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# Episode 5: Breaking Point

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“Violence isn’t always the answer, but when it is, you need to act decisively.” He had told her that once.

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Silence made for a terrible traveling companion.

Chandra had never liked it to begin with. To her, silence always meant sitting on your hands. It was the space between what you wanted to say and what you couldn’t—the pressure building in your chest, the bomb about to burst. Silence meant that pain was coming, sooner or later.

Ajani was more content with it. He’d known it well during his travels. Though it had been years since he had counted himself a leonin without friends, there had been many nights he’d found himself alone. Perhaps too many. Buried friends, severed bonds, blood on his hands. Silence meant absence. It meant thoughts had space to resonate.

And these days? These days, Ajani wasn’t sure he liked having that space.

Two Planeswalkers trudged through the tunnels below Titan’s Grave. Neither of them said a word.

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Chandra thought about it.

She didn’t quite *plan* what she would say; planning had never really been her thing. But she did run through the conversation in her head. When she could, at least. Often the blaring headache got in the way, or the memories, or the things that weren’t memories but felt like them.

*You always treat me like a child. I’m impulsive, but I’m not dumb.*

One step.

*You never trust me. Haven’t I proved myself enough to you?*

Another.

*I’ve been teaching almost as long as you have.*

A third step. No longer was she walking through subterranean caverns on Arcavios—no, now she was somewhere else. A place she hadn’t seen and did not know, where the energy in the air was so thick it threatened to stop up her throat. She was afraid. She was thrilled. She lived in that lightning strike moment before death and before birth.

*Please, just trust me on this. Trust me when I say that it’s bad.*

The fourth step found her back in the caverns, but her foot had also found a root. Just as she was getting oriented with consciousness again, she started to tumble forward.

Ajani caught her by the hood of her cloak. Once more she felt it welling up, the words she wanted to say. *Thank you, but you didn't have to do that.*

But silence stopped her throat again, and the words never managed to leave her.

Ajani set her aright. He went to pat her on the shoulder and, mid-gesture, pulled back his hand. The cloud across his features was easy enough to read.

Chandra dusted herself off. Up ahead there were three paths: one a tunnel of briars and thorns to the right; one through a massive bone, with marrow-sludge to slow them; one that resembled nothing so much as a staircase of oyster mushrooms spiraling down into the dark.

Which to take?

She had never been one to stand and debate. Her gut told her that they weren't going to get anywhere by staying at ground level. If she were the giant archaic, she'd want to hide from whatever had hurt her.

*Even if I was the one that hurt it.*

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Ajani thought about it.

It was his place to think about it. To consider it. Who was he as a teacher if he could not bring himself to mentor Chandra here? A difficult conversation was not any less worthy for being difficult. In fact, wasn't it all the more important to guide her when she was clearly struggling?

But he had tried that earlier. It hadn't worked.

Where did that leave the two of them? Chandra wanted nothing more than to be seen as an equal, yet he could not bring himself to respect her decisions here. How could he treat someone who refused to listen to him, refused to speak with him, as an equal?

Chandra's headaches could mean anything. Her visions could mean anything. The future was always open to interpretation. Many a hero had fallen thanks to misunderstanding a loosely worded prophecy. And besides, how could they be certain this wasn't someone else's work? It could be Ashiok planting these images in her head. Feasting on her fear.

How could they be sure?

He wanted so badly to be sure. The tree an axe fells in an instant takes a hundred years to return to prominence. A warrior has to be sure. When he thought of the weight of yet another war, yet another battle, yet another burst of violence, his shoulders sagged and his back ached.

Into the dark they descended. Chandra led the way, and he was content enough to follow. The flames from her hair lit their path.

Shadows played upon her features. Pia. Jaya.

He thought of telling her. Maybe she would have liked that, to know the features she shared with them. But maybe she already did.

In truth, he had never needed that light to find the way. Leonin eyes were more than capable of seeing through the dark of caves like this. He'd slept and eaten and survived in caves long enough to know that.

