

Bottled Up

James Wyatt

From set *Kaladesh*

Drawn to her home plane of Kaladesh by reports of the Consulate looking for a disruptive renegade, Chandra discovered, to her shock, that the renegade in question was her mother! Their reunion was cut short, though, by Consulate soldiers who took Pia Nalaar into custody. While Liliana pursued a different lead, Chandra and Nissa found an old friend of Chandra's parents, Oviya Pashiri, and began looking for Pia's prison cell. By way of Oviya's many renegade contacts, they have learned that she is being held in the Dhund, a secret complex run by the vicious mage Baral—the same Baral who hunted a young Chandra down and killed her father.

Nissa's head swam as Mrs. Pashiri led her and Chandra away from the noise and smells of Yahenni's party and back into the darkness of the streets, where the explosive excitement of the Inventors' Fair had faded into the cheerful bustle of night.

Ghirapur was not as bad as Ravnica, with its sharp angles and gray streets. In fact, the city had clearly been laid out with an eye toward the flow of magic—of aether—through the streets and around the buildings. And the aesthetic of the place was all graceful curves and delicate lines, more like the forests of Zendikar than the hard edges of Ravnica.

Still, it was thronged with *people*.

It was all Nissa could do to keep up—with the events of the day, with Chandra's palpable agitation, with the whole chaotic jumble of the plane.

"The Dhund," Mrs. Pashiri said, shaking her head. "Of all places."



Oviya Pashiri, Sage Lifecrafter | Art by Magali Villeneuve

Chandra growled. “Baral! Why him? Shouldn’t he be dead or...or retired or something by now?” She paused. “Preferably dead.” Another few steps, as tiny flames licked around her fingers, which were clenched in tight fists. “In a fire.”

“In a just world, he would be,” the older woman said.

“Well, when I get my hands on him...” Chandra seemed to bite her tongue, maybe literally. “Sorry, Mrs. Pashiri.”

Nissa frowned. Until now, she had seen Chandra’s fiery wrath directed only against the Eldrazi, or the twisted, corrupted creatures on Innistrad that might as well have been Eldrazi. The idea of her unleashing that anger against a person was unnerving. *How much pain must he have caused her?* she wondered.

“Liliana told me I should hunt him down,” Chandra said. “Find him and take my revenge. I should’ve listened to her.”

Nissa wanted to reach out to her, put a hand on her shoulder, offer some kind of calm through her touch. But she was afraid—of what? Of causing pain, like touching a burn? Or of *feeling* Chandra’s pain more powerfully than she already did, coursing between them like fire?

“And where the hell *is* Liliana, anyway? What the hell is more important than finding where they took my *mom*?”

Liliana’s agitation had been less...heated when she left them, but no less palpable. It had been the first time Nissa had seen the necromancer in a state other than unflappable calm, and she suspected that whatever Liliana was doing, it was very important.

Chandra stopped dead, stamped her foot with a small puff of flame on the cobblestone, and said, “And where the hell are we *going*?”

“We need to get across the river,” Mrs. Pashiri said.

Chandra furrowed her brow. “What’s across the river? The old energy plants?”

“Yes. And the worst-kept secret in Ghirapur.” She lowered her voice. “Gonti’s.”

“What are gontis?” Chandra asked.

“*Gonti* is another aetherborn. I think they made their fortune as a smuggler—I dealt with them once or twice, back in the day. Gonti’s night market is sort of a hub for contraband aether and renegade inventors.”

Chandra gripped the hair at her temples in exasperation, kindling more tongues of fire that licked at her head and hands before dwindling into smoke. “Why are we going there? Where’s my mother?”

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m following the best information I have. I’m told the Dhund lies in tunnels beneath the night market.”

Chandra looked physically pained by having to stay in her seat while a small skiff carried them across the river, poled by a young man who feigned indifference as his face betrayed a keen interest in every word Chandra spoke. She vented her energy by furiously tapping her feet. Her hands were in constant motion, and she looked like she was chewing her tongue to avoid saying anything that might incriminate her.

But for those few minutes, away from the lights and the noise and the people of the city, Nissa looked up at the stars and the swirling, shifting blues of the aethersphere and felt calm...tempered only by the nagging worry that Chandra, in her anger and impatience, might set their little boat on fire. The strongest aether current in the sky mirrored the path of the river almost perfectly, and Nissa could *feel* the agreement between them, as if aether and water were companions bound on the same journey together.



