

Episode 2: Pit Stop

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From set *Aetherdrift*

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Chandra Nalaar has seen five suns swaying around each other like dancers as they rise. She has seen spiraling skies and endless oceans. Beings of pure beauty—angels and demons alike—have fought against her and alongside her. If she wanted, she could spend all her life trying to describe the impossible feelings these things had summoned in her heart. She could speak all her life of beauty and rightness and never approach its truth.

But one lifetime simply wouldn't be enough to describe the sight she wakes up to this morning.

Nissa. *Her* Nissa.

Sitting in bed with a book in hand, Nissa does not yet notice Chandra's awakening. The light filtering in through the windows makes her green eyes rich as all the forests of Zendikar. Everything about her is perfect—the curve of her brow, the sharp lines of her collarbone, her delicate fingers.

Chandra has things to do today. Many things. A race, even, one where the Multiverse's eyes will be trained on her just as hers are on Nissa's face. But all of that can wait. At least for a little while.

After almost losing her, Chandra is never going to take these moments for granted again. She rolls over and wraps her arms around Nissa's waist. Nuzzling against her, Chandra lets out a contented sigh. Nissa runs those delicate fingers through Chandra's glossy red hair without looking up from her book.

"Did you sleep well?" Nissa asks. "I thought I heard you saying something again."

Chandra hums. "What about this time?"

"Plenty of things. Running through your launch procedures, I think." Nissa reaches over and squeezes Chandra's earlobe. "But you did say some things about me."

Chandra laughs. She pulls herself up onto Nissa's lap, looks up at her like she's all the suns in the sky at once. "Only good things, right? Because if not, I've gotta have a couple words with my sleeping self. I don't take responsibility for anything she said. Unless it's good. In which case, I absolutely meant it."

Nissa raises a brow. Her laughter has always been the quieter of the two. She snaps the book shut to look down on Chandra, pressing a kiss to the pyromancer's forehead. "You meant well."

"Meant well? What do you mean?"

A flicker of uncertainty, a shadow across the dawn. "You were telling someone how much it would mean to you to bring me back to Zendikar."

Oh . The stress of all this must be getting to Chandra more than she thought if it's leaking out into her sleep like that. But it was good, right? That she'd said something like that. It was good.

So why does Nissa look so crestfallen?

Chandra reaches up to cup her cheek. "It really would. There's so much you still have to show me."

"Chandra ..." Nissa says. She takes Chandra's hand in her own. "It isn't ... I know. I know that would mean a lot to you."

There is an ember burning before her, and if she isn't careful, it's going to rage into a fire. But Chandra understands fire. She can make this work. She sits up in Nissa's lap. Just as she opens her mouth to begin, Nissa kisses her.

It isn't exactly an argument she can refute.

But when they part, Chandra's heart sinks anew. Nissa has never been very big on eye contact. Still, when it's just the two of them, she'll usually look at Chandra's cheeks or mouth instead.

Now Nissa's eyes have fallen to the empty space between them.

"I really appreciate what you're doing. All the practices you've put yourself through, all the hard work. But isn't this ... I don't want you to fix the problem for me. If I can get back to Zendikar, I don't want to be Nissa and Chandra there. I want to be Nissa, and Chandra."

A rare moment of silence. Chandra tries to think of what to say, but all she can think about is how complicated all of this is.

Those aren't helpful thoughts. She pushes them aside and tries to see things from where Nissa's standing. It's something she's done time and time again, and though she can't make all the pieces fit, it helps her stop and consider what she's about to say before saying it.

"I used to worry all the time about what Kalad—what Avishkar would think of me if I ever went back home. The way I left things ... wasn't pretty. But I've grown since then, and so has this place. We recognized each other. You were there for me then." linebreak Nissa's eyes flick up to Chandra's.

"I don't know if I could have gotten through all of that without you. Whenever I felt in over my head you were right there, like this great big oak or something, and I knew you were as big a part of my life as all of this. Home isn't *home* without you in it."

Chandra kisses Nissa's forehead.

"Please. Please let me do the same for you, Nissa. Let me try and make home feel like home again. Let me try and take you there."

In the sacred silence of the morning, Nissa traces a shape on Chandra's palm. Every second without an answer feels like agony for Chandra. But she knows that Nissa needs time. She isn't impulsive. Whatever she's going to say is something she really means—

"Chandra! Are you abandoning your breakfast *and* your poor old mother?"

Pia's voice cuts the tethers and sends them crashing back to reality. A flush comes to her cheeks. She sighs.

"I'm really sorry," she whispers. "We can talk about this more later, okay? I promise, no matter what, I'm here for you."

Nissa squeezes her hand. Whatever it is she meant to say, she swallows it for now. "Later," she agrees. "Let's try not to give your mother a bad impression of me."