But he was grateful for the warmth and for the shadows of the past, so he said nothing.

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They heard the archaic before they saw it. A wail wavered through the fertile silence of Titan's Grave. In its wake came the sharp intake of breath, then a familiar voice: "Oh, please, you've seen the birth and death of an entire civilization. A little first aid can't hurt that bad."

Chandra's chest went tight. Already she could feel the flames springing to life around her, the haze of heat, the dizzying potential energy waiting to become real.

So close.

Yes, she could hear another wail, then something like a whack.

"They're going to make for an interesting scar. The other archaics won't have anything like it. As if you towering over them wasn't enough already. Come on, almost done now."

She took another step forward. Her foot landed on ground that felt ... brighter, somehow. Springy and alive. At the base of the steps stretched a tunnel. She didn't need the fire to see what lay at the end of it. Arcavios provided all the light she needed.

A spear of luminous silver light pierced the great empty eye of the titan. Here, within the sun-bleached cranium of the forgotten giant, they could once more glimpse the moon. So, too, could the giant archaic. It lay huddled in a heap against a mossy wall of bone. Its bubbling wounds carved deep shadows from the light. Jadzi kneeled in its palm, still, working a complex healing spell across its flesh. The being's chest rose and fell with shaky breath; its fingers twitched this way and that.



Oracle's Restoration | Art by: Elliot Lang

Across from Jadzi and the archaic was a snarl. Or something that looked an awful lot like a snarl. But there were no such things as snarls in Titan's Grave—all of Chandra's students had been clear about that. Whatever this swirl of unstable energy was, it couldn't be anything good. The tendrils of magic coming off of it frayed at the edges or went jagged. There were some that flickered like Kamigawan lights and others that shone with something like Theran essences. Like a loom being unwoven and rewoven, there was something of creation and destruction alike to it.

Chandra stopped. In the quiet she watched, the flames burning in her hand, waiting to be unleashed.

It would be so easy. A lance of flame to pierce the peace they'd found here. The archaic was too wounded to defend itself, and Jadzi was too distracted. Ajani could try to stop her, of course, but it wouldn't matter. She knew she could overwhelm him now.

It would be so easy. So why did she hesitate?

"Ah, yes. Yes, I know. There's a girl who thinks she can sneak up on us," said Jadzi. "She's going to have to try a little harder. And take into account that people on fire cast very noticeable shadows."

Chandra's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. For once in her life, she had no idea what to say.

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"I keep telling her that, but it's difficult to make someone listen," answered Ajani. The words came to him more naturally than even his own feelings on the matter. Part of him wondered how it was that Jadzi could look after something that had, hours ago, abducted her. Part of him wondered whether he would do the same. And there was a small part of him, one that he did not like, that wondered whether it was worth it at all.

Had it been worth it for Chandra? All that time she'd spent teaching the Shattered, had it been worth it to her then?

Talking came to him more easily than the answers to those questions.

The old oracle sat up and looked over her shoulder. "That's the trouble with students, isn't it? Time. You spend all that time convincing them to listen to you, then they do for a few years and are back to brushing off everything you say."

"It's not like that," said Chandra.

Jadzi gave the archaic a pat. Her spell sank into its flesh. From his vantage, Ajani could see it at work. Admirable stuff. There were some intricacies in the shape of it that he'd never seen in all his years. "Chandra Nalaar, hero of the Multiverse. Isn't that right? I've met a few of your students. They speak very highly of you. But they didn't always, did they?"

Ajani stepped forward. He turned as he did, gesturing for Chandra to follow. He wasn't sure if she would. But she did, in her own time, a silent bluster that told him she knew exactly what Jadzi meant.

"You're unharmed, then?" he asked her. "Lluwen and the others feared the worst."

Jadzi scoffed. "Takes way more than that to wear me down. My friend here wanted their own private office hours. They're not the best with forms. We make do."

How could she be so casual about all this? She'd been plucked from her studies and hauled halfway across Titan's Grave—nearly roasted alive by Chandra's flames—and she wasn't any grumpier than usual.