Island | Art by Johannes Voss

She thought of Ashaya then, her elemental companion, a fragment of the world-soul of Zendikar, and she wondered—not for the first time—why she had agreed to leave her home plane and embark on the madness of this journey with these humans. They had done important work together, to be sure, and she had found that they could battle very effectively together. Each of them contributed unique

strengths to the team as a whole, and helped cover the weaknesses of the others. She enjoyed being a part of that, of something bigger and better than herself. In a way, it was like being connected to the soul of a plane, joined together in a greater purpose.

But in the whirlwind of fighting Eldrazi, she had found little opportunity to sort out the emotional relationships among the others. Those relationships were evidently...complicated. And finding her own place within that web of relationship was exhausting. It was all so utterly unlike the simple, wordless communion she had shared with Ashaya—as effortless as a touch.

When she touched Ashaya, energy...mana...no, *life* flowed between them, uniting them—joining Nissa to the natural essence of Zendikar. The closest she had come to that with anyone else was Jace’s wordless communication, the directness of his thoughts in her mind. In the heat of battle with the other Planeswalkers, with Jace facilitating their communication, she could control the flow of mana among them. She could lose herself in that flow and let herself be a part of their larger effort. She and Chandra had shared a powerful bond in those moments, open together to the flow of magic through the planes.



Nissa, Voice of Zendikar | Art by Raymond Swanland

Face to face, though—with Chandra or with any of them—it was so much harder. People expect to conduct their day-to-day interactions on a surface level. Just as Jace didn’t use his mind-magic to replace everyday conversation, she couldn’t expect to forge that same deep connection over breakfast in Jace’s sanctum. And when Chandra was this upset and agitated, Nissa feared that opening herself to the pyromancer would be like opening a floodgate to loose a wave of fire.

She sighed and let herself become part of the flow around her, embraced between the aether above and the water below. She felt the beating heart of Kaladesh, and everything else melted away.

Nissa tried to cling to that connection as Oviya led them into the throng of Gonti’s night market, but it was snatched away with every step she took past inventors hawking their latest devices and smugglers offering great deals on illegal aether supplies. The noise pressed on her ears, the smell of close-crowded bodies assaulted her nose, and Chandra was a furnace of emotion creating her own personal bubble of intense heat in the midst of the press of bodies.

While Mrs. Pashiri spoke to yet one more contact—a surly dwarf with a suspiciously bite-shaped piece missing from one ear—about how to gain access to the Dhund, Nissa hesitantly extended a hand toward Chandra’s shoulder. She wanted...she wasn’t sure. To comfort Chandra, somehow. To take some of her anxiety into herself, if she could, to share the burden that Chandra was struggling to carry. But heat radiated from Chandra’s metal armor and Nissa pulled her hand back, imagining the floodgates holding back the raging fire.

“Chandra,” she said instead. “On Ravnica, you asked me...you wanted me to help...you were looking for calm.”

Chandra wheeled on her, eyes blazing. “I don’t *want* to calm down,” she said, her throat and face tight. “I want to find my mom.” Her eyes ranged over Nissa’s face for a moment—what was she looking for?—and then she turned away. “You just don’t get it,” she muttered.

I guess I don’t, Nissa thought. She closed her eyes and tried to block out the noise and the smell and the riot of colors as she took a long breath.

Interesting, she thought. Aether traced winding paths through her awareness, blown by stray gusts of wind, carried by ventilation systems. *I wonder...*



Nissa, Vital Force | Art by Clint Cearley

“Nothing,” Mrs. Pashiri said as the dwarf faded back into the darkness of an alleyway. “Everyone suspects that the Dhund is here somewhere. But either no one knows how to get there or they all know better than to tell me. If only I could find...” Her voice trailed off as she scanned the crowd.

Nissa’s eyes fluttered open. “*I know*,” she said.

Mrs. Pashiri’s eyes widened in surprise, but Chandra scowled. “Why didn’t you say so? Damn it, Nissa, they could be torturing her down there. Or she could already be dead.”

“I know.” She did—she felt Chandra’s fear and worry almost as keenly as she had once felt Zendikar protesting the violating presence of the Eldrazi. “I’m not *hiding* anything from you; I just figured it out. It has to do with the way aether flows through the city. If I can concentrate...”

“I don’t care,” Chandra barked. “Just take us there!”

“*If* I can concentrate,” Nissa repeated, “I think I can lead us there. Maybe even help us navigate down in the tunnels.”

Chandra gripped her shoulders and almost shook her—though the heat of her agitation, pushing against the floodgates, was still more jarring. “So concentrate!”

