

The Skies over Ghirapur

Ari Levitch

From set *Aether Revolt*

When renegades prepared to storm the Aether Hub, sky pirate Kari Zev had a different plan—find aether the best way she knows how by taking directly from Consulate ships. Always one in favor of a contingency plan, Jace accompanied the young captain on her mission.

When the Consulate retakes the Aether Hub from the renegades, they lock down air traffic and threaten to stamp out the renegades' plan to assault Tezzeret himself. It will fall to Kari and Jace to create the opening the renegades need.



Kari Zev's Expertise |Art by Jason Rainville

Though she was only fifteen, Kari Zev had been at the pirating trade long enough to have seen her share of strange things. Sometimes she'd go to strange places and meet strange people, while at other times strangeness came to her. Perhaps that's just what it was to be pirate. Kari couldn't say for sure, but whatever it was, Kari had always been quick to recognize the strange as a wonderful source of opportunity.

And that's how the notorious young pirate captain found herself aboard a Consulate aether-collecting skyship, smuggling canisters of their inventory onto her ship under the approving gaze of Consulate stooges, all the while consulting the voice in her head.

Of course, the Consulate saw none of that, at least not in that way. What they observed was an allied Consulate vessel, with a loyal Consulate crew, who'd come to them on official Consulate business to requisition aether for the Consulate cause.



Aethersphere Harvester | Art by Christine Choi

“It’s quite a trick, Jace. I can’t believe it’s working. This is the last crate,” she thought, though it still felt odd to think *at* someone. But then, what was typical about this job?

She bent her knees, pressed her cheek against the filigreed side panel of the crate, and lifted her end of it. Through gritted teeth, she let out a sharp abbreviated breath as the load rose off the deck’s polished surface, and as the weight of the crate was bit into her fingers, Jace’s voice bloomed in her head.

“Let’s just get this done. I’d advise against any more theatrics, though.”

“Theatrics?” She was shuffling backward as she conversed in her mind, trusting in her crate-partner to guide their way across the gangplank that spanned the open space between this ship and hers. *“What theatrics? As a loyal Consulate captain, I simply shared my feelings about the filthy renegades.”*

“The illusions that mask you, your crew, and your ship are only visual. All I’m saying is don’t give them reason to be suspicious. There’s a guard to your left. He’s not pleased about this exchange.”

Kari didn’t have to look to know that the guard was watching her, but of course she did anyway. He was a lanky officer of some rank, with rounded shoulders and gray at his temples. Kari nodded at him as they stepped onto the gangplank.

“He’s following you across,” came Jace’s thoughts once more.

“Excellent,” she thought, *“I have a lot more to say.”*

“I can tell that you’re joking, you know.”

“You’re still sweating about it, though, aren’t you?” Kari teased.

At last they were back aboard her ship, *Dragon’s Smile*, though it looked more like a Consulate-commissioned cloud cutter, and even she couldn’t see through Jace’s illusion. Hopefully, neither could this officer, who came around to her as she and her partner lowered the crate to the deck.

Kari rubbed her sore fingers, and turned to the officer, who stood a full head taller than her. “Can I help you with something?” He was looking around the ship, and he was doing so in a way that seemed like he wanted her to know that he was looking for something.

“He’s a lieutenant,” Jace telepathically fed her.

“Lieutenant,” she said, and again, “can I help you with something?”

The officer tilted his head down and met her gaze. He started to say something, but his words were lost as a screech from above cut across them, and he leapt back as though to avoid an attack. “A monkey!” he said, looking up. A second screech sounded.



Art by Daniel Ljunggren

“Yep,” confirmed Kari. “Someone’s got to run this ship.”

Clearly relieved, the sailor let out a nervous chuckle, and Kari couldn’t resist. “What’s funny?” she said in all seriousness. A long moment followed where the officer’s smile slowly faded until he was standing there shifting his gaze awkwardly from the monkey to Kari, and back again. Kari’s face remained humorless, and she was savoring every bit of this.

“I’m just having fun with you, Lieutenant,” she said, hooking a thumb beneath the sash of rank that hung across her torso, and giving it a good flick. “This here’s my ship.”

His head cocked to one side, and his brow furrowed. “I’m sorry, you seem quite young to be a captain.”

Kari put on her best no-nonsense expression. “Son, there are two possible realities here. Either I *am* too young, and therefore not a captain. Or,” she flicked the sash of rank again, “I am, in fact, a captain, and you are questioning my authority. Now then, which reality do you suppose is a safer one for you to believe in? Perhaps there’s a reason you’re still a lieutenant. Think on that.”

“Apologies, Captain. I meant no offense.”

Kari reached up and brushed off the officer’s shoulder. It took everything she had not to laugh. “I know. If you meant to offend me, well, then you’d discover a whole other kind of reality. Now go on.” She turned her back to them, and barked an order at no one in particular, “ Make ready to shove off! The renegade filth must pay!”

When the lieutenant departed, Kari had the gangplank hauled in. Soon, the space between the ships began to widen as Kari’s pulled away. When she deemed the distance to be sufficient, she thought at Jace, “*You can drop the trick now. We’re well enough away.* “ And before she could finish articulating her thoughts into words, her Consulate uniform dissipated, along with the Consulate trappings on her ship. She was no long Kari Zev, Consulate blah, but instead, she was back to being Kari Zev, pirate captain. “*Impressive, Jace. Truly. Now meet me on deck if you want to see our score.* “

As she waited for the hooded man, she paced the deck of her ship. Even though it was never truly gone, she was glad to have it back. While it wasn’t her first ship, it was beautiful, with its up-swept bow that had earned it its name. She loved it. More than that, she loved it up here. It was fresher, and freer, and it was hers.