Why wasn't she angrier?

"What did it want to talk with you about?" said Chandra. The desperation in her voice worried him.

"I'm sure Jadzi would prefer a moment to catch her breath—" started Ajani.

"Actually, I'm with her on this. Better to get it all out in the open," Jadzi cut in. She gestured to a small pool of water. "Think that's potable if either of you are thirsty. Might ramble a little."

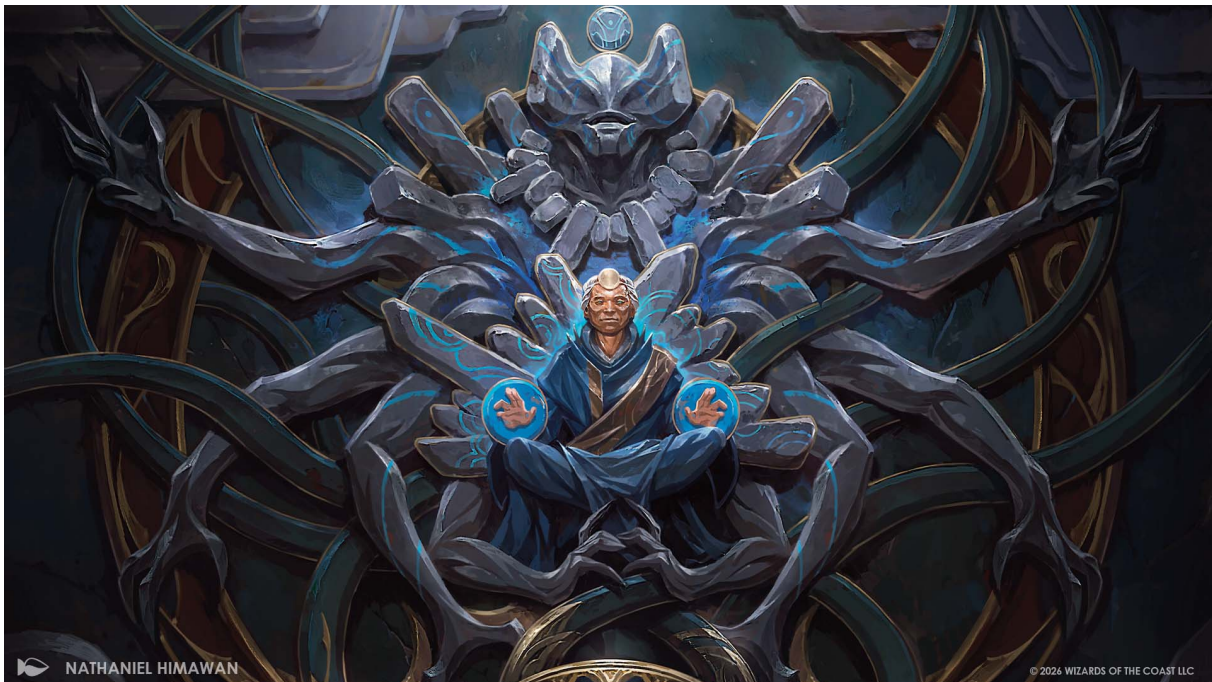
The two Planeswalkers exchanged a look. They both kneeled by the water. Before Ajani could take a sip, Chandra touched her fingertip to the surface. A flash of steam and bubbles soon followed. Over in an instant.

“I like to be sure,” Chandra mumbled.

He scooped the water into his palm. “Thank you,” he said. No one was ever particularly happy to drink hot water with clumps of plants in it, but the kindness made it easier to swallow.

Jadzi rolled her eyes. With a stretch she began to pace the chamber, talking as she did, her cadence slow and deliberate.

“Our new friend here is an archaic. Most people from Arcavios know what those are inherently, but since you’re visitors, and I don’t recall seeing either of you in Professor Vess’s offices, I’ll elaborate. Archaics are oracles, like I am. When we die, we don’t get to visit any of the places theorized by other worlds or religions; we’re flung back in time to relive all of history. Something about the process transforms us into those things. Got that to look forward to.”