"Bad impression? You're like, the best thing that's ever happened to me," Chandra says. She hops out of bed and starts getting dressed, tossing Nissa's blouse to her in the process.

"I think Pia might argue that."

"She's welcome to *try*," Chandra says.

“Was that my name I heard? It had better be about how wonderful my cooking is,” comes Pia’s voice through the door. “Come now. Don’t deprive me of one last breakfast with my turncoat daughter.”

“I’m not—it’s more complicated than that!” Chandra protests. As she tugs on her shoes, she nearly tumbles. It’s only Nissa’s hand catching Chandra’s arm that keeps her from falling over entirely.

“Oh, please, do explain,” says Pia. “I’ll just eat all these samosas by myself in the meantime.”

No. No. She can’t possibly mean that!

Chandra throws open the door. There stands Pia, great plate in hand, already biting into one of her homemade samosas. Chandra plucks one from the plate lest that threat come to fruition. Only when she’s halfway through eating it does she think to grab one for Nissa as well.

“Veg on the right,” Pia says. She nods to Nissa. “Did you get any rest?”

“A little. Though you know how Chandra is—”

“Talking in her sleep again? Her father was the same way,” Pia says. She shrugs. “You do get used to it, but if you’d like, I’ve got some earplugs to lend you.”

“Are we just all making fun of me now?” Chandra asks with a mouthful of food. She picks up another samosa, following Pia as the former renegade leads her daughter to the dining room.

Pia sets the plate down. “Someone has to keep you humble. At this rate, every house in Avishkar is going to have a little Chandra Nalaar figure for the mantle. Of course, she won’t be wearing an Aether Ranger uniform. She’ll be fighting for someplace else, where they don’t care about her so much.”

No amount of delicious food can make that go down any easier. Chandra sighs. “Mom ...”

“No, it’s fine, I understand,” says Pia. “The best hope of winning, wasn’t it?”

Nissa’s hand on the small of Chandra’s back is probably the only thing that’s keeping her from falling through the floor. “Two of you competing means twice the chance to win, doesn’t it?” she says.

Pia points to Nissa with the tip of her samosa. “See, *that* I could get behind,” she says. She takes a bite. “I’m glad you found someone with sense, Chandra.”

Chandra Nalaar—Planeswalker, Multiverse-saver, pyromage extraordinaire—groans.



Art by: Konstantin Porubov

Sita Varma—diplomat in training, tinkerer, driver extraordinaire—groans.

Her escape to the Ghirapur Grand Prix is late. Perhaps this is what she gets for needing to rely on someone else for this part of things? But it can't be helped. If her father is to believe that she's needed elsewhere, he must *see* that she is needed elsewhere. And because he is a horse carriage man in a world of sleek aether rides, it must be *women's* business that calls to her. Something he cannot solve himself.

Which necessitated pulling some strings.

“Gooooood afternoon Ghirapur! Indigo City, city of revolutions! Well, today, we've got a few thousand revolutions per minute to show you. I'm Vin. That stands for very interesting narrator ... just joking! But I *am* your companion for this race!”

Like a caged animal, Sita paces across the length of her room. The flickering screen balanced on her bureau is her only company. *Just how much longer can Lalan keep her waiting?* It only takes ten minutes to drive from her family's place to the Varma residence, five if the driver is competent enough to weave between traffic. She glances at the clock. She's got half an hour to make it to the track and ready up. Given the necessary precautions ... Lalan has about five minutes to get here before Spitfire is going to have to make the exit, and not Sita.

“It's a beautiful day for a race. The skies are clear as can be, and no one knows that like my special guest: team leader of the Alacrian Quickbeasts, Caradora!”

A proud-looking woman in armor strides onto the screen next to Vin and his interpreter. Over her head and just out of frame is the beak of Lagorin, her co-captain.

"Thank you for inviting the two of us to speak with you. Though I'd like to point out I'm not the only one here. Lagorin is just as much a leader of our team as I am. Perhaps more, given the circumstances."

The beast above her squawks. It lowers its head into the shot and stares down at the extravagantly dressed eyeball serving as their interviewer.