Off to starboard, Kari spotted a pod of skywhales that swam through a swirling aether current no more than a couple leagues away. There were perhaps a dozen of the magnificent creatures following the flow of aether across the sky. Young were among them, darting between their mammoth elders with a heedlessness that made Kari smile.

“You shouldn’t have done that back there,” said Jace when he joined Kari at the crates, and it took her a moment to adjust to the sound of his voice being spoken aloud. “It was an unnecessary risk to tear into that officer. You knew that to be true.”

“A risk? Yeah, I suppose. But I’d never be able to forgive myself otherwise.” Her hand swept from the direction from which they had flown toward the pile of lifted cargo behind her. “You understand that, right?”

“I’m not entirely sure I do,” Jace replied, but Kari already wasn’t listening. The begoggled monkey, Ragavan, was watching this exchange from atop the heap of crates, and Kari whistled him over.

“Come, Ragavan, prince of mine, let’s have a look inside, shall we?” Kari worked at the latch, and when it slid away it was the white-furred monkey who hoisted the lid. With a smile, Kari welcomed the familiar blue glow that washed over them.



Art by Sara Winters

She reached inside and extracted the cylindrical form of an aether canister. The light it emitted came from a glass window set into the middle of its metal casing, and Kari gazed at the swirling gaseous contents within. Then, from over her shoulder, Jace's face appeared.

"Were you expecting something other than aether?"

"Nope. Just appreciating the moment. You should too. After all, your illusion won us all this," she said, passing the canister over to Jace, who took it with obvious curiosity. Then she boomed the command, "Let's get this cargo secured! Bring it below."

After a moment, the platform in the center of the deck began to sink into the cargo hold in the belly of *Dragon's Smile*. As it moved, Kari lifted herself onto one of the other crates, and sat at its edge so that her legs dangled.



Kari Zev, Skyship Raider | Art by Brad Rigney

Addressing Jace, who didn't even seem to notice to descent, she said, "You know, when I was aboard my first ship, *Sun Chaser*, my captain used to tell me all the time that the main thing that makes a great pirate is instinct for finding and seizing opportunity. If you can't do that, my captain said, you're just a thief with a boat." She paused. "What I mean is, when all this business with the Consulate and the Grand Consul is over, you could come with us. A person of your talents could be pretty useful."

No response. Perhaps he hadn't heard her. The platform shuddered into place in the narrow hold below deck.

Kari was about to repeat the question, but stopped. Instead, she just watched him turn the cylinder over in hands, as though he was inspecting it for some hidden meaning that was sealed away within. It was just aether, but he was utterly engrossed.

Then at last, Jace said, "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

Never mind, she thought. Instead, she said, "You're not the pirating type, are you?"

The canister stopped moving in Jace's hands. He smiled. "No? What type do I strike you as?"

"Well," Kari leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and gave Jace a squinting look. "Not the pirating type, anyway."

"I suppose not. But what does that entail, the pirating type? How did you come to enjoy this lifestyle?"

"How does anyone come to do anything?" Kari shrugged. "All I know is that I couldn't imagine doing anything else. Whatever it takes to keep this ship flying, I'll do it. And all this aether," she pounded a fist on the lid of the crate she was using as a chair, "is going to fetch enough to see that skies remain open to me for at least a little while."

Jace set the canister back in its place like it was suddenly contaminated. “You intend to *sell* this aether to the renegades? Let’s be clear, I went with you because I thought you could help turn the tide in all this. I can lend a hand with your errands; just know that I’m here for Tezzeret.

It was little too accusatory for Kari’s liking. Especially aboard her own ship. “Look, Jace, Pia and I are pretty close. She’s like a second mom to me. But she knows me well enough to understand that I don’t fight for freedom, and I certainly don’t fight for free. I’ll raid for the renegade cause because it’s the right thing to do, but the truth of it is this ship, let alone a fleet, doesn’t stay in the sky all by itself.” She pounded her fist again. “That’s the pirating type!”

Her face was growing hot, and she was aware that the volume of her voice had risen sharply over last few seconds. She took a breath. “Look, just before dawn tomorrow, I’ll be arranging the drop with one of Pia’s associates. You should come.”

They were called the aviaries. Kari had explained to Jace it was the collective term for the cluster of hangars perched on the rooftops of some of the tallest buildings in Ghirapur. It’s where she used to visit as a small child to watch skyships come and go all day. The whole thing was a tangle of catwalks and stairways that connected a host of storage facilities and workshops that ranged in size from meager to cavernous. It reminded Jace of an inverted anthill.

It was dark in the predawn light but for a wisp of aether, miles long, bent close to the city. Jace was thankful for its pale blue light, which was enough for him to pick out the edges and contours of their circuitous path.

Then, Jace saw a vertical yellow-orange light appear in space ahead of Kari. In an instant, he snatched the same illusion spell from his mind that he’d used back on the Consulate ship, ready to mask the two of them if the need arose. He waited. Then, above the nagging wind he heard Kari’s muted voice, “Ukti, is that you?”

“Kari,” came an unfamiliar voice, raspy and hard. It wasn’t entirely unfriendly, a fact that Jace was quick to confirm with cursory telepathic feelers. “I’m surprised to see you here,” the voice continued.

“Why? What happened?” Kari asked.

“Pia’s group lost the Aether Hub. They’re all scattered now. Some people started showing up here, but not the ones you’re waiting to see.”