Art by: Nathaniel Himawan

The giant archaic rumbled.

“I’ve dealt with plenty of them before. We have our rapports and understandings. I could tell you all sorts of details about individual archaics if I wanted, along with my theories about which ones are which oracles. Believe me, I’ve got some of them nailed down. And they owe me money.”

“But that’s not what you’re here to tell us,” said Chandra.

“You like interrupting, don’t you? At least we’re in agreement. No, it’s not what’s important—it’s just a detail I needed you to know. What’s important is that *this* archaic is the last. Someday it will be the last of *my* kind, the last oracle. So, you can imagine my surprise when I saw them in distress.”

Ajani didn’t like where this was going.

“To be honest, the trouble with our archaics is the whole reason I’ve come to Titan’s Grave. Otherwise, the place gets on my nerves. All these gift shops and maintained paths get in the way of real exploration. Not that I dislike seeing a town spring up. I’m sure they all do very well for themselves. But you have to be careful about making changes like those. You have to be purposeful. Otherwise, they ripple out, and next thing you know ...”

She sighed.

“As I was saying. It isn’t the best way our friend here could have gotten my attention, but it worked, and I’ve been through worse. What they had to say was important enough to excuse the rudeness.”

Ajani narrowed his brows. There was a sense of dread between his shoulders, like the flat of a spear, its tip resting against the rise of his vertebra. “What did they have to say?”

Jadzi looked straight at him. She held his gaze for twenty long breaths. Despite her small stature and timeworn frame, she was every bit as formidable, every bit as unyielding, as any of the dragons he’d faced. “Something is threatening the future of Arcavios itself.”

Chandra swore. She pointed to Jadzi as she stepped toward Ajani, her eyes ablaze. “It’s Jace! I’m telling you, it’s Jace.”

He had to admit there were few things that came to mind that could wreak that kind of havoc. But ... they had to be sure of what they were talking about, didn’t they?

“It’s possible,” he said to Chandra. He couldn’t bear the thought of upsetting her further—or of ruining the truce they seemed to have come to here. “Oracle, do you have any idea how it’s happening?”

She shook her head. “If I did, I would have already told you. Skipped all this about the where and why. One mark of a good educator is knowing when to give the straightforward answer.”

Next to them, the archaic whimpered. Then something strange happened: a ripple ran over it, as if it was an illusion on the brink of being dispersed. Yet Ajani was sure that he wasn’t seeing an illusion, or at least, not one Jadzi could be maintaining. It would be too much effort to account for the way the moss bent against its back, the way the moonlight reflected off its skin.

“You can see the results of the meddling there, though. They’ve been flickering in and out of existence. If Arcavios has no future, then it has no archaics, no oracles. We stop existing the way we should. It’d be like drawing away all the oxygen from a fire. Or from water, for that matter. Things ... fall apart.”

She looked down, looked at the archaic. The pain on her face. She really did care for that creature, didn’t she? “Imagine that you’re walking along an impossible path—one that folds back in on itself and continues for as far as the eye can see. You know the beginning of the path; you know the end of it. You have walked it all of your days and will walk it for many more. But one day, you step forward, and the path changes before your foot even hits the ground. Paved roads turn to sand. Is it the same path?”

Chandra pinched her nose. “I thought you said you had to get to the point.”

“This is the point,” said Jadzi. “These archaics are walking along that path, but instead of rocks and sand, we’re talking existence and cold, empty nothingness. They exist and they do not. They cannot predict when it will happen, or how, or what will happen to them while they’re gone. There’s no guarantee that they’re even going to come back. Imagine careening down those racetracks of yours and losing minutes in between. What if you hit someone? What if you blinked and woke up in the wreckage? How could you live?”

A quietness fell over the clearing. Jadzi had, as she spoke, gotten closer to Chandra and was staring at her with the same intensity she’d given the giant archaic.

Chandra frowned. “I don’t think I could. And that’s why we should stop this before it gets any worse.”