“Chandra, dear,” Mrs. Pashiri said, laying a gentle hand on Chandra’s back. “I think your friend needs a little space.”

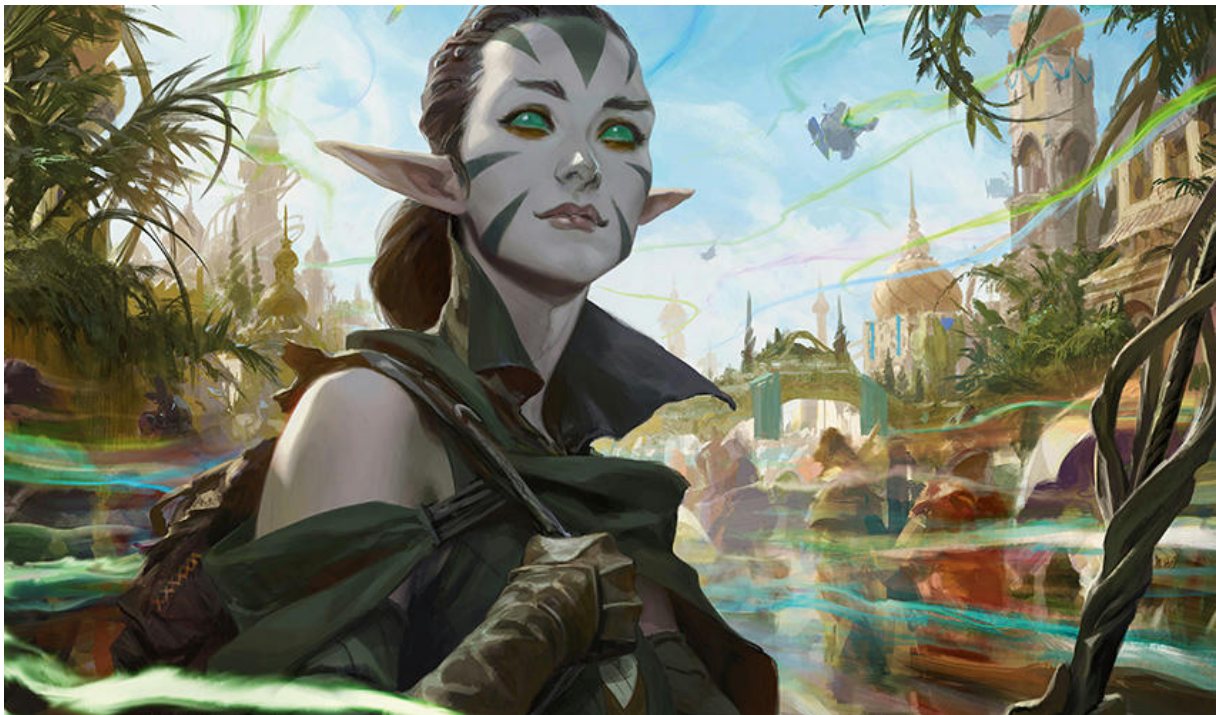
Nissa blinked. *Your friend? I’m not...*

Ashaya had been her friend. With Ashaya she could reach out her hand and make a connection, perfectly casual, perfectly natural. Effortless. With Chandra—or Gideon, or Jace—nothing was effortless, not even a simple act of touching, like Mrs. Pashiri had just done.

Chandra removed her hands and took a half-step back. “Oh, sorry.” She stared expectantly at Nissa.

Nissa met her gaze, and suddenly all of Chandra’s pain and anger and frustration burned into her. Tears stung her own eyes, and she looked away. “I’ll try.” She turned, squeezed her eyes shut and shoved her emotions aside, and pressed her fingers to her temples.

The world suddenly sprawled vast across her awareness, like a map unrolled and spread upon a table. Aether flowed through the plane like a vast river network, soaring through the sky here, dipping down to kiss the earth there; mirroring the paths of streams at times, winding through city streets at others. Refined aether, a different taste, streamed through pipelines above and below the street. Little knots of concentrated aether nestle underground in places, where it could not flow as easily.



Attune with Aether | Art by Wesley Burt

But through a system of tunnels, aether could move. Not the streams coursing high above in the aethersphere, but stray wisps and tributaries. Nissa had felt it under her feet—a mere trickle compared to the rush around and above them, but there. Focusing her mind on that part of the flow, she started searching for the points where aether entered and left the passageways.

“This way,” Nissa said at last, pointing to her left.