“Show me,” said Kari. The door swung open to reveal an old dwarven woman, wrinkled with age, but upright and strong-looking.

Jace followed Kari into a wide, low-ceilinged room arranged like a restaurant, with round, bare-topped, metal tables. From what Jace could see, broad windows encircled the place, though the curtains had been drawn across them all.

“This is First Launch,” Kari informed Jace. “It’s a restaurant and club for aeronauts. My parents brought me here a few times when I was kid.”

“You’re still a kid, Kari.” Ukti rounded on the youth. “What kind of life is piracy for a fifteen-year-old?”

“Mine,” answered Kari, her voice cool, as though she’d given that exact response, with just as much explanation, a dozen times or more. For several breaths, an invisible, unbendable rod seemed to extend between Kari’s eyes and those of the elderly dwarf, as they stared coldly at one another.

Finally, Ukti snorted, and turned to lead the two of them through dining area, pushing in chairs as she went. Soon, they entered a pantry. The shelves were only half full, but Jace wouldn’t have known

from the collection of smells that met them. At the pantry's far side, Ukti reached behind a spice rack and found something there along the wall, and there came a sequence of low clicks that seemed to originate inside the wall. She then tugged at the corner of the shelf, which pivoted inward silently on rollers to reveal a dimly lit, narrow chamber. Within, a slightly narrower stairway with steep, shallow steps led upward to the sound of muffled voices. Five minds according to Jace's mental sweep.

"Through here," Ukti said with a tired wave.

"Thank you, Ukti," said Kari. She placed her foot atop the first step, but before she could begin ascending, Ukti seized her wrist and shot a glance around to each of the three of them.

"Listen," Ukti said, "you are two out of a handful of people who know about this place. It's my sanctum. You treat it with respect."

Jace navigated the steps after Kari. Below him, Ukti closed the secret door, and the only light came from a circular hole in the ceiling where the stairs terminated. As his feet found each progressive rung, Jace thought of his own sanctum on Ravnica. It was his retreat from the pressures of his Guildpact responsibilities, and he'd grown to rely on it. He knew well the importance of a person's sanctum.

His head rose through the round portal into a room that was far too small for its current inhabitants. A quick count confirmed his initial assessment, and with Kari that meant six people crammed into a room not much larger than the pantry they had just passed through. Everyone was talking at once, and each person appeared to be carrying on several conversations. In the middle of it all was his own companion. The noise was a little overwhelming, and Jace decided to focus on navigating the final, awkward step into the room. He was contemplating his approach when a thick gauntleted hand reached out from the huddle. Behind it, a voice: "It's a tricky one. Take my hand."

Jace complied. A strong grip closed around his hand, and he was hoisted into the room.

Then Jace heard Kari's familiar voice. "Come on in, Jace." She was pushing her way over to him, and his eyes moved from her to take in the cramped space. Every inch of every wall was covered in what Jace discerned to be aviator equipment and tools. Some of it looked very old. To his left, a metal shelf extended from the wall to form a work bench, and it too was covered in all manner of tiny metal bits and instruments. In the far corner, someone sat in an old, worn chair. A second chair in the other corner filled the remaining space.

"I'm not sure I can be any more 'in' than I am now."

"No?" Kari smirked, and hung an arm over his shoulder. "Crows!" The conversation in the room quieted as the all eyes turned toward Kari. "This here is Jace. He's a friend of Renegade Prime's, which means he's one of my friends. He's a talented young man and a promising smuggler."

When the conversations resumed, Jace suddenly found himself in the middle of them. Kari recounted their heist from earlier, and after that came the introductions. They were called the Derby Crows. They had been an aeronaut society that raced skyships in the city, but as things with the Consulate took a turn, they decided as a group to take a more active role in politics. They were at the Aether Hub with Pia when everything fell apart yesterday.

"Look," Kari said, "I'm supposed to make a drop today, but it appears things are a bit more complicated than I was hoping. How bad is it?"

A dwarf rose to her feet. Around her neck hung a red scarf embroidered with purple scrollwork, and a white tattoo ran down across her right eye from forehead to cheek. Depala was how she'd introduced herself. "Consulate's spread out from Weldfast to the Spire. They've formed up around *Skysovereign*."

"*Skysovereign*," Kari repeated after a moment.

“Yeah,” said Depala with a nod. “Have a look. Laksha, show them what you showed us.”

The woman Depala had addressed turned around and slid a small gear-shaped door to one side. Jace had missed it on his initial read of the room, but it was very small door with an opening that was no higher than the woman’s chest. She had to duck to pass through it. “Come on,” she said, but Jace, Kari, and Depala were only able to crowd around the doorway and look out at the woman, who huddled over an apparatus that was perched on a modest platform clinging to the attic’s exterior. She didn’t seem to mind.



Quicksmith Spy | Art by Ryan Alexander Lee

“There,” she said. “Have a look for yourselves.” And then she pushed her way back into the attic. The apparatus was a collection of lenses fixed in a brass frame, and when it was Jace’s turn to peer through them, his entire field of vision was filled with the enormity of what could only be the promised *Skysovereign*, a massive warship that hung heavy in the air like a storm cloud. In the growing light of dawn, Jace could make out scores of smaller escort ships that orbited the flagship.



Skysovereign, Consul Flagship | Art by Jung Park

When he rejoined the group inside, Depala was shaking her head. “There’s no way *Heart of Kiran*’s getting through that monster,” she said, spinning the replica’s tiny propeller as she spoke.

After that, no one said anything for a while, and the only sound was Laksha moving the gear door back into place.