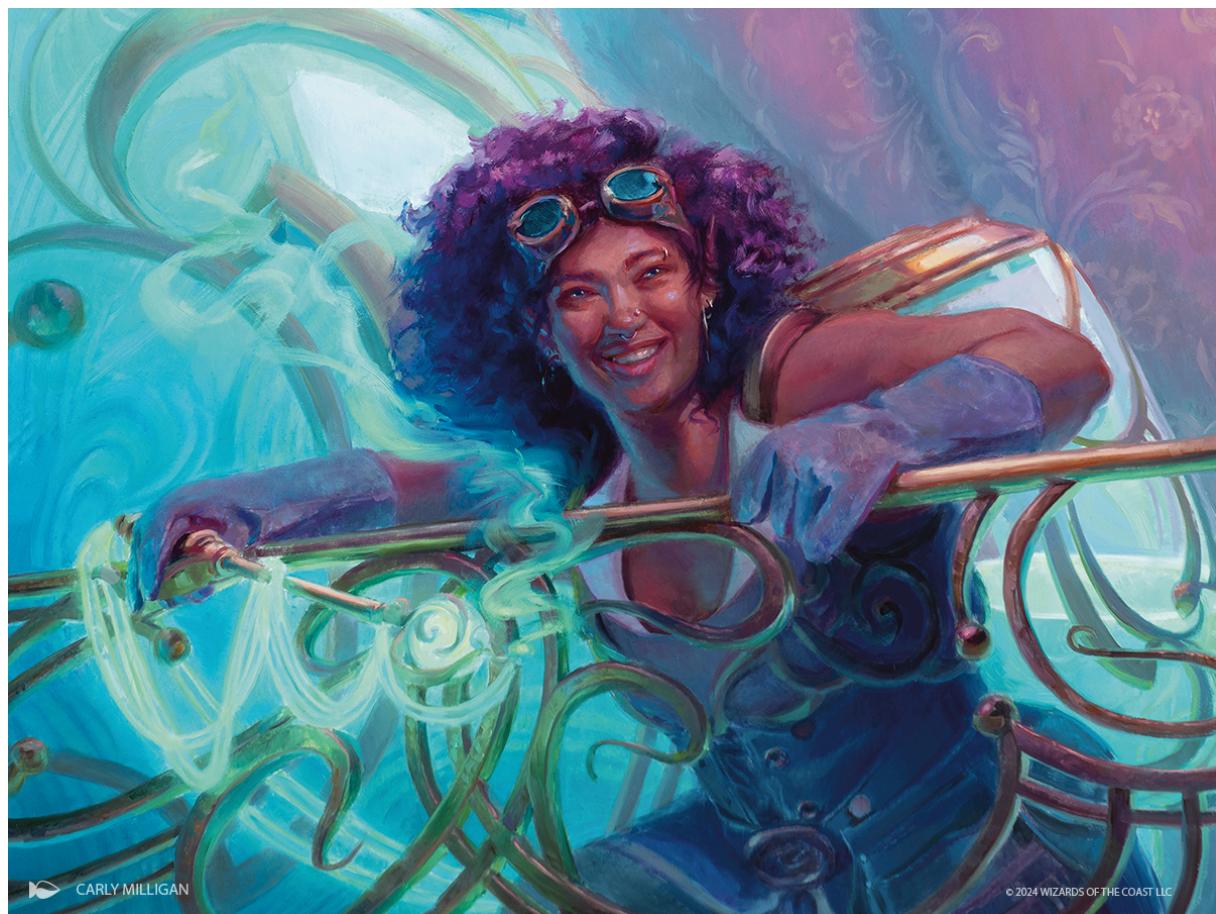
"Oh ... do you have a bit of a temper, there, Lagorin ...?"

"He dislikes injustice," says Caradora.

"But I love justice. No one's more just than me. You wouldn't eat just an eyeball, wouldja, pal?"

Lagorin's beak nearly touches Vin. He mimes clearing his throat and tries to steer the interview back on subject. "Anyway! You must be excited to get some flying in for real, huh?"

Sita glances away. As much as she loves learning about her fellow racers, the Quickbeasts aren't her top priority. Muscle and bone are no match for the pure torque and force of an engine. That much is a mathematical certainty. While she admires their spirit, she isn't going to learn anything here. Just then, she hears the screech of tires outside and her heart catches. *It's got to be Lalan!* Sure enough, there's Ghirapur's most in-demand young seamstress hopping out of a cruiser and waving up at her. Like a bolt from a crossbow, Sita shoots out of her room. Her father, downstairs in the sitting room, frowns.



Art by: Carly Milligan

"Sita! Where are you going?"

But just as he finishes asking, Sita's opening the door. Lalan steps inside. Sweat beads on her brow, and her hair is a frizzy mess, but the determination in her eyes lends Sita comfort.

"Hello, Consul Varma! I just thought I'd swing by to pick up Sita for her internship."

"Internship?" Mohar asks. His eyes narrow at the two of them. "What do you mean?"

"Lalan's atelier is looking for apprentices! I applied, and for the next couple of days, I'll be staying there to learn all about it," Sita says. Bright, happy, cheerful—there's no room for error. "I didn't mention it to you earlier because I wasn't sure I'd make it in, to be honest. It's such an exclusive position, you know?"

