

She Who Breaks the World

Grace P. Fong

From set *March of the Machine: The Aftermath*
01. 05. 2023

Nissa Revane is digging her grave. Under the cover of night, she drives her shovel into Zhalfir's ground and wipes sweat from her brow. The task should come easily to her. It's just dirt, after all. Once, she could bend nature with a whim, but now her heart pounds, her limbs shiver. She concludes she must have overexerted her recovering body and decides she will take a well-deserved rest upon completing this task. But she cannot ignore the question that claws at her heart: is this what happens when a Planeswalker loses her spark?

She asked the others what happened, but they could only describe the battle and her revival. No one could answer what had happened within her soul. Chandra suggested it was a side effect of her revival. Karn theorized it was damaged when the Phyrexians altered Nissa's mind and body.

But Teferi only listened and nodded. "It's not just her," he said.

Teferi's spark had faded sometime after the invasion. Koth's as well. Chandra is the only one among them who seemed to have kept hers—well, Chandra and Ajani.

The sylex had gone off in the Blind Eternities. Holes had been punched in the space between planes. Maybe this is some sort of natural response from the Multiverse; a great pruning, a taking back of that mysterious energy that once filled them. It doesn't matter the cause, though. No amount of theorizing offers Nissa comfort.

So, to comfort herself, she touches the heavy clod she lifted from the red earth, but the dirt does not reassure her like the familiar soil of her homeworld, Zendikar. She squeezes it between her fingers. She asks the plane how it feels, but it does not answer. Perhaps the damage extends beyond her spark, right to her animist powers.



Art by: Tuan Duong Chu

She hears something else, though. Not the deep, reverberating, voice of a plane that shakes her very soul, but something distant, lively, and human: music. The drums of Mirrodin and Zhalfir are celebrating their victory over the Phyrexian invaders. Since leaving the austere Joraga clan in her youth, music had become her favorite indulgence, but today it mocks her, does nothing but make her chest ache. She knows somewhere in the firelight, her friends are celebrating, too.

Just that morning, Karn and Koth had finished roofing the last house in a new village. Nissa saw relief—even happiness—in their eyes as they moved in alongside the Mirran refugees, for they were all united as survivors. They had invited her to join them.

“Are you sure I’m welcome?” she had asked.

“Of course.” Teferi put his hand on her shoulder and said, “You will have a new home here if you just try.”

So Nissa worked with the other survivors, ate with them, talked with them. But it wasn’t the same. Teferi had his country again. Koth and Karn were forging a new one. Nissa’s Zendikar was locked a Multiverse away.

But Zhalfir still never spoke to her. Neither did the five colored suns, more refugees from Mirrodin now at home in Zhalfir’s sky. She felt cut off, lost in the Multiverse with no voice calling her home. Maybe no plane would hear her ever again. They’d all lost their sparks, but only Nissa still wanted to planeswalk.

Even if her friends seemed to be moving on without her, she still cared about their happiness. So not wanting to bring down the spirits of their celebration, she excused herself. There’s at least one task she can do. She thrusts her shovel into the ground.

Again.

And again.

Finally, the hole is deep enough. Next to it, her Phyrexian carapace awaits burial. With the Phyrexian leader dead and her virulent vice grip on the glistening oil severed, the survivors were able to cleanse it with Halo, but the inert metal remained. Its copper skeleton is covered in mangled spikes, and those spikes are covered in the dried blood of her friends. She rubs one, and dark residue flakes off on her fingertips. She wonders whose blood it was. Maybe Koth? Maybe Wrenn? Maybe Chandra?

Chandra.

She had hurt Chandra, almost killed her.

Nissa and the other Planeswalkers had tried to fight the Phyrexian invaders, but they became the enemy's weapons. After the Phyrexian defeat, Nissa's friends said they forgave her. They cut her out of her metal prison and cleansed her mind of the Phyrexian influence. They cleansed the oil from her Stem Sword, but they could not cleanse the memories of what she had done.

The copper ribcage had been both trap and armor, a construct of crippling terror yet intoxicating power. It granted her the ability to unleash a call through the branches of the Invasion Tree and speak the glory of Phyrexia to every plane in the Multiverse.

And right now, Nissa is disgusted with herself because—despite her friends' sacrifices, despite Chandra's sacrifices—part of her misses hearing those planes.

She tries to kick the carapace into the grave she dug, but it is heavy, heavier than the shovel, heavier than the earth.