“Kari,” the dwarf said, “we’re trying to find a way to buy the *Heart of Kiran* some time to take flight. It’s our best shot at the Spire, but this blockade has completely grounded the renegades. We can’t even get to our racing crafts,” she said.

“So you have no plan,” Jace said.

Depala threw her hands up. “That’s what we’ve been trying figure out. We need ships, plain and simple.”

Admittedly Jace felt a bit out of his element with all the talk of skyships, though he seized on something the young captain had mentioned after their heist. “What about your fleet, Kari? You mentioned your fleet earlier.”

“Is that true?” asked the large man who’d lifted Jace into the room, a note of optimism rising in his voice.

Kari shot Jace a look. He got the feeling that he’d said something wrong, but he was already following that question up with another. “Can you send word to them? Kari?”

“Wouldn’t do much good.” She leaned against the work bench shelf, and looked at her boots while everyone was looked at her. “They’re near Lathnu,” Kari said without looking up, “but they’re not exactly sky-worthy these days. That *Skysovereign*’s exactly as you described it, Depala: a monster. It was designed to be a pirate hunter, and it was that and more. When it was done with my fleet, *Dragon’s Smile* was the only ship to make it out. You can find the rest of them scattered in a million pieces in the streets of the village that it destroyed to get to us.”

Then Kari pointed in *Skysovereign* 's direction, as though she could sense it through the wall. "All I could do was watch as that thing just floated away like it was out for a pleasure cruise."

Silence once again filled the room. Then Jace stepped toward Kari. "Was it a lot of ships?" he asked.

"Fourteen, including *Dragon's Smile*."

"And how well did you know them?"

"Very." She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Jace allowed himself a smile. "Then we have no time to waste. I have an idea."

During the night, the aether current had swept in close to the city, bringing with it the same pod of whales that Kari had seen yesterday during the heist. Kari, knuckles on the starboard gunwale, leaned out from the deck to peer down over the side of her ship at these gathered behemoths. With mouths agape, the whales took turns gulping huge curls of aether, and all along their hides countless speckles lit up with the aether's warm glow.

From there, Kari's gaze tracked along the sprawl of the city. An updraft sent her asymmetrically longer hair whipping along her right shoulder with such suddenness that Ragavan scurried over to her unassailed shoulder with a litany of annoyed noises. Below the ship's keel, a veil of gauzy clouds spread out over most of the sky below, and the parts of the city seen through it took on an ethereal quality.

Even from this altitude, she could see the double-pylon tower that loomed as the tallest structure in the city. It was haloed in multiple tiers of circling enforcer skyships, and as much as she attempted to count and assess their various makes and armaments, her eyes were again and again drawn to the floating mass that dominated the airspace between the spire and Weldfast—*Skysovereign* .

All they had to do was dislodge it from its aerial perch long enough to create enough of a gap for the renegades' own *Heart of Kiran* to mount an assault on the grand consul in the spire. So the plan was to draw the Consulate flagship out of position. Toward them. To Kari, it was as though the ship was following her across the world, and she was now supposed to welcome it with open arms. She was suddenly aware of how thin and cold the air up here was, though part of her found more comfort in it than in the prospect of facing the *Skysovereign* again.

But then there was the other part of her, the pirate captain part, which demanded satisfaction for the destruction of her fleet. It was that part of her that sent an angry heat up her neck until it boiled over in sharp, hissed words that pushed their way through clenched teeth. "Sovereign of the sky, huh?" Her eyes shifted back to the whales in flight. "I'm not sure they'd agree."

Kari found her raiders in the cargo hold, seated in two rows facing each other. It was more cramped than usual, with their haul of aether taking up most of the space.

Seven of the raiders crewed *Dragon's Smile* , and five were Derby Crows. Each one of them had a flight pack secured to their backs, though the packs varied from raider to raider. Kari took the moment to captain a bit; she strode up and down the narrow space between the two rows, doling out encouraging nods before she drew her sword and addressed them all.

"Listen up! Your job is to get some attention. Cause enough of a stink for their flagship to take notice. Think you can do that?" An enthusiastic affirmation rose up. "Good. Now remember, this is *Dragon's Smile* ," she said, spreading her arms out to either side. "Today, each one of you is one of its brilliant pointed teeth! And the time has come to show the Consulate just how sharp these teeth can be."

The cheers of her raiders followed her from the cargo hold, and she let them linger in her thoughts as she made her way to the cockpit.

When they'd left the Aviaries that morning, Depala had made it quite clear that she'd like to pilot *Dragon's Smile* during this operation. When Kari asked why she should allow it, Depala had simply said, "Because you know that's where I belong." That much was probably true. Kari had seen her race before, and there was no doubt that the dwarf was one of the best pilots in Ghirapur.

Kari was going to ask Depala to take the helm, anyway, but she never said so, so when the captain entered the cockpit, it made her smile to see the dwarf already seated at the controls. Behind her, Jace was strapping into his seat.

Kari secured Ragavan in his spot in an alcove above the pilot. After she had strapped herself in, she asked, "Are you two all set?"

"Just give the word," said Depala.

"Jace?" Kari said, shifting in her seat toward him.

"If I had to choose yes or no, then I suppose yes. But if it's a spectrum—"

"Depala," Kari called out as she slid her goggles over her eyes, "make like a meteor!"

"Right away, Captain," said the dwarf, before addressing the crew through the conical end of a communication tube that extended from the ceiling of the cockpit. "Here we go." Then the engines halted with a low sigh, and even before the quad propellers had stopped rotating, the ship was falling. Air rushed around the vessel, and in seconds its mounting whoosh drowned out all other noise. Her straps kept her secured to her seat, but Kari's stomach felt unmoored in her abdomen. It was a discomfort she was used to, and one even Jace, who sat with eyes closed, seemed to be handling like it was nothing.