Mrs. Pashiri tilted her head. “How do you...”

But Chandra was already moving in the direction of Nissa's pointing finger. "Show me," she said. "Which way?"

Nissa hurried to catch up to her, and steered her toward a small sort of building erected up against the inside of the cavernous room that housed this portion of the market. A glance over her shoulder confirmed that Mrs. Pashiri was still with them, and they wound their way through the crowd until they reached the steel door.

Chandra jiggled the handle. "Locked," she said.

Mrs. Pashiri started rummaging in the voluminous folds of her clothes. "Let me get my tools..."

A blast of white-hot fire leapt from Chandra's hand to engulf the door handle and, presumably, its locking mechanism. Nissa had to shield her eyes from the bright flash, and she felt the intense heat on her face.

"You're attracting attention," Mrs. Pashiri said under her breath.

Chandra kicked the door and it swung open. "Let them get in my way," she growled.

As if accepting Chandra's invitation, a massive hulk of a man strode over, backed up by an even more massive hulk of metal plates, filigree, and gearwork. He shoved Chandra to the side and interposed himself between her and the half-melted door. Either he hadn't seen Chandra's blast of fire or he wasn't wise enough to be afraid of it—Nissa suspected the latter. Or perhaps his sense of duty led him to disregard his own personal safety.

"Hey, now," he said. "Where do you think you're going?"



Embraal Bruiser | Art by Sidharth Chaturvedi

Chandra's hair and both her fists ignited as she met the man's stern gaze. "Into the Dhund," she said. "Is this the way?"

Nissa saw a room behind the door, cluttered but disused, and a stairway leading downward. She could practically taste the trickle of aether coming up from the tunnels below.

“That’s private property,” the man said, apparently undaunted by Chandra’s fiery display. Though he shared Gideon’s physique, this brute lacked any of his charisma or good humor. He reminded Nissa more of the ogres of Murasa—and she felt a pang of longing for her beloved Zendikar.

“Why don’t we discuss this in a little more privacy?” Mrs. Pashiri said mildly, taking the man’s arm and drawing him inside the small building.

Clearly, he lacked Gideon’s intelligence as well, or perhaps he was put off his guard by Mrs. Pashiri’s kindly appearance. While he was ducking his head to get through the doorway, Chandra planted a kick on his backside and sent him sprawling on the floor. His head thudded hard and he didn’t raise it again. While Chandra seized Nissa’s hand and pulled her inside, the man’s automaton tried to come to his rescue. Too large to get through the door at all, it bent over and reached its arms inside. Waving Chandra and Mrs. Pashiri toward the stairs, Nissa drew on the magic pulsing through the earth beneath the creature. Vines broke through the concrete floor and coiled around its legs while others reached up right in front of Nissa and seized its flailing arms. Aether hissed out of it in dozens of tiny jets as the vines started disassembling the automaton.

Nissa followed the others down the stairs, down deep underground, and found herself in the middle of a long tunnel.

Chandra threw her arms around the elf. “You did it!”

Chandra’s armor, still hot to the touch, poked Nissa’s chest, and a strand of the pyromancer’s hair—smelling of smoke—tickled her nose. And a different sort of heat, the raging fire of Chandra’s boundless energy, pressed on her as well—the merest hint of a real connection. Then Chandra pulled away and turned back and forth, looking down the tunnel in both directions.

“Which way?” she said again.

“I...have no idea,” Nissa confessed.

“What do you mean? You got us this far!”

“We were looking for the tunnels beneath the night market. I found them by tracking the flow of aether beneath our feet. Finding your mother down here is another matter entirely.”

“Follow me,” Mrs. Pashiri said, starting off to the right of the stairs. “And quickly; that automaton’s going to get noticed.”

“And then stripped for parts, if I know night markets,” Chandra said, shooting Nissa a wry grin.

Once more, Nissa felt her head swimming. Chandra’s frenetic motion, impelled by the desperate need to find her mother, left Nissa breathless from the ride. Every time Mrs. Pashiri stopped to consider a branching passage, Chandra paced back and forth in the hall, her hands releasing puffs of flame as she flexed them into fists. Nissa wondered if she had led them into a useless network of access tunnels built for the old energy plants, since nothing here suggested a secret prison compound. People who looked like shifty renegades connected to the night market kept a very casual watch over some of the passages, and they were easily distracted when Oviya sent a small lifecraft animal or servo skittering down a hall.

“This can’t be the right place,” she said. “It’s too easy. They’re too inept to be highly trained secret police.”