"Over five hundred applicants this season alone," Lalan says, which might not actually be a lie. "We ask them all to keep their acceptances private as long as possible. It prevents gossip that way."

Mohar studies them. In that instant, Sita feels him running his calculations. "The Silverloom Atelier?"

"The very same!" says Lalan. "You've probably heard of us—"

Mohar waves a hand. "Yes. The talk of the town, from what I understand," he says. He rises. For a moment, Sita worries he will say no. But then he draws her into an embrace and smooths her hair.

"Be sure to work diligently," he says. "You are a Varma, through and through. Never let anyone see you for less. When you return, we'll stop by your mother's memorial and show her your creations."

Regret is a stuck gear. Sita hugs him back. If she doesn't make any promises, she won't have to lie.

A shark-man's laugh doesn't sound like you'd expect. A gleeful, wet gurgle not unlike the babbling of a brook. "Heh! And I thought I was slow. Good to see you made it, Spitfire!"

Spitfire rolls her eyes beneath the mask. Most days she'd try to find some sort of pithy comeback, but not today. Today, she needs to get into their ride as quick as she can. Brooding silence is going to have to be the play.

She storms past the towering chordatan, the smell of chum thankfully filtered by her mask. How the Endriders put up with the briny stench is beyond her; but then again, Far Fortune seems like a woman who's put up with much in her life. The rugged road warrior is beating a spiked steel plate into place on the front of her ride.

Fortune's eye finds Spitfire's. Of all the other racers, Fortune is the only one that really intimidates Spitfire. Something about the way she looks at people. The mask may as well not be there, so far as Fortune's concerned. "You want me to chop that guy up for you? Shark isn't half bad. Tough on your teeth, though."

It feels almost like a dare—but it isn't one Spitfire can indulge. A gruff scoff, and she's off further down the lane. Speedbrood chittering, Amonkheti prayers, and goblin fight songs mingle backstage in a cacophony that makes her feel alive.

By the time she walks into the Aether Ranger's camp, Pia's already arguing with one of the marshals.

"She's right here! Now let me get her ready and go bother someone else."

The marshal gives her a once over. "You're five minutes late for last call," they say.

"For good reason," Spitfire intones. She looms over the aetherborn as best she can to sell it.

Thankfully, there's no argument. With a sheepish sigh, the marshal walks off toward the nearest control station.

"Good reason, huh?" Pia says. She raises a brow.

Spitfire looks around. The others are all too busy with their final preparations. In the distance, she spots Team Cloudspire. Kolodin, the team's captain, stands before a gathered crowd. He's about to give a speech from the looks of it. Before him is—

No. Best not to focus on *her*. If she does, she'll only lose track of the prize. The point of this isn't to be better than Chandra Nalaar. It's to be better than *everyone*. To leave no doubt who the best racer in Avishkar is—no matter who her father might be.

"My alibi was having girl trouble," Spitfire says. She leaves out Lalan's rambling about that trouble all the way to the track.

Pia lays a hand on the hood of their ride and studies Spitfire. "Girl trouble."

"Very important," she answers.

"Oh, I'm sure. Girl trouble halts a woman's day like a gremlin gobbling up all an engine's ball bearings," Pia says. The wink she shoots Spitfire is not *entirely* one of disapproval. "Thankfully, you have just enough time to get ready. Wait—don't get into the driver's seat just yet. I have a surprise for you."

Just as Spitfire turns to open the door, Pia hands her a package she'd hidden behind one of the wheels.

Now it's Spitfire's turn to raise a brow. "This isn't illegal, is it?"

"Illegal! I'm not about to risk all of this for a gift. No offense," Pia says. Then, softly, "But I think you'll like it."

Spitfire tears open the blue and green tissue paper. Beneath it, she finds a new racing suit. That's the word for it, but only in the same way that a scooter with six aether chambers and a souped-up engine is technically "a vehicle." Beautiful brass filigree follows the course of winding, glowing tubes inlaid throughout. Resting in the fold of the suit are three cylinders crackling with aether. The bases match up with the intricate ports at various points along the suit.

It's beautiful. But more than that, it's *exciting*. The analytical parts of Spitfire's head are already trying to put the pieces together.

"Induction ports. And these pipes must ... aerosolized aether, with a filter to ..."

"I knew you'd get it," Pia says with a grin. "I don't have time to go over the finer points, but you've got the gist. With one of those capsules in your system, you'll be quicker than the gods for about two seconds. And only because your perception's so advanced that—"

"Two seconds will feel like two hours to me," Spitfire finishes. She wants to throw her arms around Pia and thank her for this gift. *How long had it taken her to make it?* There must be only one in all of Avishkar.

But that isn't what Spitfire would do.