Not much time now, Kari intuited. At any moment, Depala would reengage the engines. Through the rounded glass of the cockpit, all Kari could see were flits of white racing up along a backdrop of blue sky. Wisps of cloud, she guessed, but they were moving too fast. Any time now, Depala.

Then the skyship's nose dipped, and the cockpit was suddenly leading the descent. All at once, the fast-approaching city swung into view, and so did the tops of dozens of Consulate ships arranged in a multi-layered formation that were impossible to count from their vantage. The abrupt shift in gravity pinned Kari and her insides back, and all she could do was watch the panic that was spreading among the formation as they frantically dispersed at their advance. "Look at 'em scatter!" came Depala's voice through her manic laughter.

"How about those engines, Depala?" Kari said in way that barely resembled a question.

"Another second." She was enjoying this perhaps a bit too much. "And..." The dwarf's hand shot forward and cranked the lever to engage the engines. The ship obeyed, as Kari knew it would, and she felt the hum of its four rotors working in harmony.

Dragon's Smile soared between the first of the Consulate ships and through the gap in the blockade. "Here we go!" Depala bellowed. She pulled on the control stick, and the ship went into a tight swoop that brought it out of its vertical dive. Then *Dragon's Smile* was among the Consulate fleet, and the pilot had to weave between the hostile vessels. There was no time for them to catch their breath, though the same was true for the Consulate ships, which were still tangled in their collective scramble.

Now the real work could begin. "Stay between them until we deploy," Kari said. "They're less likely to open fire if they might hit their own ships."

"I don't have much choice. They're everywhere!" Depala growled. "If you're going to deploy the crew, do it soon."

Kari unfastened her straps. "It won't do much good if *Skysovereign* doesn't take any notice. Just get as close as you can." The young captain rose from her seat and leaned into the communication tube, her words echoing as they made their way through the narrow tube that reached out through her ship and down to her crew in the cargo hold. "Get ready down there! When the hatch opens, deploy! Be as bees—swarm them!"

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then, "Bees?" came a tinny voice from the tube. "A moment ago, we were teeth. Sharp teeth. Which is it, if I may be so bold, Captain?"

That was good. Spirits were up. "What about bees *with* teeth? How does that sound?"

"Absolutely terrifying."

"Wonderful!" Kari meant to say, but the word came out as a gulp as the skyship juked to one side. She caught herself on the back of the captain's chair. "No chance of a warning next time, I take it," Kari said leaning over Depala's shoulder.

"Afraid not, Captain." Depala sent the ship into a sharp climb that was punctuated by a hard bank. "Have a look." There was no need for her to point, for when they came out of their turn, Kari's field of vision was consumed by *Skysovereign*'s great bulk. It hung there in the air, almost motionless, between two buildings like a predatory bird perched on an invisible branch.

"There it is," the captain said flatly as her eyes narrowed.

She turned to the illusionist, who was still motionless, with eyes shut tight, though now pale as a marble statue. She had to admit, he was handling the drop better than she thought. "Jace! Jace!" When his eyelids slid open, Kari barked, "You still with us?"

He nodded. "I'll be ready when you need me."

"I truly hope so. In the meantime, I need you to open the cargo bay door to unleash the crew. Turn that crank until it doesn't crank anymore." She pointed to a metallic disk that hung from the low ceiling above Jace's head. "Ragavan, to me!" The monkey scurried to her along the netting on the wall, and by the time he was on her shoulder, Jace was at his task.

"Where are you going?" he yelled over the screech of the obstinate crank.

She pulled on a flight pack, and Ragavan had to do some gymnastics to avoid the harness's straps. "I'm going topside to see about keeping my deck clear!" Kari said, clasping the contraption's final strap at her waist. Then she was off at a run, her booted footfalls clanging along the metal floor panels of the central corridor and up a steep set of stairs. At the top, she pushed her way through a low, arched passage that opened onto the chaotic scene that played out all around them—because of them.

Ships were streaking past from every direction, and Kari felt as though she were moving in slow motion against such a frenetic backdrop. Or rather, the whole thing seemed like the inner workings of an elaborate clockwork toy that had been wound too tight. Fast flying was nothing new to Kari, but she had to admit, Depala was coaxing something out of *Dragon's Smile* that even she hadn't seen before.

She better not break my ship.

Once at the ship's stern, she was thankful to have the cabin at her back, which protected her from the wind's most insistent clutches. She anchored herself to railing with the cable and winch that was fixed to the bottom of her flight pack. Then, she peered down just as the first of her raiders launched

from the yawning cargo bay. They emerged as blurs in twos and threes until all twelve were airborne, carried along on flight packs much like her own.

Well done, Jace, she thought.

“*Thank you*,” Jace said, his words startling her with their closeness. Like before, they manifested directly in her mind, but it was as though he’d been walking right behind her this whole time. “*That crank wasn’t easy work.*”

“*Dammit, Jace!*” she thought back at him, “*How long have you been lurking in my head?*”

“*I don’t lurk. I was about to let you know that the task was done.*”

Kari’s eyes flitted from one group of raiders to the next as they wove through the Consulate line like a bunch of angry...bees. Then back to Jace, “*Now I need you to close the bay door. Then stay where I can reach you. When I give the command, you know what to do.*”

“*Of course.*”

“*You remember everything I showed you?*”

“*Every detail.*”

“*Well, let’s hope we won’t need it.*” Kari watched a Consulate ship suddenly spin out of control when a neighboring vessel struck it with an errant harpoon that was meant for a pair of her raiders. To starboard-low, three Consulate ships collided while in pursuit of a single raider—one of Depala’s by the look of her.