Someone behind her speaks, "You left the party early. Wanted to make sure you got something to eat."

Nissa would recognize that voice anywhere. She turns to face Chandra Nalaar, arm outstretched, offering her half a ripe mango. The smile on Chandra's face is warm, and Nissa knows she does not deserve it.

Nissa shakes her head, "I'm not hungry."

She watches Chandra's gaze drift to the shovel and then the emptied Phyrexian shell. "Need help?"

"I'm fine."

Chandra steps forward anyway. She hands the mango to Nissa and puts her palms against the copper hull. Heat radiates from her fingers, and the dirty metal starts to cave under her touch. Her hair ignites into a shock of flame.

Nissa can't help but think she's so beautiful like this.

The spikes bend down with the heat. The carapace softens into a formless hunk of slag. The smell of cooling metal fills the night air, and Nissa wants to tell Chandra to stop, to let her have just this one small success.

But instead, she still tells Chandra, "Thanks."

"No problem!" Chandra winks, and with one swift kick, punts the crumpled skeleton into the hole. Without hesitation, she gestures for Nissa's shovel. "The sooner we fill this hole, the sooner you can get back to having fun!"

Instead, Nissa hands Chandra the uneaten mango. "I'll celebrate when I'm done."

Chandra drops the mango to grab Nissa's wrist with both hands. Her palms are so warm. "Just do it later, then! C'mon!"

Nissa knows Chandra's just trying to make her feel better by focusing on their victory, but it's not working. She slides gently out from Chandra's grasp. "I'll be quick. Promise."

But Chandra does not leave. She paces around, using her foot to nudge dirt into the grave when she thinks Nissa isn't looking. There's something she's not saying.

So Nissa asks, "Is there a reason I have to go right now?"

Chandra gnaws her lip before lowering her head and softly admitting, "Because if you're too late, I might not be there."

As Chandra's words sink in, Nissa's memory drifts back to the day she awoke in Zhalfir. The first thing she felt was Chandra's warm hand gripping her own, and the first thing she saw was Chandra's broad smile. Her limbs were weighed down by dead copper metal, but her thoughts were hers. Chandra's smile was hers.

I'm right here. Chandra had said. *I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere.*

Nissa wants to stay something, to remind Chandra of her own words. But before she can protest, Chandra's voice spills out to fill the quiet she can't stand. "Tomorrow, I'm leaving to find Ajani."

Nissa opens her mouth to reply, but she doesn't know how to respond to a broken promise. Her reticence only troubles Chandra further.

"It's only for a bit! Only until I find him. I'm one of the few people who can still planeswalk, right? If I can't bring him back, who can? And I know you'll be right here, waiting for me—"

But Nissa does not want to wait here. She doesn't get to choose, because she's not a Planeswalker.

Nissa barely hears herself when she whispers, "But you kissed me."

You finally kissed me.

Chandra shifts from foot to foot. "I mean, yeah, but I still gotta go—"

The rest of Chandra's words mean nothing to Nissa. How could Chandra love so many people so freely? Yet leave her so easily? Does she lack more than just a spark? She has to know.

Nissa steels her voice. "Then be clear—exactly what kind of love do you have for me?"

Nissa watches anxiety build inside Chandra, made of words she doesn't know how to say, turning into frantic hand gestures that start, stop, and start again as if her fingers could shape her jumbled thoughts into sentences. What comes out is, "I I " Chandra's hands drop to her sides. "Like, I knew I had to save you."

"You're a hero, Chandra, a Planeswalker. You'd save anyone." Nissa thrusts her shovel into the ground. "Am I no different than anyone else?"

"No, that's not it! It's it's it's hard to explain—it's just so big, like, I can't describe it. Isn't that enough? Can't you just believe me when I say you mean everything to me? Everything!"

Nissa frowns. Because what Chandra is saying doesn't match what Chandra is doing. Nissa thought Chandra would know better. That the kind of love Nissa needs is one that won't leave her. Or has she once again been drawn into Chandra's inextricable orbit only to be trapped in a one-sided love? Like her own personal, Immortal Sun.

"Please," Chandra begs. "Can't you at least tell me if something's wrong?"

Nissa looks down at the charred husk of her metal bones. To Nissa, her pain is so obvious, but she doesn't have the strength left to describe it, let alone heal it. She couldn't tell Teferi, Karn, or Koth about it, and she still can't even tell Chandra. Nissa shakes her head. "Go, then, find Ajani, and I'll just wait here."