So, she keeps it to a deep, cool bow and holds the suit close to her chest. "Thank you."linebreak "Don't thank me, just get out there and win," Pia says. "And I'm sorry, but the sizing may be a little off. I tried to adjust it."

The unspoken lies between them like a safety cage. Outside it, there can only be pain.

"Right," says Spitfire. "It's because I'm taller than her, isn't it?"

Pia smiles. "Just so."



Art by: Eddie Mendoza

Kolodin likes to talk.

He's good at talking. Maybe the second best at it out of anyone she's ever met. No one's going to match up to Ajani, after all, who always made you feel like you were standing on the surface of a drum-beating victory, but Kolodin comes pretty close.

The trouble is that as stirring as this speech is, Chandra just wants to race. And she can't get her mind to settle down long enough to listen when the point is basically the same thing repeated again and again: win the race and show everyone watching the glory of victory.

Sure. But she's not here to prove that she's better than anyone. She's here for Nissa.

And so, the lively bray of Kolodin's voice, like the brightest trumpets, is to her a drone.

Is it any wonder that a whimper should cut through it?

The whine tugs at her attention like a child at her sleeve. Chandra's eyes leave Cloudspire's fearless leader, wandering off to the right.

"That really hurt."

Chandra's brow twitches. *Who is that?* Can't be one of the humans or the chordatans; the voice is too small for that. Like a whimpering toddler, almost. Maybe one of the goblins? But when she glances over there, Daretti's leading some kind of desperate last-minute workshop on explosive safety. She counts as many of the goblins as she can remember (they're good drinking buddies), and everyone seems to be in place.

So, what is it?

Kolodin keeps on talking, but Chandra slips away.

“It’s just a little pain. You’ll live,” comes a voice. Cold and exhausted sounding, a man who hasn’t slept in days. But there’s an unnatural echo to it.

Closer.

It can’t be the Brood; they hardly talk. The Voyagers? No, when she walks by them, they’re all peacefully modifying themselves, not talking to one another. *Can they even feel pain?* That’s not a thought she wants to spend much time with.

Something chirps unhappily.

The Endriders don’t keep prisoners; Far Fortune’s made that much clear. Chandra’s pretty sure the Quickbeasts would eat anyone who tried to cage someone given that they almost ate Vin this morning. The Amonkheti didn’t spend so much time fighting for freedom only to take it away from others. So that leaves ...

At the end of the hall, she spots them.

Massive, twisted vehicles. Spectral skeletons pressing up against glass prisons they can never escape. Half-eaten ghouls screeching as they finish final preparations. Liliana’s ghouls never acted like that. No. Big Sis’ Lili would have a conniption if she saw the state these guys were in. Ghoulish—even for ghouls.

The man in charge of all this would probably *also* earn Liliana’s disapproval, come to think of it. He’s not much more than a ghoul himself. The hollows beneath his eyes and the darkness of his gaunt cheeks tell her he’s the man she heard speaking.

So does the cage he’s clamping tighter around a strange, fuzzy creature. Its glowing tail and pointed ears whip out beyond the bars. The cage itself is so small that the creature is forced to stand on its hind legs at all times. As Chandra approaches, it fixes her with its big, glistening eyes. *Talk to him*, it seems to say.

Chandra doesn’t need to be told twice. “Hey, Spikes. You wanna lighten up on your little friend here? He’s in pain.”

His eyes are flinty and cold. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“He’s crying out so loud that I heard him from across the garage, so yeah, it does,” Chandra says. She crosses her arms. “Let him have some breathing room.”

“How about you keep your eyes on your own page, *Chandra Nalaar*? Chronic-hero syndrome gets you last place and six pallbearers.”

Oh, so it’s going to be like that? This little ...

“Chandra Nalaar! Last call for Chandra Nalaar! Please get to your engine!”

She grits her teeth. The man gives the most awful, dismissive shrug in the world. “Better get a move on.”

Chandra leans forward. A quick grip of the bars is all she needs to heat them up. Not a lot—barely enough to make them glow—but enough to be able to mold them. She pulls two of the bars apart wide enough to make a little perch for the creature.

Team Leader Winter scowls at her.

"See you on the track, loser," calls Chandra.

The easiest way to get a prime view of the Ghirapur Grand Prix is to *work* for the Ghirapur Grand Prix. Suraj figured this out last year, when his father's masonry company was contracted to construct many of the platforms throughout the city.



Art by: Borja Pindado

Before then, he hadn't really been into racing. The idea of watching people turn left over and over was just ... so boring. But from the top of a platform he had constructed with his own hands, he saw it was so much more than that. The tactics of when to close in, when to cut off; the lightning-fast reflexes of the drivers; the underhanded tactics some employed just to get ahead. Out there, on the track, it was always life and death. When he watched two goblins shoot each other out of a cannon just so they could slice someone's tires, he knew there was no going back to regular entertainment. He had to attend every race he could.