“Your version of stopping things always involves lighting them on fire, doesn’t it?” said Jadzi. She shook her head, but not with any sort of mean spirit. It was the shake of someone who had, perhaps,

already considered such a thing. “Snuffing out an archaic is treating the symptom, not the disease. We need to find another way.”

“But what if the archaic *is* his plan?” Chandra said. Then, far more quietly, “I’m begging you. Just stand aside.”

Ajani looked between the two women to the archaic. What to do? Chandra was so focused on her solution. She couldn’t see the grace Jadzi was extending her. How many people would have afforded Chandra the same opportunity?

Jadzi held Chandra’s gaze a few moments more. “Are you willing to throw away the future of this plane? Are you that certain?”

A good educator really did know how to get to the point. Chandra grew quiet.

Jadzi nodded. “Don’t start your little fires until you know what’s going to burn.” She began to pace again. “There are so many unknowns we still have to contend with. What’s causing this, yes, and why? But also *how*. How it’s being done, how we might undo it. The future of a plane is a complicated thing. You say that your friend is somehow behind this—”

“He’s not my friend anymore,” Chandra cut in.

“After everything we’ve been through together? He’s done some wrong, and I won’t defend that. But we can’t turn our backs on him,” said Ajani, weary. The moment the words left him he knew he’d made a mistake.

“I get to decide who my friends are, Ajani,” Chandra said. “You don’t.” She rubbed at her temple as another wave of migraine pain came over her. “I’m sorry, Oracle. Go on.”

Jadzi looked between them. It seemed as if she might say something, but the words were lost in another wail from the archaic. Ajani’s chest ached; the sound was so high and keening, it made his teeth feel as if they would jump out of their sockets. There was an awful *lurch* rippling through the cave. A *wrongness*. For a moment he wondered what he was doing here with—

—a known agitator on Avishkar—

—no, a Consulate enforcer—

—a vengeful rage that would never be quenched—

—and then it was over, and he was standing in the empty skull again, the light of the snarl-that-was-not-a-snarl playing upon his fur. The dizziness lingered. He leaned on his staff and took a steadying breath. When he glanced at his companions he found them in similar states of disarray—Jadzi wobbling on her feet, Chandra dabbing away at a bit of blood coming from her nose.

He reached out to steady Jadzi. “That was ... How often has that been happening?”

“When it first brought me here, every few hours. But it’s getting more frequent,” she said. Her eyes landed on the creature, its many hands alongside its great head, writhing this way and that. “Every time it happens, something about our future changes. Every time. And it’s getting worse.”

“Do we know what that thing is?” asked Chandra. She walked to the edge of the swirl of magical energy. Ajani watched as she held up her hands, palms out, as if she was warming them on the edge of the fire.

He wanted to pull her back. He wanted to tell her that it was a foolish thing to place herself in danger like that. They didn’t know what was going on well enough to do anything at all about it.

But ... he had to admit she was powerful enough to manage. Wasn't she?

"Some kind of nexus, I think," said Jadzi. "Haven't worked out the details yet, but whatever is going on, this is at the core of it."

"Has it been growing?" asked Ajani. He walked next to Chandra. The wild energy before him was ... From afar it had only looked like brightly pulsing light. Close up, though, he could see flashes of something else within it. Visions of worlds familiar and unfamiliar, things he should recognize and things he couldn't possibly hope to.

A tendril of it wrapped around his wrist, and for the space of a blink he felt his brother standing next to him. Warmth and comfort spread between his ribs—only for cold absence to return once the light dissolved.

"Yes," said Oracle Jadzi. And he knew from the weight of it, from the way she said it, that she too had glimpsed something she wished could stay. "No point in more questions, at least for now. Maybe the three of us can untangle it together. Vess and Fel are capable hands. I've got high hopes for you Planeswalker types."

"I'm willing to try," said Ajani. He looked over at Chandra. The light from the nexus reflected upon the blood leaking from her nose, giving it the look of molten gold. "Chandra ... would that be enough of a step forward for you? If we worked together on this?"