Chandra cups her hand around Nissa's cheek and gently turns her head until their eyes meet. She bites her lips, and her voice is low with consolation. "I'll be back," she says, "Zhalfir's not a bad place, Nissa. I think you'd like it if you tried."

Nissa Revane is sick of trying. Turning to hide the tears welling in her eyes, she picks up her shovel. She does not watch Chandra planeswalk away, but Nissa can still smell the scent she leaves behind, like the last wisps of smoke from a fireplace.

Nissa wakes the next morning, and the first thing she feels is Chandra's absence. Instinctively, she reaches out to the soul of this unfamiliar plane for comfort, but Zhalfir is silent. Perhaps the land also hurts because it misses its home. The sting of a second abandonment pierces her heart, and she even wonders whether Ashaya, the elemental Worldsoul of her homeworld, would still recognize her call.

Nissa's nickname, Shaya, meant Worldwaker, not world breaker.

She lies on her bedroll, counting every inhale, every exhale. It's been a long time since she truly meditated. She used to practice every day before she joined the Gatewatch, before she met Chandra. She should try again.

But not here. Every voice, every sound, every vibration of life outside her tent reminds her how the distance has grown between her and her friends. Still, there's one who might understand.

Nissa takes her staff and climbs the forested hill that overlooks the village. Awkwardly, she lowers herself to the ground, sitting with her legs crossed beside the sprout that used to be Wrenn. She's growing fast, nurtured by the light of Zhalfir's five newly inherited suns.

Nissa had only spoken once to the dryad, and there's no point in speaking to the seedling. Nevertheless, she feels a unique kinship with the only other Planeswalker who bound herself to the Invasion Tree. Nissa saw so many ugly things from her time as a Phyrexian, but one beautiful moment stands clear in her mind. When Wrenn knit her fragile body into the sinew of the Invasion Tree, Nissa's bones were filled with haunting, beautiful music. It was more than a single treesong. It was a hymn sung by a chorus of planar voices, played on the strings of leylines.

Nissa tries to remember that song now. She closes her eyes and slows her breath. She listens to her heartbeat, willing it to calm with each inhale and exhale. She reaches into herself, to the roots of her soul. And she listens.

A song lies beyond the silence.

Its low tone rumbles deep in Nissa's chest, like her early days as an animist, before Ashaya. She turns her heart toward it, but she hears something else. A quiet, tinny, ringing coalesces behind her eyes.

Never mind that. She focuses on that song, the planar magic. But when she does, the ringing grows. She calls louder, and so does the noise. Her ears are itching, twitching, burning now.

Still, she tries again. Her heart pounds. Her soul screams out to the whispered song. But her cry is muffled by dozens of new, alien voices she recognizes and despises: the Eldrazi, Bolas, and finally, loudest, Phyrexia.

The ringing explodes into skull-shattering static. Vivid, lightning pain crackles in her muscles and up her spine. Colorful sparks explode in the dark of her vision.

She screams for real.

When Nissa opens her eyes, she's lying flat on her back in the shade of a nearby acacia, and the silent truth stares back at her: every being who touched her mind was now buried in her soul. She has spent so long connected to others that she has smothered her own connection to the Multiverse. Whether or not those bonds were made of her own volition, the planes have rejected her.

She rises unsteadily to her feet. As her vision sharpens, she sees a blue light hovering in the air, a glow pulsing to the beat of the leyline song. Its edges resemble ragged cloth, as if someone took a knife to the fabric of reality. Nissa reaches toward it and quickly pulls her hand back as a bolt of electricity jumps to her fingers.

With a thunderous boom, the light tears open.

The force throws Nissa to the ground. She scrambles to her knees just in time to dodge the massive creature that burst from the light. The beast is like nothing she has seen before, a predator larger than a bear with deadly claws that emit curling storm clouds. Golden fissures of lightning trace its muscular body, emitting sparks that threaten to ignite the dry grass. The ground cracks under its feet, and with a swing of its limbs, a nearby shrub goes flying. When it sees Nissa, it bellows with rage.

She can't let it near the village. Too many are still recovering from the wounds of war. They cannot handle a frenzied animal.

Nissa Revane may not be a Planeswalker, but she's the only person here right now.

