in,” Chandra says. Wrenn nods as well.

“Good. Because you’re not the only one with a powerful friend,” he starts.

“When you said friend “

“He’s a friend. For now. Maybe more like he isn’t an enemy. It’s complicated.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Chandra isn’t. Staring at her own reflection in Urabrask’s polished carapace, she’s not sure what to think. He hasn’t attacked yet, but maybe he’s waiting for the right time. He hasn’t insulted her or gone on about unity, but maybe this is all a cover.

She crosses her arms.

Urabrask lets out a breath. “Such keening mouths,” he says. “Infighting will be the death of your kind.”

Chandra frowns. He’s right, and she kind of hates that he is. Wrenn offers a consolatory hand on her shoulder as Urabrask turns toward the edge of their platform.

“The main pathways to the Invasion Tree are guarded by more Phyrexians than your mind can hold in one place,” he explains. He doesn’t need to point them out with his claws, but he does. “If one of them sees us, Norn will know instantly. Koth learned this earlier. As a show of good will, I told him of the passage you took to get to this platform.”

The path they’d taken was well hidden. At the time Chandra thought Koth sensed it beneath the ground with his powers. They hadn’t seen a single patrol on their way through the twisting passage. A good thing, too, with how narrow some of it got.

“Organic eyes can behold the Realmbreaker without obstruction from here. More importantly, the trajectory is clear, and lies within the boundaries of your cognition. Your chance of success is still almost non-existent.”

"I came here to help," Chandra snaps. "I don't care what some Phyrexian weirdo thinks of me, I'm going to do what I can here. Why are you even helping us, anyway?"

Fire roars from the eyeholes of Urabrask's carapace. "Because Norn stifles the fires of creation with her pontificating. Phyrexia cannot thrive if there is only one Phyrexia." Magma drips from his jaws, plumes of smoke rising from the holes they burn. "Even a newt understands. Urabrask serves no one." Melira steps between the two of them. "Let's keep our eyes on the prize. The plan's to have Koth fling you two over the divide."

"Why just us?" Chandra asks. Truth be told, she's grateful for the break.

"The rest of the Mirrans will provide a tantalizing distraction for the so-called Mother of Machines. They'll find a patrol somewhere and pick a fight. She'll focus on eliminating them, leaving our path in the air free."

That is maybe the simplest plan Chandra's ever heard to deal with the most precarious situation she's ever encountered. Flinging them across the divide? She takes a step to the edge of the platform. The chasm that yawns before her could probably fit all the tallest buildings in Ghirapur stacked together. The platform overlooking the tree is so far she can cover it with her thumb.

"Oh. I'm not fond of aerial travel," Wrenn says.

"It won't last long," Koth says. "I can launch us from here. Urabrask says that platform's mostly used for maintenance. Norn has the elf busy doing something else right now, so it should be clear."

The elf. Despite all the fire in her heart, Chandra's blood runs cold at the thought. They're being so casual about it. She wants to snap at them again, to say that Nissa's important in ways they can't understand, but if she does they might think less of her. She came here to help the Multiverse, after all. Rescuing Nissa's a small thing in comparison.

But if that's her platform, and if she's there

"Let's do it," Chandra says.

"Glad you're on board," says Koth.

"The moment your dryad makes contact with the tree, Norn will know. We'll need to act quickly. Quick as your flesh can go without sloughing off." Urabrask has already turned toward the edge of the platform. Curiously, he leans down and begins carving sigils into the metal below them.

This tiny clutch of people is all that stands between Phyrexia and the Multiverse. The weight on her shoulders threatens to crush her. Chandra paces, as if to offset it by moving. Wrenn and Seven remain standing where Koth told them to be, looking ahead at the amassed forces. The air here isn't good for Seven—the tips of her branches have gone black. Just what is it doing to the rest of them? How long can they be here before they start changing, too? That last bit of Halo won't last forever.

"Are you ready?" Koth asks.

Chandra stops, one leg on either side of an inscribed rune. Over and over, she opens and closes her hands. "Yeah."