And so he has. Every race, Suraj and Sons have applied at river-bottom rates to construct platforms and tracks. All building toward this.

The platform Suraj is standing on is one he oversaw himself. The first such platform. No assistance from his meticulous father nor his controlling younger brothers—this was a Suraj Chaudry original. From here, dozens of spectators could watch the race in pure bliss. Not too high up and not too low, good light and yet not blinded by the sun, close to the speakers and announcers without causing one's ears to be blown out by them.

Yes, Suraj Chaudry III had one job, and he had done it well. He tells himself as much when he takes his seat in the VIP box, his commemorative bowl on his lap and a hard-earned glass of toddy at his side.

“Racing fans! This is the moment you’ve been waiting for! All of our racers have now taken their places. Once our grand marshal, the honorable night minister Gonti, fires the signal gun, we begin the Multiverse’s most amazing spectacle, most thrilling chase, most incredible extraaavaagaaaanzaaaa ... the Ghirapur Grand Prix! Night Minister Gonti, the eyes of the Multiverse are on you!”

The minister strides up onto the central platform—the one that Suraj had *really* wanted to build—as Vin’s sign language interpreter hands them the signal flare. The night minister takes the microphone. Their voice is silk and ash.

“We thank all of you for attending. This is not only a race, but a commemoration and testament to the true heart of Ghirapur: progress. We are always moving ahead, always in search of the next advancement. And where the riches of a dozen planes find their homes—there, too, you will find Ghirapur and her people.”

Some people didn’t care for the new minister, but Suraj loves Gonti dearly. Who else would have approved of all these construction jobs so quickly? And not a word of complaint about his decision to go with a cheaper, more quickly made copper alloy instead of steel. Not a word, indeed.

The minister raises the signal flare.

All around, the cheers of the spectators reach fever pitch. Chants for this team or that echo in his ears. Someone’s started a stomp-clap routine for the chordatans, which strikes him as a little insane given their betting odds.

Stomp. Clap. Stomp, stomp, clap.

Everyone knows Team Cloudspire is the real winner here. Where’s their chant? They don’t need one, of course, with machines like those and Chandra Nalaar at the helm, but still. Maybe he should start one.

Stomp. Clap. Stomp, stomp, clap.

Gonti fires the flare.

Here, two things happen.

First: With a speed before now unknown to creation, the racers streak out past the starting gates. Blurs of green and red and white and black and blue shoot ahead. First among them: the Rocketeers. Go figure. Their rocket cars are built for quick starts and insane handling, so it’s no wonder. Though his heart sinks when he catches sight of Cloudspire. For some reason, Chandra Nalaar’s in dead last. *Is she tailgating the Speed Demons instead of focusing on winning ...?*

But all of that falls away from Suraj’s mind when the second thing happens: the crowd rises to their feet at once, jumping and hollering, and the metal beneath them *groans*.

Safety alarms slice straight through the cheer of the crowd. It’s panic that seizes their hearts as they realize what’s happening.

The platform is going to fall over.

As the marshals close in to catch the falling spectators, the thought occurs to Suraj: he had one job.

And now he might never have another again.



SCOTT M. FISCHER

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Art by: Scott M. Fischer

What's worse than navigating the jam-packed streets of Ghirapur in a vehicle going half the speed of sound?

Doing so while debris is falling overhead, a swarm of wasps are trying to get into your ride, shark-people are firing cannons at you, and you're fairly certain those nice little robots are messing with your communications.

Spitfire grits her teeth. Chaos doesn't become her. That the others are resorting to underhanded tactics so early in the race only tells her that they're desperate. They don't really have what it takes.

Swerving around a corner saves her from a cannonball, only for one of the Endriders to close the distance. The fierce young vagabond throws a hooked chain toward Spitfire's ride. She slams on the brakes, and the chain wraps around a street lamp instead.

The hairs on the back of Spitfire's neck tingle.

She throws herself into reverse and turns out to the right—onto the sidewalk—and away from the Endriders.

It proves to be a good decision. No sooner than she turns away does an Amonkheti beast trample over the chain binding the Endrider to the pole. The poor kid didn't stand a chance against a zombified river horse: from the corner of Spitfire's eye, she spots his leg getting crushed.

Yellow flags up ahead. No time to think about whether that kid is ever going to race again. Spitfire wanted to prove she's the best? Well, here's her chance. The crumbling platform is bad enough, not

to mention falling chunks of stone, girders barricading this path and that, and zipping rescue teams overhead catching the spectators in midair.

That falling platform, that thicket, is the first real test of her ambition, her talent, her drive.

If she wants to show people that she can be more than her lineage, she needs to ace this.