She rolls across the ground. With one smooth motion, she grabs her staff and charges it with magic. Its tip lights green, and the desert grass bends to her will. It entwines with itself, becoming thick ropes to entangle the creature's legs. But on contact with its electric skin, the plant matter dries and crumbles to ash. Nissa summons roots, branches. The enraged beast tears through them all the same, leaving dust in its wake.

Still, she bought herself an opening to get back on her feet. With one deep breath, she tries to recall what it felt like to be a hero, to stop letting this creature play her like a game piece and become the hand that moves it.

She wraps her fingers around her staff, and its twisted wood comes to life. Green vines curl around her wrists as she draws the sword from its heart. She sends her magic down the blade, and its metal shines green. She steps nimbly forward, but the use of even a little magic has somehow winded her.

The beast lunges, but this time Nissa is ready. She vaults upward onto its back. When it rears, she has to dig her grip into its fur just to hold on. Burning heat pierces her glove, and she knows she won't have long.

She doesn't want to hurt the creature, but she needs to immobilize it. She drives her sword into one of the lightning cracks on its flank—not too far, just a prick for something so large. Green magic unwinds from the blade, solidifying into thick, spiked vines that pierce the creature's leg and wrap around its body. The beast bucks wildly before dropping to its damaged knee. The movement throws Nissa into the air, and she has barely enough time to tuck into a roll before hitting the ground.



Art by: John Tedrick

She rights herself and looks at the animal. Her weapon is still wedged in its side. She watches the vines connected to it burn away again. The creature shakes and rises, unscathed and even angrier. Its eyes meet hers as her sword falls out, useless, onto the ground.

Nissa presses her hands to the earth, calling to the leylines for help as she used to. The ground glows under her touch as she asks, pleads, begs, for an elemental to appear. The pebbles around her tremble, and hope rises in her chest.

Then they fall right back down.

Zhalfir cannot hear her.

The creature charges directly into her, catching her on its broad claws. With a shake of its massive arms, it tosses her forward and she lands yards away with a sickening crunch. Pain explodes through her entire body.

Through bleary vision, she lifts her chin and sees the beast readying to charge, claws extended to gore her and lightning crackling down its spine. Perhaps this creature is no ordinary animal. She thinks back to how it appeared when she tried to reach the leylines. Maybe this *is* an elemental she summoned, one sent by Zhalfir to avenge the wrongs she had committed in the name of Phyrexia.

She does not want to die. But she cannot deny her crimes deserve it.

She lets her head drop fully to the ground. After all, why fight the world when you know who will win?

The creature lunges forward, fangs bared. Nissa braces for the blow.

When suddenly, the beast stops.

It hangs suspended in time, gnarled claw ready to strike. Nissa feels strong, warm, hands lifting her out of danger, and Koth's voice tells her, "We've got you."

"Don't hurt it" Nissa tries to say, but she isn't sure anyone can hear her.

She sees Teferi, staff outstretched, his radiant, blue spell holding the beast in place. Karn moves toward the creature and wraps his massive metal arms around the creature's neck.

"I'm going to let go now," Teferi states.

Karn nods. "Ready."

Time resumes. The beast finishes its swing, but its claws strike only air where Nissa used to be. It wrestles against Karn, but its claws rake uselessly against steel. It gnashes its fangs, but Karn tightens his chokehold so it can't turn its neck.

Then the air grows hot with the smell of ozone, and white lightning bursts from the creature's skin. The explosion throws all four to the ground, and Nissa lifts her head just in time to see the creature barrel into the distance, storm clouds trailing behind it.

Koth is back on his feet, sliding his arm under Nissa to help her up. He returns her weapon, now back in its staff form. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Nissa struggles out of his grip. She takes the staff, using it to stand despite the pain throbbing down her entire body. "How did you find me?"

"Teferi was going to visit Wrenn when he saw a strange light at the top of the hill and gathered us to investigate. Luckily, she's all right, too," Koth says, gesturing toward the plant.

"It's one strange light, all right," she hears Teferi say. He stands in front of the place the beast emerged, where she had seen the hole in reality. Now, the gap is a massive portal, tall enough for any of them to walk through, even Karn.

"The creature," she explains. "I think it came out of there."