"Certainly," says Wrenn.

Koth nods. "Mirrans, are we ready?"

Chandra can't call the answering shouts hearty, or even confident. No, she's heard that kind of tone before, and it's closer to desperation than it is to hope. Her chest hurts. She counts them, the Mirrans, wondering how many will be gone by the next time she sees them.

Koth drives his fist into the earth.

The runes beneath their feet flash to life. An instant later they're shot straight into the air with only the stone beneath them as an anchor. Air whips across their faces; Chandra shields her eyes to keep them from tearing up.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

Behind her, she can hear Koth's shout: "Keep yourself in the air if you have to!"

Would it be better if she was down there, with him?

It's no use wondering.

Especially when they've got company in the air.

Chandra's not sure what she'd call the beasts that swoop in on the attack—they're a little like birds, a little like bats, and an awful lot of their bodies are made of bladed metal. What matters is that they're in the way, and if they're in the way, they're going to get blasted. Fire melts them as surely as it does everything else, though already she's starting to feel herself flag in between blows. On the other platform, Wrenn and Seven have grabbed one and used it to beat the others into retreat.

They aren't in the air long, but the bladed bats swarm them the whole time. Chandra's so busy fighting them off that she can't keep track of where they are in relation to the tree. Impact rockets her onto one of the Invasion Tree's lower branches. Her bones groan as she's thrown onto the jagged white surface. She's pretty sure one of her ribs cracked, because it hurts to breathe, but she needs to breathe if she's going to get anywhere.

One of the blade-bats swoops down on her, its wings forming a drill. Her teeth rattle from the sound. Chandra fumbles, rolls out of the way, pushes herself up on an outcropping. The blade-bat's shifted weapons: now, when it dives at her, it means to pin her to the wall. A hasty blast of fire sees it melted into a ball of metal at her feet.

Chandra takes a painful breath. "Almost there."

"Yes, I suppose that's so," answers Wrenn. "How odd. It's so quiet."

Chandra doesn't know if she's heard Wrenn sound afraid before now.

But she understands why. This tree is huge—bigger than anything Wrenn's ever tried to bond with, and nastier besides.

There's a very real chance this is going to be the last tree she ever joins. And as much as part of her wants to talk Wrenn out of it, she can't. The whole thing reeks of *practicality* and *sacrifice*, but ultimately it isn't her choice. It's Wrenn's. And as far as they know, it's their best shot.

Plates along the tree shift and reform. Chandra tries to blast them, but she isn't fast enough; they form into centurions before she can get rid of all their parts. There's got to be a couple dozen of them—most armed with swords, but some with their arms changed into lances. One's taken the shape of a strange metallic hound.

She backs up against Seven.

"We're going to have to act fast," Chandra says. "Can you get started? I'll cover you."

"Y-yes, I can."

Something shifts behind her. Chandra readies another blast of fire. Flames engulf the branch, consuming two of the gathered centurions, but they don't move. The whole time they're burning, none of them move.

"Wrenn, I've got a bad feeling—" She starts.

But the mouths of the centurions birth their answer, slick skinned with black oil and corruption. "We do not want to hurt you. We only want to welcome you home."

Hearing a lone woman's voice emerging from so many throats, doubled and doubled again, sets Chandra's teeth on edge. "I don't care. Come on, Wrenn—"

Two spears fly at her just as she glances behind. Chandra hardly has time to scream before they've pinned her to the white-plated tree. Somehow her clothes are the only thing damaged—the spears landed just below her armpits. She's a sitting target up here, but if Wrenn can free her, they may still have a chance.

But as she starts to shout, she sees what's been keeping Wrenn occupied.

A figure faces down Wrenn. Green magic crackles around her metallic body, her four arms all acting as conduits. One—a blade—slices off Seven's thickest branch as if snapping a twig. Magic weaves around Wrenn and Seven's remaining limbs, binding them together, then lifting them in the air.

"We can perfect you the way we've perfected her," the voices speak. "All of your flaws, your weaknesses, gone. You will never be lonely again once you've become one with us."