Aether Swooper | Art by James Ryman

“Things are going well so far, wouldn’t you say, my prince?” Kari nudged the monkey with her head. Ragavan chittered his agreement, while Kari made a quick mental tally.

Run the blockade? Check.

Disrupt the Consulate formation? Check.

But her list was interrupted by a blast that rang out from above. It sent her and Ragavan tumbling to the deck, and with an arm held up to shield her face, Kari looked up to see an aetherborn raider leaping from an expanding cloud of what was once a Consulate ship.



The aetherborn gave Kari a casual salute in their descent, before they landed hard on another Consulate ship.

“Cause a ton of mayhem? That’s right, Ragavan, check,” Kari said as *Dragon’s Smile* continued on its winding course through the blockade. “But not enough. The flagship—the only ship that matters—hasn’t budged. And none of this’ll mean a damn thing if that sky slug doesn’t give chase. Hey!” Kari’s hand went to head where Ragavan had tugged at a chunk of hair. The monkey was screeching and pointing toward the streets below.

“All right, you have my attention.” Dozens of Consulate enforcers, equipped with flight packs or mounted on single-seater skimmers, were joining the fight. Most were deploying to screen the ships. But not all of them.

“Are you seeing this, Kari?” said Jace. “Depala spotted a group of enforcers moving in to intercept.”

“Six of them, yep,” Kari responded. She tested her anchor cable with a quick tug. “Can we shake them?”

“Depala says she’ll do what she can.”

Kari drew her sword. “My prince—not you, Jace—battle station.” Ragavan flicked his goggles into place and scurried into a pouch that was nestled between Kari’s shoulder blades where her flight pack curved away from her back. “It’s time we got into this fight.”

By the time the first three enforcers rose up along *Dragon’s Smile*’s port side, Kari had already taken flight. Her pack’s mechanical wings buzzed furiously as they carried her across the deck, and as she flew, her anchor cable unspooled behind her with a high zipping sound.

The trio of enforcers were held aloft on identical quad-prop flight packs and were armed with Consulate-issue net-casters, which they clutched close to their chests. There was no sense in waiting to get

mobbed by these mooks, so she welcomed them to her ship with all the hospitality of a pirate captain. She raced right at them.

Or rather, right past them.

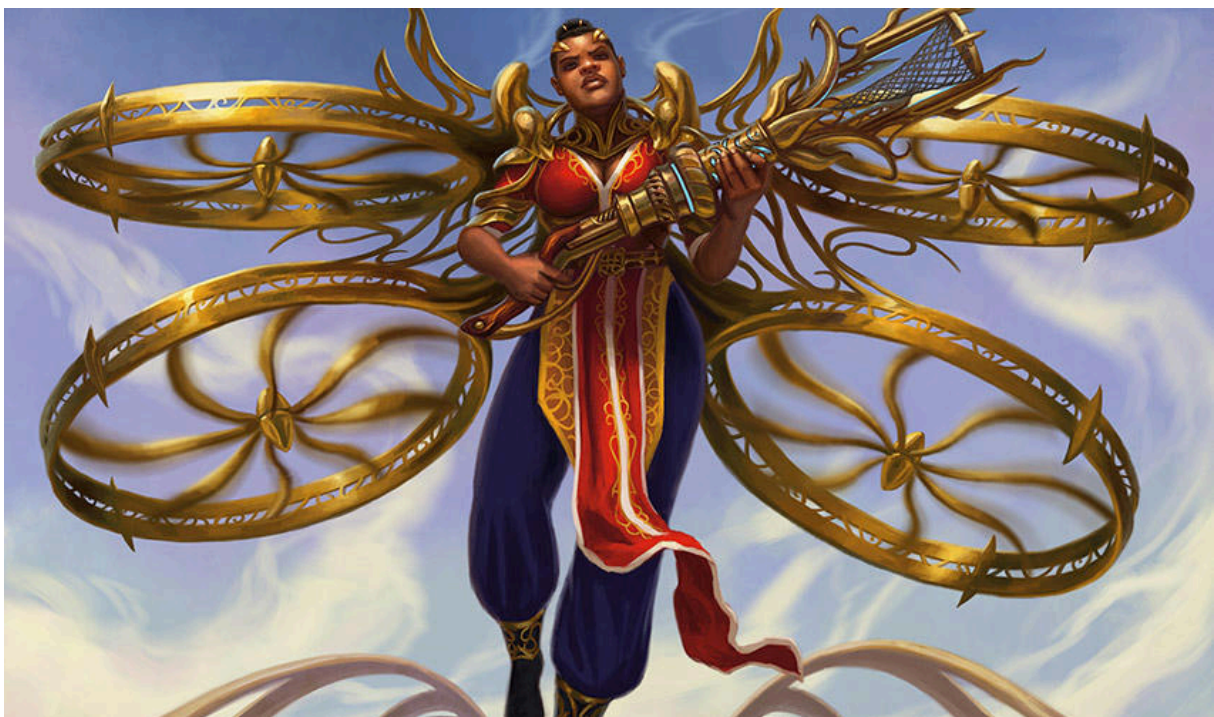
As expected, the enforcers dispersed at Kari's direct approach, and she hurtled straight through them. The cable seemed to draw a line in the air as she flew, separating two of them from the third. Kari saw this and leaned into a tight a turn to sweep around the two. Before the cable could go slack, Kari engaged the winch's break and raced back toward the ship.