The portal calls to Nissa. Something on the other side hums with the energy of a leyline song. It's like a chorus of overlapping, chaotic, melodies from different planes, but through it all, she feels a familiar vibration. It's faint, but it sounds like Zendikar. Even if the plane cannot hear her, her heart instinctively fills with longing. But she needs more than instinct. She needs to understand. So she dares to ask, "Where do you think it leads?"

She wants it to lead her home.

"Hard to say," Teferi muses. "But that beast certainly wasn't from Zhalfir."

Desire grips Nissa's chest even harder. "Could it have traveled from another plane?"

Karn appeared to shrug, an awkward gesture with his massive shoulders. "It's possible. Realmbreaker burrowed holes through the fabric of reality. The sylex exploded in the Blind Eternities. Who knows what that might have changed."

Nissa's throat tightens as she speaks. "Do you think that one of us should go through?"

Silence passes over the group, and Nissa begins to worry. They could merely be thinking, or there could be something they aren't telling her.

Finally, Karn shakes his head. "The risks there are incalculable. If it indeed led to the Blind Eternities—without a spark, you could be instantly destroyed."

"But that creature wasn't destroyed!" Nissa shakes her head. Every frail strand of hope that she has built frays and snaps. Again, this is what it means to not be a Planeswalker.

Teferi places a reassuring hand on Nissa's shoulder. "Or it's possible that creature is a Planeswalker. But that's only one of an infinite number of possibilities. We don't know where this portal leads, so we can't say for sure what will happen. But to step through well, that would simply be a leap of faith."

A leap of faith.

Nissa is not the type of person who takes leaps of faith. Chandra, though. Chandra is a person who could do it. Without even thinking.

Koth speaks, interrupting their analysis. "I feel the need to remind everyone that the creature is still out there, and it's lost and angry. Our people have suffered greatly, and we have a duty to protect our new home from further risk." He nods at Nissa. "Let's corral this creature, and then we can talk about exploring."

The group agrees, and as much as Nissa loathes to abandon the portal, she knows Koth is right. As much as the war took from her, others have lost even more. They need to help first.

Teferi, Koth, and Karn have already begun to walk down the hill. Nissa follows as quickly as her tired legs and aching ribs can, but before joining them, she takes one last look at the glowing portal behind her.

Nissa still hurts. She lies on the bedroll in her tent, reaching for sleep that will not come. The Civic healer had looked exhausted, but she still took the time to look Nissa over. Nothing seemed broken. Nothing physical, anyway. Even so, she still made Nissa stay behind when Teferi, Karn, and Koth went to find the lightning beast. In some ways, Nissa is glad for the rest because it means she can be alone.

She hears muffled voices outside, going about their daily tasks, gossiping about people she has never met. She rolls over and attempts to sleep again. Times like these make her wish elven hearing wasn't so sensitive.

But then, the voices quicken, grow louder, and her calm is shattered by a scream. Followed by the sound of thunder.

Electricity heats the air, making her hair stand on end. Nissa has no doubt: the creature from the portal is here. Dread sinks into her stomach. What if it's looking for her? What if it followed her here to complete its mission?

Her actions have left the village unguarded and in danger. She staggers upright, grabbing her staff as she exits the tent.

Still not a Planeswalker, she thinks. Once again, just the only person around.

The creature is busy ransacking the mess tent. The ground is littered with torn canvas and spilled pots of stew. Even the largest wooden tables have been cracked in half, reduced to splinters. A brave team of Zhalfirin and Mirran warriors have surrounded it, but she can see their weapons are still in desperate need of repair from the fight with the Phyrexians. She needs to help them lead it away from the village.

With the help of her staff, she casts her magic forward. Thick roots emerge from the ground. They loop around the beast's neck and limbs, trying to tie it down or at least pull it in another direction. The effort causes Nissa's legs to shake, but she wills herself to stay standing.

She won't have much time until it burns the restraints away, but she takes advantage of its confusion. There! She runs toward a thick baobab tree just outside the village.

"Over here," she growls, unleashing another barrage of angry vines.

The creature takes the bait. It turns away from the villagers' swords and spears, mere nuisances compared to this prickly, new attacker. It swings at the plants, claws cutting them down like a scythe. A few feet away, Nissa raises another onslaught. The beast lunges forward again to chase its quarry. Slowly, vine by vine, swing by swing, Nissa leads the creature out of the village.

She breathes a sigh of relief to see the wounded inhabitants hurrying to safety. She's done one good thing at least. But the effort has exhausted her. The green light in her staff fizzles. She collapses to her knees.