The words aren't reaching her. Not now.

Because she recognizes that face. She'd recognize it anywhere—the way its cheeks round when it laughs, the ears prone to twitching, the small nose, the mouth so often quirked into a secret smile. If all the memories in Chandra's head poured out of her like molten metal into a blacksmith's pitcher, this one would remain stubbornly lodged inside.

Nissa.

It can't be—but it has to be. Even with two new arms grafted onto her body, even with black tears streaking her cheeks, even when so much of her is now copper root and bramble—Chandra recognizes her. Even the way she tilts her head toward Chandra is the same. Words unsaid weigh down Chandra's

tongue; the agony of recognition tears at her heart. To recognize her to recognize Nissa like this hurts worse than dying, she's almost sure—what could hurt more than this?

But then Nissa speaks, and Chandra has her answer. Nissa's voice is the one thing they haven't changed. "You're afraid, aren't you? My new form must be hard for you to understand."

"Nissa," Chandra creaks. It's all she can get out. There are too many other words backed up in her head right now, all struggling to get out: *This isn't you. You don't have to work for her. We can find some way to fix this. Please stop. I'm sorry we ever stopped talking.*

But all that comes out—time and time again—is Nissa's name.

Nissa doesn't react. There is no small smirk, no glint in her eye, no expression at all as she turns back toward Wrenn and Seven.

Two more spears pin Chandra in place. One lands in her calf. She screams, pressure building behind her eyes. Fire licks at her fingers. The breaths she tries to take don't do anything to soothe it.

"You don't have anything to be afraid of," Nissa says. Her tone is awful and flat. As Chandra watches, she tears Seven limb from limb—the sharp quills and blade of her new body working in tandem with her magic. Wrenn's screaming, too, fire flaring behind her eyes, but Nissa still does not react. When only Wrenn's small, dryad form remains, Nissa lets her fall to the floor. "I no longer feel any pain."

"This This isn't about !" Chandra stammers. It's getting hard to think, there's so much energy building up inside her, and none of it has anywhere to go.

Nissa turns toward her. "Is it about your plan? That's already failed. The Mother of Machines sent me to stop you."

"Why?" it comes out a scream, an accusation.

"Because what you're doing is short-sighted. You've always been short-sighted." A flick of her hand and the centurions stand down. Another, and they remove the spears—even the one that's pierced Chandra's calf. Freedom isn't much help. With the pain shooting through her leg, Chandra isn't running anywhere soon.

If she wanted to, she could fight back. Cauterizing wounds isn't difficult for a fire mage. She could take all this energy building up inside and let it loose. There's no way anyone could walk away from a blow like that. At this rate there might be enough building up to do some serious damage to the tree, too. No matter the "improvements" Norn's made, no metal can withstand the heart of a sun, right?

"You wanted to be the hero, didn't you? You wanted to save me and the Multiverse in one fell swoop. Unfortunately, you've gotten things backward. I'm here to save you. As always."

It would be the easiest thing in the world to let loose.

But if she does

Chandra's tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth.

Nissa takes a step toward her. The smile breaking out across her face is wide and toothy and not at all like her. "Out of all your companions, only you and the dryad chose to face us. Your kind lack unity and understanding."

"More are coming," Chandra says. She screws her eyes shut. If she doesn't look, it's easier to keep everything in. Easier, too, to bathe this whole branch in flame. If she wanted to. If she doesn't look into Nissa's corrupted eyes, she won't have to remember what her face looks like while it's—no. No, she can't. It isn't just about her, or Nissa, or any one person. There are Mirrans dying underfoot to give

them the chance to be here. Hundreds of planes are relying on them to take this tree down. However hot her fire burns, Chandra knows she can't take out the tree in one go.

She opens her eyes. There is Nissa, gesturing with her blade-arm, movements sharp and precise and not at all her own. "Look around you. Don't fear, I'll wait."

Chandra can't help herself—she looks. She wishes she hadn't.