Chandra laughed. “Never underestimate human stupidity.”

"They're on edge," Mrs. Pashiri added. "Nerves wound up tight. So they go running after every clank in the darkness."

Both explanations seemed plausible, but Nissa wasn't convinced. She closed her eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath, trying to reclaim the calm she'd felt on the river.

Chandra jolted her out of it with a yank on her arm. "No time to meditate," she said.

Nissa scowled. "You might want to try a deep breath, too," she said, as gently as she could manage.

"Maybe later."

"Just one breath. Open yourself to the flow of energy through the world. Feel the vastness of it."

"I said later!" Chandra stomped down the passage.

Nissa hurried to catch up with her as Mrs. Pashiri trailed behind them.

"You're so closed up, Chandra. It's like you're curled up around all your pain and fear, clutching them to your chest."

Chandra's pain and anger erupted in flames again. "Of course I am!" she cried. "I can't relax, I can't calm down, not while they have my mom!"

"But you'll be better equipped to find her—"

Chandra wheeled on her and flames surged dangerously close to Nissa's face. "This is my mother! For *twelve years* I thought she was dead. Don't you understand? Do you even *have* a mother?"

Nissa stopped dead. Something had gripped her chest and was squeezing, driving the breath from her lungs.

Chandra's sudden rage seemed to ebb, as she saw the effect of her words. "I'm sorry..."

"Did you ever see Bala Ged," Nissa said, "when you were on Zendikar?"

Chandra shook her head, blinking.

"It was the home of the Joraga, my people. And when Ulamog...escaped his prison, it was the first place he destroyed." She swallowed hard. "Dust."

"So your—your parents...?"

"They're not gone, or so the elders teach us. The spirits of past generations live among us. I expect they are helping those who seek to rebuild..." Nissa's voice broke. The last time she saw her mother was long before Ulamog awakened. She knew that some of the Joraga had survived. But she had never sought her mother.

Before she knew what was happening, Chandra pulled her into another hug, pinning her arms to her sides. Strangely, the pressure on her chest seemed to diminish.

Mrs. Pashiri stood at a four-way intersection of unmarked identical tunnels somewhere deep in the maze beneath Gonti's night market.

"I know it can't be that way," she said, pointing to her right. "And it's not the way we came." She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "But it could be either of these others."

"What even are we looking for?" Chandra said. "Do any of these tunnels go anywhere?"

"If they didn't," Mrs. Pashiri said, "what would be the point of guarding them? I've been trying to figure out where we're going by seeing what tunnels they think are important enough to guard. But I *think* we're just going in a big circle around the edge of it. I can't find a way to the middle."

Pouring a blast of fire down the tunnel to the right, Chandra roared, "No!" The twin roars of the flames and her voice echoed in the small passages. "You've been leading us around in circles while they have my mom?" She wheeled around and grabbed Nissa's shoulders again. "Nissa! Do your thing. Feel the aether flow or whatever. Figure it out!"



Furious Reprisal | Art by Svetlin Velinov

"I'll try," Nissa said, wincing at the heat of Chandra's hands on her. "It's...different down here."

Chandra stepped back to give her space.

Nissa stood at the center of the intersection and tried to listen—to feel—to awaken herself to the breath of air moving around her, the earth beneath and above and around her, the flow of aether, the ley lines, the magic suffusing it all. But no breath of wind was moving, the merest motes of aether hung motionless in the air, and the earth refused to yield its secrets.

"Pipelines," Chandra blurted. "They'll need refined aether in their little secret hideout or prison or whatever it is down here. Are there pipelines?"

"Yes," Nissa said, and she focused her attention on the distinctive feel of refined aether, a concentrated stream just above the tunnels. "That way," she said, pointing in the direction of the flow—the passage to the left.

Chandra took off down that passage, leaving Nissa and Mrs. Pashiri to straggle after her until they caught up at the next intersection... *Wait*.

"Chandra, back here!" Nissa called. The pipeline had changed course, made a sudden right turn, but there was no tunnel following its course. Just bare stone wall—

"Yes," she said aloud. The tunnel walls were all stone, but decorated with the intricate swoops and whorls common to all the architecture she'd seen in the city. Pillars—probably just decorative, rather

than load-bearing—emerged from the walls like bas-relief at even intervals along the length of the tunnel, and swirling filigree extended out from each one and linked to the next, forming decorative arches, with bare stone below.

Was it a coincidence that the pipeline bent right over one of those archways?