She grabs a canister. Jamming it into a socket on her suit's shoulder, she swerves to avoid one of the Quickbeasts charging out from behind. Her head's spinning, her heart's pumping.

Spitfire twists the canister and enters the infinite.

The sizzling crackle of aether fills her; her tongue tingles; her whole body alight with an energy it can't contain. Even the heartbeat—moments ago like the flutter of a hummingbird's wings—has gone stone-still. If she didn't know any better, she'd think she was dying.

Part of her brain is in absolute wonder at all this—at the obstacles stuck midair, the Quickbeast unbreathing and still, the Keelhauler cannonades and goblin rocket-barrages frozen in time.

But if she wants to win, there's no time for wonder.

Pedal to the metal.

Spitfire's ride surges forward. Weaving beneath the wings of the Quickbeast up ahead, she avoids an oncoming chunk of platform overhead.

A rain of food from the platform's concession is a darkly comedic curtain. Rather than risk something getting caught in her engine, she switches gears, drifts into a ninety-degree turn, and launches herself off the back of a Voyager's tank.

It is midway through the launch that she catches sight of it: a spectral arm heading straight toward her. The Speed Demons. If that thing makes contact, it'll hurl her away, at best.

So, she won't let them make contact.

Flipping a switch on the steering wheel activates the auxiliary thrusters. Spitfire's idea, not Pia's. She'd insisted on them for situations just like this—without them, taking to the air would always be a fool's bargain.

The thrusters ignite. Spitfire is slammed against the roll cage by the pure momentum as her ride rolls through the air. Ghostly claws rake at the smoke and dust she leaves behind. From the corner of her eye, she catches the Speed Demons turning off the track in defeat.

Up ahead: the floor of the platform itself, shorn from the base, falls like a great disk. Her only hope of making it past the thing is to aim for the center. The stairwell's left a gaping hole there. But at the rate it's falling and Spitfire is traveling, it would be insanity to attempt it.

Spitfire has never been one to back down from a challenge.

Another flick of a switch. Impossible force steadies the ride mid-roll. Her head should be dashed against the roll cage, her stomach should be empty, but the momentum of it all hasn't quite hit her yet.

She is left to contemplate what might be the approach of certain death: the wall of stone, wood, and metal she's hurtling toward like a missile.

What would her father think if he heard she died doing this?

Maybe he'd realize he never really knew her.

One breath, two ...

There!

In the span of an eye-blink, the shorn stairwell shows itself, and Spitfire shoots through it. It's another three seconds of airtime before she hits the ground again. The whole ride rocks and lurches but remains sound.

Coasting through the Omenpath feels easy in comparison. The dazzling sights on the other side of it—along with the wall of heat—fill her with wonder. Massive statues to gods she's never known; beautiful oases in bloom; the music and sound of a plane eager to prove itself.

Petals fly over the first-place winner ...

And Spitfire realizes it's not her.

The Speed Demons. But they'd been behind her a second ago. How had they ...?

Second place is never good enough. But at least she's ahead of Nalaar.

For today, it will have to do.

If Mohar Varma sees that car do a barrel roll one more time, he's going to scream.

Every single channel is playing it on loop it seems. The news stations he might be able to understand, this garish spectacle of recklessness somehow being part of daily life here now. They're honor bound to cover it.

But all of the other channels, too? Every time he flicks over from one to another, the shots blend into each other. The car launching, the falling platform, the announcer losing his mind and shouting.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve never seen anything like this! Maybe the Aether Rangers will be fine without the younger Nalaar after all. Could Chandra have stared death in the face like this!”

Idiots. Chandra Nalaar, for all her faults (and there are many) had saved the Multiverse. Mohar attended the medal ceremony himself. This new upstart—likely plucked by Gonti off the streets—could never hope to compare.

Ugh. Why did he care? Mohar turns the screen off.

It’s then that he realizes the screaming wasn’t just coming from the crowds.

In the empty halls of his family home, he hears a howl of agony.

An assassin? It wouldn’t be the first.

He picks up an aether blaster mounted on the wall and storms toward the door. Thank the gods that Sita isn’t home; he would hate for her to see him like this. Violence isn’t a thing for women to witness.

Yet, as he rounds the corner, it is a woman he sees—one with green skin and serpentine tendrils for hair. He aims the blaster—only for his hand to stop when he tries to fire. No matter how much he tries to force himself to shoot, he can’t seem to move. He can’t even speak. It’s as if someone’s trapped him within his own body.

The woman gives him a pitying look. Next to her, the shadows part, and he realizes they have company. A man with a blue cloak hanging around his shoulders; his eyes glow a bright, searing blue. *Wait a second. Hadn’t he seen this one before, during the Aether Revolt ...?*

“Mohar Varma,” says the man. “That’s your name, right? Actually, don’t answer that, I know it is. Just like I know what you had for breakfast, and what your secret hopes and dreams are for this plane.”