There is an army on the other side of the bridge. A teeming, numberless army, the light shimmering off their sleek, silvery forms. A draconic monstrosity in the vanguard carries a blue banner. Next to it is a towering being, one Chandra must assume is their general. Every fall of their feet is a thunderclap, every weapon an arrow in the back of their hopes.

She can't even see the Mirrans from here. How are they going to take out a force like that?

"I asked the Mother of Machines for her blessing to speak with you the moment I knew what you were planning. The resistance never had a chance. But I knew there was a chance for *you*. I know what you could be, if you only join with us."

Norn knew. The whole time they'd been here, she knew what was going on. The sparse resistance they'd met wasn't because Norn was occupied with the invasion, but a trap.

And now they're all going to die, or worse.

Grief is a porcelain shard in her throat. She tries to swallow. All it does is hurt more.

Chandra takes a step backward. Her heel hangs off the rounded ground of the overlook platform. One more step and she'll fall—a burning star, the dashed hopes of the Multiverse.

Nissa takes another step forward. Brazen, now, she traces a metallic claw along Chandra's cheekbone—but it still isn't Nissa that's speaking. Chandra feels sick. "We are offering you the holiest of graces: freedom from this fear. When you join our congregation, you will never know loneliness again. We would never leave you to die alone."

"I'm not alone," Chandra snaps. She isn't. Wrenn's laying on the ground, in pain, but alive. While Nissa's been talking, Wrenn's been pulling herself closer and closer to the tree.

For a second, there's hope in Chandra's eyes.

Nissa soon follows Chandra's gaze to the fallen dryad. A bitter laugh leaves her lips. Copper branches spring from the tree's surface to clutch Wrenn tight.

Wrenn screams.

"We see now. You're still alive. Impressive. You will make a fine guardian for Realmbreaker," Nissa says. After a moment's consideration, Nissa's head turns toward Chandra once more. "As for you—we shall say only this: there are many ways to serve Phyrexia. When you join the fold, you'll discover what it is you were truly meant to be."

Chandra's breath is coming ragged. Her head's pounding. Jaya could talk her through this, but Jaya's dead; Gideon could soak up anything she threw at him, but he's dead, too.

And now there's Nissa.

But there's Wrenn, too. And as Nissa advances once more, Wrenn catches Chandra's eye. Flames flicker within her pale body. The metal around her begins to glow. With the centurions averting their eyes and Nissa focused on Chandra, Norn has no way of knowing what's about to happen.

Breathe, she tells herself. *Hold on a little longer.*

Chandra's other heel hits the edge. Fire swirls around her forearm. "I'm not giving up here."

Nissa's ears droop, her lips part. A softness creeps in around her oil-slicked cheeks. How many times has she seen this look? In the cold hours of the night, before the sun rose, when they used to talk about whatever came to mind; whenever Chandra spat out an idea that didn't quite make sense and Nissa wasn't quite sure how to tell her. How many times has she seen it?

Why does it hurt so much now?

"Chandra."

That's her voice. Nissa's voice. Without any of the interference, without Norn's influence—just Nissa.

Chandra's flames flicker out.

Nissa holds out her hand. "Please, come with us. I miss you."



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

A life without fear. A life without the others second-guessing every decision she's ever made. A life free of loneliness and pain. Even if they stop Phyrexians here, won't something else take its place? Bolas, the Eldrazi, Elesh Norn—there was always a tyrant. But if she takes that hand right now, that story could end.

It'd be like running away together.

Running away from their problems, and their responsibilities, and everyone who'd sacrificed everything to get them here.

"I miss you, too," Chandra says. Tears burn at her eyes. "I miss you so much. But I can't. I'm sorry."

All that familiarity, all that softness, is gone an instant. Nissa's face is a mask of rage in the moment before the fire.

Chandra ducks below Nissa's slicing arm and drives her fiery fist into the branch itself. One second of blinding orange is all the warning they get before the ground beneath them explodes. The impact sends her and Nissa hurtling away, the centurions dropping like stone hail. Only Wrenn is close enough to the tree to cling to it.

She's going to have to handle it from here.