“What?” Chandra said. She had doubled back to where Nissa and Mrs. Pashiri stood and was simultaneously drumming her fingers and tapping her foot—actually creating an interesting rhythm, Nissa noticed, whether she was aware of it or not.

“Could there be a hidden door here?” Nissa said, pointing to the wall.

Chandra stepped over and pressed her palms against the wall—and stumbled forward, disappearing through the stone as if it were a wall of water. Or an illusion.

She stuck her head back out, giving the gruesome impression of a head mounted on the wall as a trophy.

“No hidden door,” she said. “But no wall either. Come on!”

The tunnel network was utterly transformed. Instead of seemingly abandoned access tunnels, they found themselves moving through clean, well-maintained, and well-lit passages of more recent construction. Doors were spaced along the length of the halls, most of them ajar and revealing what looked like the offices of bureaucrats—eerily similar to Jace’s paper-crowded office on Ravnica.

Who could work in an office down here? Nissa wondered.

There could be no question now that they were on the right track, and Nissa expected at any moment to find a prison compound filled with angry police guards. But there could be no turning back. She led them on through every intersection, following the path of the aether pipes. Soon they reached a juncture where an aether pipe came down from the ceiling, arced gracefully around the side of the passage, and disappeared below their feet.

“We must be close,” Nissa said. “Other pipelines are converging right around here...all around us, actually.”

“Uh, Nissa?” Chandra said.

Nissa looked up and saw armored figures closing in on them from every side, the blue glow from the aether pipeline glimmering on metal armor and drawn blades.



Art by Victor Adame Minguez

One of the figures reached up and pulled off a filigree mask that covered his face. Nissa saw his incandescent blue eyes first, like windows into some light-filled eternity. They were surrounded by badly scarred skin that seemed almost as blue as his eyes in the weird glow.

Chandra erupted into a raging bonfire, and a firestorm swept down the tunnel toward the scarred man—giving a pretty clear picture of how he might have acquired those scars. But the flames vanished as they reached him, and Nissa saw the last tongues of fire as they were suctioned into the man's hand—presumably swallowed by some aether-powered device on his arm.

"Not this time, Pyromancer," he said. He reached to the wall and manipulated something, and just as Chandra began her charge toward him, she slammed into a wall that shot up from the floor.

Trapped! Nissa heard her own pulse pounding.

Similar walls now enclosed them on every side, forming a tiny chamber that appeared to be tightly sealed. One side held what looked like a door, including a thick pane of glass—surrounded, of course, by ornate filigree.

Even death here is beautiful. The strange thought flitted through Nissa's mind.

Chandra slammed her fist against the door, making a blast of orange flame that was instantly transformed into shimmering blue sparks, scattering harmlessly away. She pressed her face to the glass and shouted, "Baral!"

So this is Baral, Nissa thought.

She stepped back in surprise when the man's face appeared on the other side of the window. Nissa could better see his scars—half his nose, one cheek, and his forehead were all knotted with the characteristic scars left by terrible burns. Contempt curled his brow and twisted his mouth.

"Pyromancer." He spat the word, barely audible through the thick door. "Baan said you were back. I couldn't believe it. I don't know how you escaped me last time, or where you've been hiding all these years, but it won't happen again."

Chandra threw herself against the door again, pounding at the glass with both flame-wreathed fists, producing only more blue sparks—some form of counterspell magic, Nissa reasoned. “I’ll kill you!” Chandra yelled. “You bastard!”

Baral didn’t flinch at the outburst. “You’re pathetic, little Nalaar. A pathetic freak of nature.”

Nissa doubted that Baral could notice, but she saw it—his words cut Chandra, hit some sore spot from her childhood. She stepped closer to support Chandra and returned Baral’s glare.

“I kicked your ass when I was just a kid!” Chandra screamed. “Wait’ll you see what I can do now!”

“Burn all you like. You’ll die more quickly if you burn up the air. Your friends, too.”

Chandra threw a wild-eyed, helpless look over her shoulder at Nissa. Her pain and rage were so fierce, so *hot*, that part of Nissa wanted to back away, but her hand reached out and her palm rested on Chandra’s back—just as Mrs. Pashiri had done.

A channel opened between them, and Nissa felt Chandra’s fire surging deep in her soul. She pulled her hand away and took a step back.

“Quickly or slowly,” Baral continued, “you will die here. I’ve been waiting a long time for this, Pyromancer.” He turned away, lifting his mask back into place and taking a few steps back the way he had come.