And the creature has only one target now: Nissa.

It looms above her, claws ready to strike her down.

It's so damn big up close. Nissa raises her staff in defense and braces for impact.

Again, it doesn't come.

A lone, burning, figure stands in the way. Chandra.

Internally, Nissa curses the knack for Planeswalkers to show up exactly where there's trouble. Chandra has thrown up a barrier of fire between them and the creature. The beast staggers back and forth, trying to reach the prey it cornered just a second ago.

Now, she's hurling fireball after fireball at the animal, which is growing more and more agitated. It shakes, and static sparks off its fur. She instructs Nissa, "I'll take it from here! Head back to the village!"

But Nissa was the one who summoned the creature. It followed her here, not Chandra. This is Nissa's fight, and Chandra can't even let her have that. Her staff blazes with green light. Hundreds of thorny vines thrust from the ground. One almost hits Chandra in the face.

"Hey! Watch it!" the pyromancer shouts.

The vines whip at the beast. It roars against each stinging strike. One of them catches a fireball and ignites. The beast whines slightly, moving away from the flaming lash. Nissa watches Chandra crank up the heat. She grits her teeth as she watches every vine she conjured disintegrate in a blast of flame. It was as if she hadn't done anything at all. Sweat forms on her brow as she searches the landscape for her next move.

Her eyes pass over the baobab. The baobab! Their thick trunks resist fire, and the massive tree would be a staunch ally if she could animate it. She reaches her magic toward it, coaxes each branch to life. But she's not summoning an elemental that walks of its own accord, she must concentrate with all her effort, will it to move, puppet every action. Her breathing is labored. Her trembling palms sweat under her gloves.

Stem by stem, root by root, she forces it out of the ground. She gives it one final push, launching it at the beast. It hits the creature in the side, bowling it over into the grass. Tired as she is, Nissa still relishes the fleeting feeling of victory.

Because Chandra takes this as her cue. "Thanks!" she grins. She burns even hotter. Too hot. She encloses the beast and the tree in a ring of flames as tall as an elephant.

Nissa smells smoke, and she realizes the dry grass is starting to kindle. "Chandra, stop!"

The pyromancer doesn't seem to hear her, or doesn't seem to care. She tightens her circle, closer to the creature. It paces the edge, panicking as the flames close inward. It rears up, claws and teeth thrashing, and smashes the baobab to pieces. The water inside the tree evaporates immediately on contact with Chandra's superheated flame, turning into white steam.

Neither Nissa nor Chandra could have predicted the creature's next move. It inhales. With one deep breath, the storm beast sucks the hot steam from the sky. The added moisture makes it double in size. More than double. Now colossal, it bats away the shards of broken tree like playthings. The burning debris sets the grass ablaze wherever it lands.

It towers over the women.

They run, but every step the creature takes equals twenty of theirs. Soon, they find themselves directly under its massive form. It readies an attack.

"Watch out!" Chandra pushes Nissa out of the way of its snapping jaws, sending them both tumbling into the hole left by the uprooted baobab.

When the dizziness of the fall fades, Nissa looks up. The beast is scratching, gnashing at the opening, but the gap is too narrow for his huge form. They're safe, but for how long?

"Aaaaaaaaarrgh!" Chandra's lit hair flares with frustration. She points her hands up toward the creature, another blast charging in her open palm.

The beast has them trapped. The entire savannah is going to burn. "Stop!" Frustration and loneliness fill Nissa's lungs, emerging in a howl. "Just let me save myself for once!"

The light fizzles in Chandra's hands. "What?"

Nissa's heart is trembling, but this time, not from exhaustion. She uses all the energy she has left to turn her thoughts, her regrets, her worries, into words. "You made me a promise, Chandra, and you still left. Do you think," she says, voice cracking, "that because I no longer have a spark, that I'm happy to see you running around the Multiverse like nothing has changed? That I'm happy just waiting for you to come back?"

The flames in Chandra's hair extinguish themselves, returning to warm, natural red.

Nissa chokes as she speaks. "If that's how it's going to be, you don't need to return. I'll take care of myself."

Chandra pauses, thinking about what to say, and lowers her head. Her voice is soft when she answers, "No. I know you. Well, *knew* you. I guess things have changed. And they're still changing." She raises her warm eyes to meet Nissa's. "But I still want to know you."