Dew dripped onto the pyromancer's head. A hiss of steam rose up from it. In the smoke, he thought he saw a spiral.

"Yeah," she said. "I can do that."

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It hurt so bad to lie to him. Even before she said it, she knew that it wasn't enough of a step. Still, it hurt. Ajani was reaching out his hand to her and telling her that he could meet her halfway. She was smart enough to see that.

The trouble was that this wasn't the sort of thing they could risk doing piecemeal. Not with Jace. In the back of her mind she could feel his determination. The tides of time themselves wouldn't pull him under; whatever it was he was up to with this ... it was big.

Chandra took a breath. Fire is nothing without air to feed it—even the musty, moldy air that filled this old skull. She tried not to think of what it was she was breathing in. This thing, whatever it had been, had flesh once. Maybe some tiny particles of it still clung to the walls of this place. Maybe some of them were in her now. What would it be like to inhabit your own destruction like that? No, it wasn't good to dwell. Easy, slow rhythms. Let the lungs expand as much as they could. She'd need all the air she could get.

"Together. In, two, three, four ..." Jadzi must have agreed with her. The three of them were breathing in time. Light pulsed from the nexus ahead, and the threads of magic they now worked to untangle writhed like serpents away from the hands that sought to grasp them.

Chandra's head was pounding. She gritted her teeth. If this was going to work, the others couldn't know what she was doing until it was too late.

"Hold, two, three, four ..."

Another pulse of light, another burst of pain. This time she could not focus on the plan, on her goals, on anything but staying alive. A howl left her as her knees threatened to give out from under her.

“Out, two, three—the girl!” Jadzi shouted.

“Chandra!” said Ajani.

Both turned toward her. As she fell to the mossy earth, resentment and desperation alike welled within her. The longer this went on, the weaker she got. And she could not afford to be weak. The sympathy in their eyes only stoked the fire of these awful feelings. Why was it only now that they realized she had not been exaggerating? Now they were helping her. Now they understood. Now ...

Now, as they scrambled to help her, she could strike. She’d fallen right in line of sight of the archaic. Staring at it, she felt a strange kinship echo between them—a weakness. Neither of them could hold on for much longer with the way things were going. Looking at that great eyeless face, she had the thought: *it can only be one of us.*

Ajani’s hand met her shoulder. Jadzi kneeled behind her to prop her up. Hands fussed over her as the world began to spin this way and that. Ajani was saying something, but she couldn’t make out the words—or maybe she didn’t want to hear them. Maybe she knew that if she allowed herself to take in any of what he was saying she wouldn’t have the strength to do this.

Fire at the base of her spine, fire in her heart, fire in her throat. She did not need to summon it so much as guide it. All at once, welling up and flowing out. Chandra pooled it all into her right hand. Gritting her teeth, she readied the blow.

Ajani’s eyes went wide. In that instant before the flames left Chandra’s hand, he brought the flat of his axe down on her forearm with crushing certainty.

*No!*

The howl of pain that left her this time had little to do with the migraine. Instead, she watched as her fireball went wide. The hole it blasted was the size of a dragon. If it had only hit ...

“Are you *that* committed to this path, Chandra?” roared Ajani. “Violence is only going to make this worse. We need to work together if we’re going to fix this.”

Chandra staggered to her feet. The oracle had fallen away, perhaps for the better, to focus on the flares of light and magic behind them. “Violence isn’t always the answer. But when it is ... you have to act decisively.”

The words came out slurred but not uncertain. And from the way that Ajani hesitated, she knew she’d struck true. “Killing the archaic before Jace can use it is our only choice. I’m sure. And if you’re still standing in my way after all we’ve heard ... I’ll go through you if I have to.”

Ajani planted himself between Chandra and the ailing archaic. “I will stand here as long as I am able. Fire can only burn my flesh.”

Soon, the flare of the snarl-that-was-not-a-snarl was no longer the only source of light and danger within the skull of the lost titan.