"Ragavan, hang on!" Kari yelled, and her cable caught one of the enforcers in the chest with a loud snap, sending Kari catapulting into the second enforcer, a startled dwarf who couldn't raise his weapon in time. With the first enforcer in tow, Kari and the dwarf tumbled to the deck of *Dragon's Smile*. Weapons skidded away and they grappled there in a heap of wings and propellers as the ship tilted this way and that.

There was dull thud when Kari's elbow connected with the dwarf's cheek, and for half a second, the fight seemed to abandon him. Kari shoved him away, and in the next moment, she was in the air again.

The first enforcer had just untangled herself from Kari's cable with the help of the third one, and Kari wasted no time bowling them both over.

The victory was fleeting, however, for the three other enforcers joined their comrades. One of them, an officer of some rank, descended to hover before Kari.



Spire Patrol | Art by Dan Scott

Kari sent her thoughts at Jace, "*Any progress?*"

And in response came, "*Skysovereign hasn't moved. How are things topside?*"

"Surrender your vessel," the officer commanded.

To Jace, "*Not great. Any chance of deploying your part of the plan?*"

From Jace, "*Just give me a moment.*"

Kari stepped toward the officer. “Let your Consuls know,” she called out, “that I, Kari Zev, captain of *Dragon’s Smile*, have brought my fleet to claim this city.” *Any second, now.*

Then there was a flash of blue, and whatever the officer was about to say was lost to the great spectacle that unfolded over the next few moments. Suddenly, ships were drifting out from behind buildings. Not Consulate ships, but pirate ships.



Illusionist’s Stratagem | Art by Svetlin Velinov

They moved in twos and threes, and like the enforcers, Kari could only watch, utterly transfixed, because she knew each one of them. *Brass Hammer* and *The Demon of Vahd*. *Cold Wind* and *Kite*. And more. They kept coming. Even the *Sun Chaser*—of course the *Sun Chaser*. Her fleet had returned to her, and they were assembling to fill the space above a plaza so that buildings protected their flanks to either side. One moment, *Dragon’s Smile* was alone, and the next, it was one among dozens. This was Jace, she knew, or rather, the memories she’d shared with Jace. But nevertheless, she couldn’t help but be consumed by the feeling that the Consulate was severely outmatched now. The enforcers seemed to share her assessment because all around her, they were taking flight to retreat from the pirate fleet.

The officer looked from Kari to the wall of ships, then back to Kari. And before the next snide comment could leave Kari’s lips, the officer’s net-caster fired. Its suddenness caught Kari off guard, and for a moment, Kari just stood there as the net expanded on its path to entangle her.

But it never got to her. From his pouch on her shoulders, Ragavan pounced. He vaulted off Kari’s head, and threw himself into the incoming net. He was entangled instantly, and in the net’s clutches, the monkey fell to the deck without any of his usual grace.

In the next heartbeat, the officer was off—and with her, the net containing Kari’s prince.

“Ragavan!” Kari shrieked. She was already in motion. In the span of four steps, she scooped her sword up from the deck and was leaping over the side of her ship. As the wings of her flight pack flitted into life, a downward swing from her blade severed her anchor cable against the gunwale.

Kari raced after the officer, and the distance between them closed rapidly. She came in low, and saw that Ragavan was still bundled in the net, which now hung from the officer’s waist. “Hang on, prince

of mine. I'm coming for you," she said under her breath, and she wished that the monkey shared Jace's mind-reading tricks.

When Kari caught the officer, it was from below, and before the officer could bank, Kari had grabbed hold of her so that they were hurtling through the air, face to face. The officer tried to shake Kari off, but Kari just wrapped her legs around the officer's.

"Get off me!" the officer spat.

"Not while you have my monkey!"

"You'll kill us both!"

Kari just winked at the officer, and shoved her sword into the spinning action of one of the four propellers that kept the officer aloft. There was a series of staccato pops and streams of sparks as the propeller tore itself to pieces buffeting against Kari's blade. Immediately, their flight path became erratic, a development exacerbated by the punches the officer rained down on Kari.

But Kari held on, and she drove her head into the officer's jaw. Pain engulfed her skull but the blows ceased, and she managed to wrest control of their entwined path, if only to influence it. The undamaged propellers tugged the flight pack to one side, and though Kari compensated with her own pack, the tangled group flew ended up in wide semi-circle that took them back toward the projection of the pirate ship, through the *Sun Chaser's* illusory hull, and beyond the fleet.

"Kari's not responding," said Jace, his eyes closed against the madness he knew was playing out beyond the cockpit. "She's moving too fast for me to reach into her mind."

"Just focus on that projection of yours!" Depala snapped.

And of course, that's exactly what Jace was doing. Though he was physically strapped in his seat behind the dwarven pilot, his mind was at work maintaining the enormous and complex illusion that he'd constructed solely out of memories pulled from Kari's mind—plus a few duplicates here and there to really sell the spectacle. It was a lot of work that required tremendous focus and most of his attention.

"The *Skysovereign* will never commit if they see through..." Depala began, but trailed off.

Jace didn't want to risk opening his eyes, especially not right now. "What's happening?"

"Bet you could guess."

He could, but Depala said it anyway. "*Skysovereign* inbound with escort, moving to engage the fleet. If Renegade Prime's people don't recognize their opening, she and I will have words after this."

"How should our fleet respond?" Jace asked.

"Keep them steady. We should be just one of its numbers."