Chandra takes Nissa's hands in hers, and Nissa's heart leaps to her throat.

"Nissa, I'm so, so, so, so sorry. Spark or not, you're an incredible fighter and even better person, and I'm so sorry to have ignored that."

But Nissa's soul still aches. She isn't ready to forgive just yet.

At that moment, fire and dirt begin to rain down on their heads. Unable to reach them, the lightning beast has decided to smother them instead. "Perhaps we can stop it if we work together," Nissa says.

Chandra nods. "All right, what's the plan?"

Warmth swells in Nissa's chest to finally be asked, but without her strongest magic, she can only respond, "I don't know."

"Is there anything we've done before?"

Nissa thinks back. Every time before, the elemental magic had come so effortlessly. She now knows she was taking it for granted. She bats away a hail of dirt from above.

“There’s gotta be something,” Chandra urges. “What about when we channeled my pyromancy through Zendikar’s leylines? If it beat an Eldrazi, it’ll work here, right?”

“But “ Nissa’s admission comes as a whisper, “I I I can’t reach any leylines anymore.”

“What?”

Nissa shakes her head, coughing from the dust cloud forming around them. “They won’t listen to me. I tried. Many times. But when I call out to them, it’s like my voice isn’t my own. Like it belongs to Phyrexia instead, like everything I’ve ever connected to is drowning me out.”

For once, Chandra pauses. “You know,” she concludes. “You have good connections, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true—you did bad things while they had you. But everyone you’ve connected with over the years with the Gatewatch, we’re just happy you’re still here. With us.” Chandra sets fire to a chunk of moist dirt that was about to fall on Nissa, turning it into a soft rain of ash. “*With me*.”

For the first time since she awoke in Zhalfir, Nissa smiles. Chandra, sweet Chandra, even if she doesn’t realize it, has always understood and explained emotions better than Nissa ever could.

Chandra continues, “Your connections aren’t drowning your voice, Nissa. They’re changing it into something new, maybe something even more powerful. Infinite voices, infinite possibilities, right?”

Infinite possibilities. Nissa offers her hand to Chandra. “All right, let’s try.”

Gripping Chandra’s fingers in hers, Nissa closes her eyes. She retreats inward and listens for her inner voice. It’s hard, much harder than before, but Chandra is dutifully helping her concentrate, blasting the falling rock away before it can reach her.

Nissa is greeted by ringing deep in her ears, but she refuses to be deterred. With her connections in mind, she picks the static apart into unique melodies, the individual songs she picked up from all around the Multiverse. She arranges them, harmonizes them, and this time, when she calls to Zhalfir, her voice is amplified in chorus. She offers an apology.

The plane answers. It too was cut off from everything it knew, from the connections it had made. It, too, was scarred by Phyrexia and is growing into something new. It forgives her, and Nissa can finally forgive herself.



Art by: Wisnu Tan

Magic floods her flesh, her blood, her bone. She hears Chandra laugh, delighted by their success.

Nissa uses the elemental power to reach out to the creature. It's an elemental, but one made of unknown power which neither Nissa nor Zhalfir recognize. But Nissa can sense its disorientation and confusion, trapped in an earthly form by Zhalfir's unfamiliar magic and trying desperately to return to the pure energy that created it. Kind of like Nissa. The answer dawns on her.

"Steam," Nissa announces.

"Huh?"

"It's a storm elemental, a creature made of magic. But it's from another plane, so it's struggling to tap into Zhalfir's power. I think we can give it the energy it needs if we heat it up."

Chandra winks. "Heat? Now that I can do."

Nissa lets Zhalfir in and directs its power into Chandra. Her vision becomes a blinding, shimmering green. But even if she cannot see, she can feel Chandra's hand in hers. It grows warm, warmer, until it is unbearably hot, but she does not let go.

Fire magic, like a miniature sun, coalesces in Chandra's free hand, so bright that Nissa can see it through the green. With their connection made whole, Nissa sees what Chandra sees, feels what Chandra feels. Chandra aims upward, and a solid column of fire catches the lightning creature in the face. Together, they watch the beast inhale.

Chandra pours heat and energy into the creature. Its molecules and magic begin to vibrate faster and faster. Its fur melts into vapor. The lightning seams on its body crack and expand, and the beast breaks into pieces that convulse so furiously they liquify and then evaporate. Jets of steam escape its fading form and rise into the air, coalescing into a rumbling thunderhead overhead. Nissa wants to believe the cloud is grateful with laughter.