“Wait!” Chandra shouted. “My mom. Let her go. Your grudge is against me. Nissa, Mrs. Pashiri, you can let them go too. Kill me, just me.”

Baral did not turn back around, and his voice was barely audible. “No.”

Chandra roared, all words banished from her mind, and a wave of fire erupted from her body and crashed against the door. Like the sea washing against the great dam of Sea Gate, it sent up a great spray of blue sparks and then turned back on her.



Chandra Ablaze | Art by Steve Argyle

Nissa dove away, throwing her cloak over Mrs. Pashiri and trying to shield the older woman with her body as much as she could. The heat slammed into her back, knocking her to the ground, but it passed in an instant. She rolled onto her back to smother any fires that might have kindled in her cloak, then sat up.

Mrs. Pashiri seemed unharmed. Chandra was on her knees, shoulders slumped and head hanging, all her fire doused.

My turn, Nissa thought.

She walked past Chandra and rested her hands on the door. Air-tight—she could feel that right away. And it wasn't just fire-quenching magic that hampered Chandra's spells, it was the twisted enchantment of a counterspell, apparently worked into the substance of the door.

Not the door, then.

She sank to one knee and touched the ground, stretching out her awareness, looking for roots and tendrils that could break through the floor in answer to her call. The smallest sapling, given time, could shatter concrete—and under her guiding hand, the time required for a plant to wrest the door from its hinges would be next to nothing.

"What's that smell?" Mrs. Pashiri asked.

Chandra poked her shoulder. "Nissa, look."

Nissa turned and let her gaze follow Chandra's pointing finger to the top of the wall. A fine grate, one of several set at intervals around the room, was emitting tiny cascades of greenish vapor that vanished from sight as it dispersed. She smelled it now, too—acrid and nauseating, an utterly unnatural chemical smell. "Poison," she said. "He means for us to suffocate more quickly after all."

Chandra slumped back to the floor, hugging her knees to her chest.

"It's all right," Nissa said, returning to her position kneeling by the door. "I'll have us out..."

But it wasn't working. The floor was imbued with the same dampening magic as the door and walls. She couldn't extend her senses, her will, her call into the earth. Nothing living grew within her reach.

The tightness in her chest returned. Being caught like an animal in a hunter's trap was bad enough. But only once before had she felt so utterly alone, so cut off from the life and soul of the world around her: when the demon Ob Nixilis had disrupted the ley lines on Zendikar and torn Ashaya from her.

She sat down, leaning back on the door, gulping the air as she tried to calm her racing pulse.

"It's getting harder to breathe," Chandra said quietly.

Nissa met her gaze. "I don't know what to do," she said.

"Jace would have a plan." Chandra tried to force a smile, but it died on her lips.

"That...Baral? He's built quite a trap for us. Canceling our spells sending them back at us..."

"He's built his career on persecuting people like Chandra," Mrs. Pashiri said. "It stands to reason he would trap his lair to protect himself from retaliation."

"Gideon would probably just beat the door down," Chandra said. "It'd probably break before he did."

Nissa shook her head. "I'm completely cut off, Chandra. I can't reach even the nearest plants. I can't call up an elemental. I don't know what to do."

"Maybe Liliana will show up and save us. Like she did on Innistrad."

Chandra's despair was so plain on her face that Nissa wanted to embrace her and hold her to her chest. Even if it meant being caught up in the fire of Chandra's turmoil, even if it meant burning up...

Of course.

"Try something with me," she said, getting to her feet and holding a hand out to help Chandra up.

Chandra took her hand and Nissa's blood ran hot. Instead of closing the floodgate, she let the fire wash through her. She felt it all—all the rage, the desperation, the turmoil of finding her mother and losing her again...and the tiniest shred of hope. And she reached deep into herself and found something to offer in return: a deep breath of calm, an openness, a taste of the soul of this plane. Chandra's eyes widened.

"Let me fuel your fire," Nissa said. "Maybe together we can overpower Baral's counterspell."

Chandra's face brightened. "It's worth a try!" she said. "That connection..."

"A focused flame," Nissa said. "Not another big wave of fire—too dangerous. Small but as hot as you can manage, right at the edge of the door. Maybe we can melt the hinges."

"Let's do it! Pump me up!"

Chandra's excitement was as palpable as the rest of her emotions. Nissa drew a deep breath, pulling in mana from the living earth around her. That worked, at least—she couldn't extend her magic *out*, but at least she could draw magic *in*.