Unable to speak, Mohar can only seethe. He feels something in the back of his mind, an uncomfortable probing.

“Would you like to make that dream a reality? You see how easily we hold you in place now. Those who usurped your power wouldn’t stand a chance against you if you had our backing.”

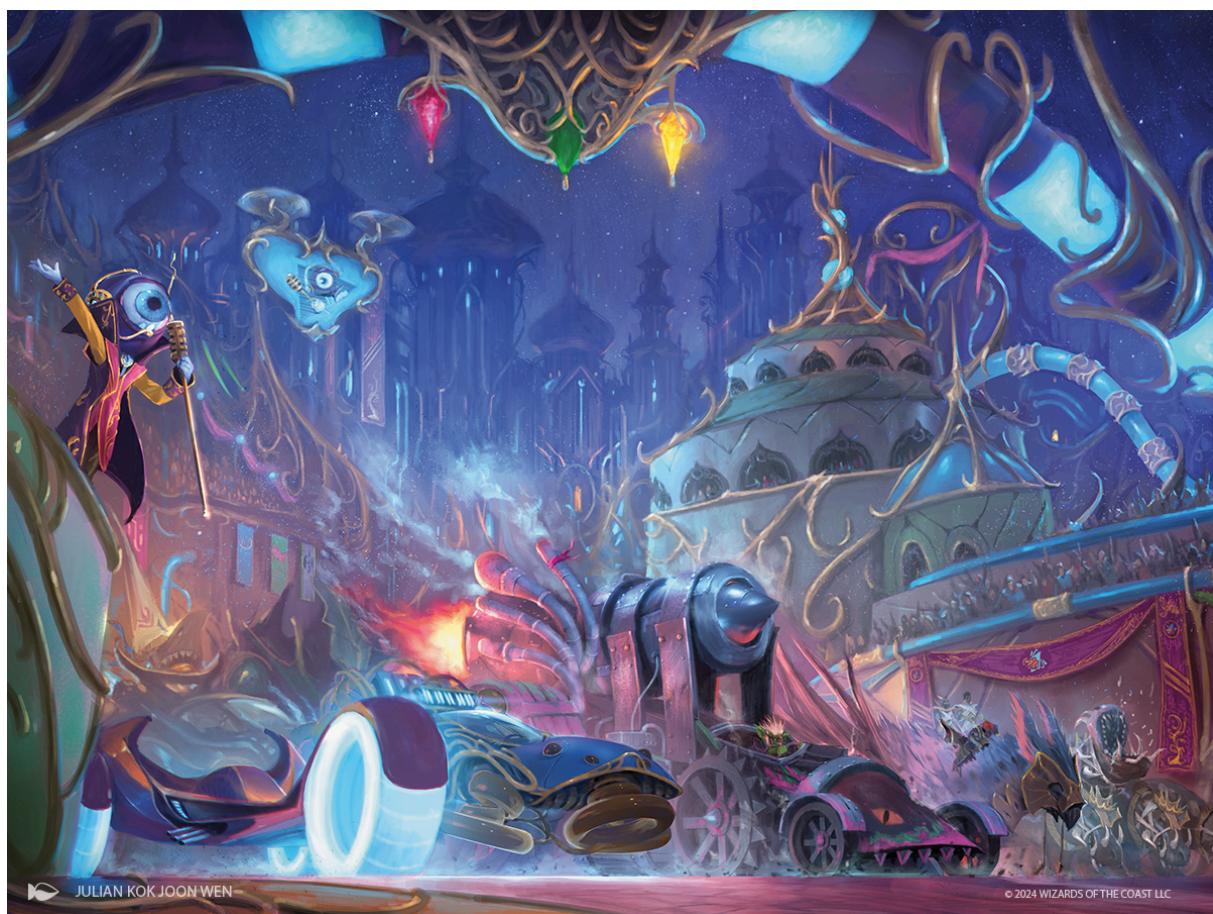
“With a stroke of your pen you could undo all of the things they’ve done to your precious city,” he says. “You know how much people long for it. Two bloodless revolutions, your opponents imprisoned.”

“It’s a beautiful state of affairs, isn’t it? You can see it now,” says the man.

And he can. He can see it all so vividly, so perfectly: himself and the restored consuls in their halls. Order and righteousness. The restoration of all the things that had made Kaladesh great—and the peace of knowing your proper place. A Sita who’s no longer confused by the rhetoric of the masses but eager to fulfill her role.

Life as it had been before the invasion.

“All we need,” says the man, “is a little help from you.”



Art by: Julian Kok Joon Wen