Jace was suddenly aware of the light strobing beyond his eyelids. He tried to push the visual sensory input from his mind, but then the whole world seemed to turn white and a sound like the sky tearing open boomed in his ears. He pulled his awareness into his illusion to keep it from failing, though he couldn't ignore the metallic taste that had filled his mouth.

From some distant place, Jace heard his name. There was panic in the sound, which came again and again. He willed his consciousness back into the cockpit, where the world was turned sideways, and where Depala was calling for him.

"I'm here, Depala," Jace said, which was partly true. Part of him was still keeping the fleet intact. "Were we hit?"

"Jace! I'm blind!" the pilot yelled.

"WHAT?!"

"Take the controls!"

Even as the ship banked and juked, Jace didn't like the prospect of him at the helm. There simply wasn't adequate time to pull the necessary expertise from Depala's mind. So instead, he returned a favor. During their freefall descent into the Consulate blockade, Jace had staved off panic by reaching out to the absolute confidence in Depala's thoughts. Now, he pulled her into his mind.

"I can see!" Depala said, and without missing a beat, she pulled *Dragon's Smile* into a graceful climb.

"What blinded you?"

"The lightning cannon on that thing!" And as if to demonstrate, the strobe went off again. This time Depala banked hard to dodge the arc of electricity. All the while, *Skysovereign* drifted closer. Jace, meanwhile, felt that his hold on his grand illusion could falter at any moment.

"It certainly seems to like us, despite your illusions," Depala said.

"This is still Captain Zev's ship."

"Don't much look forward to facing her if we break it."

When Kari, Ragavan, and the Consulate officer emerged on the other side of Jace's illusion, they were still locked in their savage airborne brawl. The officer kicked furiously at Kari, and Kari tried to swipe at the net containing Ragavan. The monkey, for his part, reached through his net to occupied himself with riffling the officer's pockets.

Kari was almost dislodged when the officer caught the young captain below the knee with the sole of her heavy boot, and jerked it downward so that it raked along Kari's shin. Wincing, she bit her lip.

The pain broke her concentration, and Kari noticed that their path had carried them into an eddy of aether. And in that eddy, colossal shapes were moving. Swimming.

Skywhales.

They were creatures without malice or predatory urges, though that did little to assuage the feeling of absolute insignificance that gripped Kari at that moment. Her throat had suddenly become dry, and she realized her mouth was hanging open.

The officer must have also been struggling with a crisis based on how wide her eyes had grown. It was in that instant that Kari remembered her prince. She wrenched the gathered net from the officer's waist, pushed away from her stubborn adversary.

Once away, she held Ragavan close. One of the whales bent through the air toward them, and for a moment, Kari was face to face to it. Its mouth seemed to go on forever, and the throat grooves that creased its lower jaw were like canyons. She could have been a mote of dust for all the notice the whale reciprocated.

Then in Kari's mind, Jace's voice bloomed. It sounded somehow distant, but he was calling her name.

"*Jace!*" she replied.

"*Skysovereign's right on top of us. Heart of Kiran is still grounded. We can't last much longer here.*" He sounded drained and haggard.

“No!” She refused to allow *Dragon’s Smile*, the last of her fleet, to meet the same fate. She gave the whale one last look, wheeled around, and sped toward her ship.

But then she stopped. And all at once, she saw it. Opportunity.

“Jace, open the cargo door. And when I give the word, have Depala jettison my cargo and climb sharply.”

“Jettison the aether? Do I understand that correctly?” asked Jace, his words barely registering in her mind.

“This is for my fleet.”

She came streaking out from the illusory fleet, and she was met by *Skysovereign*’s great bulk looming before her. It filled the sky, a metallic reflection of the skywhale behind her.

“We’re right below you, Kari,” Jace said, and Kari saw her ship climbing to meet her.

“Drop the cargo!” Kari thought as loud as she could, while she worked the fastenings of her flight pack. The crates fell from the ship’s hold, flipping end over end so that the canisters themselves tumbled out.

This was it. Kari whipped her flight pack from her shoulders and hurled it down so that it crashed into the glass canisters. Puffs of blue erupted, and as more canisters shattered, the cloud swelled and began to reach out in spiraling wisps. It’d have to be enough to get their attention.

Meanwhile, Kari cradled Ragavan to her chest and slid onto the *Dragon’s Smile*’s deck as it climbed. Her aching shin screamed at her as they skidded and bounced along the deck’s metal surface. Finally, she and Ragavan came to a hard stop when they slammed into the aft railing.

“Keep clear,” Kari thought at Jace, thankful that she didn’t have to speak aloud.

A few moments passed. Then Kari watched Jace’s illusory fleet—her fleet—flicker and burst, as one of the skywhales came hurtling through it toward the aether. And directly ahead of the great creature, *Skysovereign*.



Aethertide Whale | Art by Steve Belledin

While smaller Consulate vessels careened out of its path, the *Skysovereign* was left to prove its name as the whale met it with full force. It was no contest. Metal squealed and crumpled, and everywhere smoke billowed into the sky. The whale moved off unfazed, while the Consulate flagship coasted in the air for a moment like an errant balloon, before the whole thing listed to one side and drifted slowly to the ground.

“Prince of mine,” she said, “come watch this with me.” She helped him find his way out of the net, and she placed him on her shoulder. Then, utterly exhausted, Kari draped her arms over the rail and watched the dying gasps of the metal monster.

They should probably get out of here, she thought. She was about to give the command when Jace’s voice found her mind once again, only this time his words were more animated than she’d come to expect. “*Was that your doing?*”

“*That was the whale, Jace. I don’t hit that hard.*”