Her lungs began to sting. *The poison.* She coughed, loosening her grip on the mana she was holding in. “Go,” she gasped.

Chandra tried a similar centering breath, accompanied by a clumsy attempt at a stance she had probably learned from the monks on Regatha. *Dear Chandra,* Nissa thought. *Focus is really not your thing.*

But a blaze like a dagger appeared in Chandra’s hand, small and controlled. Nissa began channeling her mana toward Chandra, and the blade burned brighter and hotter until it was blinding white. Grinning, Chandra turned the blade on their prison, trying to wedge it into the seal around the door.

Blue motes flew back at Chandra like sparks from a welder, and Chandra looked like she was exerting every muscle to keep the fire blazing and physically drive it into the seal.

For just a moment, it looked like it was working—Chandra’s arm moved forward...but then a blue-white light flared with a crack like a whip and Chandra staggered backward into Nissa’s arms, the last flames fizzling out in her hand.

“Damn it!” she yelled. “Damn you, Baral! Damn you, Consulate! Damned Kaladesh! Why the hell did I ever come back here? Damn-damn-damn-damn-damn!” She accented each expletive by slamming her fist into the door, creating a little spray of blue sparks each time.



Deadlock Trap | Art by Jason Rainville

She turned around and sank back to the floor, looking up at Nissa, all the rage on her face melting into sadness.

“How did this all go so wrong?” she said.

“Why did you come here?” Nissa asked. “What did you expect to find?”

“Pain. I don’t know. Liliana said...I don’t know.” She chewed on her lip for a moment. “Why’d you join the Gatewatch, Nissa?”

“What?”

“You’re so connected to Zendikar, right? Why leave? Why come with us humans and deal with all our crap?”

“We’re stronger together,” Nissa said. “We can use that strength to help other worlds, the same way we helped Zendikar. I don’t want to see another plane suffer like Zendikar did.”

“Stronger together. That’s what Liliana said, isn’t it? I don’t think that’s it.”

“What do you mean?”

Chandra’s gaze rested on Mrs. Pashiri, who was sitting against the opposite wall, conserving her strength. “We’re Planeswalkers, right? And that means it’s so easy to feel alone—cut off, like you said before. It will always mean leaving our families behind. Leaving the people we love. I found my mom, and Mrs. Pashiri, but I don’t think I could ever stay on Kaladesh forever. We’re Planeswalkers—and the Gatewatch is about *not* being alone anymore.”

Nissa blinked. “Being a part of something larger than ourselves...”

“No. Just being a part of *something*. Together. Having a family, no matter what plane we’re on.” She smiled weakly. “Having friends.”



Zendikar Resurgent | Art by Chris Rallis

Nissa tried to remember the last person she had called a friend. Not Ashaya, the soul of Zendikar, but a *person*.

Mazik? Back before I ever left Zendikar, before—

Chandra was on her feet again, face to face with her. “It’s not just saving the Multiverse. It’s saving each other. Helping each other. Like you coming here...for me. Helping me find my mom.”

“I’ve never really had that...”

Chandra put a hand on her shoulder. “It means a lot to me, Nissa. Thank you.”

As Nissa tried to come up with some kind of response, Chandra walked past her and knelt beside Mrs. Pashiri.

“How are you doing, Mrs. Pashiri?”

“I’m all right, child.”

"You don't look all right." She looked up at Nissa, her forehead creased with worry. "You should go."

"What?"

"We're Planeswalkers, duh. You should just leave."

"What about you?"

Chandra smiled as tears welled in her eyes, and she shook her head. "I'm going to stay here with Mrs. Pashiri. I think Mom would want that."

"Nonsense, child," Mrs. Pashiri said. "If you have some way out of here, even if you can't take me, you both should go."

"No. I can't let you die here alone."

Mrs. Pashiri took both of Chandra's hands in her own. "Go, Chandra. Go. I've lived a long, full, wonderful life. I buried my own partner years ago. I'm ready."

Chandra kept shaking her head. Keeping her hold on Mrs. Pashiri's hands, she sat down beside her.

"Chandra, you should find your—your mom," Nissa said. "Save her. I'll stay here with Mrs. Pashiri."

Chandra smiled and shook her head. "You're a good friend, Nissa."

It doesn't make any sense, Nissa thought. We're Planeswalkers. We're part of the Gatewatch. We promised to help protect the Multiverse—there's so much good we can do for so many people.

But I just want to stay here.

She sat down beside Chandra and Mrs. Pashiri.

With my...my friend.