She laughs. And when the green light fades from Nissa's eyes, she sees Chandra, hair ablaze and laughing, too.

Rain falls in the desert.

One by one, fat droplets from the sky coalesce together into a torrent. A torrent becomes a flood. Water fills the crevasse they are trapped in, buoying them up. Soon, they are floating together, watching the cloud move away to reveal a clear, night sky. Chandra, hair still on fire, looks every bit like a lantern on the water.

She watches Nissa, refusing to take her warm eyes off the elf for one second. “Love comes in a lot of forms. I loved Gideon. I loved Jaya. You asked me what kind of love I had for you. I didn’t know how to say it.”

Nissa’s heart beats faster. “Then what would you say now?”

Instinctively, Chandra tries to move her hand while she talks, creating awkward splashes around her. “It’s still hard to describe. When I saw you there in New Phyrexia, I realized I wanted to save you more than I wanted to save the world. My love for you It’s like when you left the Gatewatch, came back to the Gatewatch—it’s not perfect all the time, but I want to do my best.”

“I don’t understand. How can love change?” To Nissa, it seemed like such a straightforward emotion, with the same primal, immutable quality as magic.

Chandra looks away to hide her face, but Nissa can tell her cheeks are as hot as her flame. “Sometimes, you convince yourself it’s better to do what’s easy, assumed, natural because it’s easier than facing the unknown. Under stress you become who people expect. Throw that giant fireball instead of thinking first, you know? But you saw past that. Always. You made me better.”

Emboldened by Chandra’s vulnerability, Nissa musters her own honesty. “But you hurt me. I don’t want to be left alone again.”

“And I’m sorry. More sorry about that than anything I’ve ever done in my entire stupid life.” Chandra turns to face her again, eyes bright with a new promise. “When I went to find Ajani, I realized he doesn’t want to be found. He’ll come back when he’s ready. I’m still frustrated, of course, but I have to give him time and space. That’s when I realized I can’t just burn through any relationship I care about. Love leaves room for the other person to be who they are. I have to make room for you, too. I want to.”

“Like fire needs oxygen “ Nissa asks her final question. “You have room for someone who can’t planeswalk?”

“Yes. I’ll make it. I will falter, I will be tempted, but I will make it. Fire’s going to burn, no matter what you do, but you can shape it if you try. And I want to try. For you.”

Nissa thinks for a moment. Finally, she nods. “I can handle that.”

She leans over and places her hand on Chandra’s neck, pulling the pyromancer toward her. Their eyes meet one last time before closing, and Nissa pulls Chandra into a kiss.

The sudden storm had caused a flash flood that stranded Teferi, Karn, and Koth in a cave a few miles outside the town. They were unable to return until the next morning after the waters receded. Nissa, Chandra, and the villagers welcome them back with blankets, warm stew, and smiles. Later that night, the friends celebrate the women’s clever victory. This time, Nissa joins in. She and Chandra split the sweetest mango she’d ever tasted.

When the last bonfire dies down, Nissa takes Chandra’s hand in hers and leads her up the hill overlooking the village. She waves at Wrenn before stopping in front of the portal.

“Here it is,” she gestures, “the place where the creature came from.”

Together, they gaze into the swirling blue light. Chandra asks, “Where’s it go?”

“I don’t know,” Nissa admits. “Neither did Teferi, Koth, or Karn, for that matter. But when I listen, really listen, I think I can still hear Zendikar out there, strange and distorted, but possibly still out there. I could just be imagining it completely, but I think I would risk that unknown to see home again.”

Chandra nods firmly. “And I’ll be walking right alongside you.”

Every Planeswalker can go anywhere they want, but Nissa recognizes Chandra’s need to roam runs deeper than that. It’s part of who she is, and part of what Nissa loves. So Nissa offers, “Maybe, after that, I wouldn’t mind seeing more. As long as it’s with you.”

Chandra breaks into a wide smile. “Let me be your torch, then. First stop: find your way home! Hey, we can even check in on that little forest you started a while ago.”

They move toward the portal and each place one foot on the threshold. Nissa wavers and turns to Chandra. Just in case, she asks, “Are you sure you want to commit to a leap of faith?”

“Together? You bet.”

Hand in hand, Chandra and Nissa step through the portal into just one of infinite possibilities.



Art by: Livia Prima