

Homesick

Chris L'Etoile

From set *Kaladesh*

Five Planeswalkers allied as the Gatewatch. From Kaladesh, the pyromancer Chandra Nalaar. From Theros, the hieromancer Gideon Jura. From Zendikar, the elven animist Nissa Revane. From someplace he no longer remembers, the telepath Jace Beleren. From Dominaria, the necromancer Liliana Vess. With the aid of Tamiyo, a soratami scholar of Kamigawa, they defeated the eldritch titan Emrakul, sealing the entity within Innistrad's silver moon.

Three months have passed.

She knocked again, louder.

From the far side of the door came a thump and a muttered obscenity. After long seconds of fabric rustling this way and that, accompanied by sotto voce imprecations against *these* blankets in particular, bedding in *general*, and the entire profession of weaving *by extension*, the sounds of unsteady feet on hardwood lurched and swayed towards the door.

"Yeah. What. What?" a sleep-thick feminine voice mumbled from the other side.

"It's almost noon. You need to get up."

"Can't be noon. It's still too heavy out."

"Could you open the door?"

"No." A moment of silence, a sigh, then long seconds of loose-limbed scrabbling against the door lock. A final pause. "Wait. Didn't lock it. *You* open it."

She pushed gently, and the door creaked open, the movement of air rustling the dark silk of her dress. The woman collapsing against the doorframe on the far side was a chin-level explosion of sleep-mussed copper hair in a baggy nightshirt, its neckline untied and sliding off one shoulder. The light from the hall fell across one sunburnt and freckled cheek. She groaned and squeezed amber eyes shut. "Morning, Liliana," she mumbled into the door frame.

"Oh my," Liliana said. "You look terrible, Chandra."

Chandra smeared night sand out of one eye with the hand she wasn't leaning on. "Oh yeah? Well you look..." She dropped her hand and squinted at her blearily. Her eyelid twitched. "...Great, actually." There was a definite unspoken "damn it" at the end of the sentence.

"Why, thank you."

The only light beyond Chandra's shoulder was a sliver of blinding sun slicing between the heavy folds of drawn curtains. The bedroom seemed to have been ransacked by hasty goblins. Or possibly a bear had taken up residence. The blankets on the four-post bed were pulled off and trailing across the lacquered hardwood, leaving behind only a shambling fortress-pile of overstuffed pillows in the center of the mattress.

The desk was covered with dried-out paint bottles in several lurid colors, and one oversized, half-eaten cookie. There were piles of wadded-up clothes in two different corners. In the gloom, Liliana couldn't tell which was the clean pile. Assuming either was. In a third corner lay the charred remnants of at least two easels.

"I trust the evening was worth it?" Liliana asked. A breeze kicked through the hall, carrying the scents of sun-baked bricks and frying food, the susurrantion of crowds and the tinkling of bands in the square below. A strand of wayward orange hair wavered in the summer wind and fell across Chandra's eye. Liliana reached out and tucked it behind the girl's ear, tsking. It was dry as straw, the ends split. To be expected, perhaps, given its tendency to burst into flame.

"Stop that," Chandra said, waving away her hands. "I wasn't doing anything last night. Just went to watch..." she hesitated, amber eyes squinting off into the gloom of her bedroom. "Uh, some minstrels. Yeah. A tavern in—on Tin Street. They had, like...fiddles."

Liliana had met many terrible liars over the centuries, but impressively few could rival Chandra. She folded her arms across her chest and allowed one corner of her mouth to tilt upwards. "You went to see the Izzet air races."

"No! ...Yes." She yawned. "So you gonna yell at me, or what?"

She laughed lightly. "Why on earth should I? Do what you want." She waved over her shoulder, the gesture encompassing the sun-baked hall, the quiet, book-stacked rooms of Jace's sanctum, and the preposterous band of freelance do-gooders she'd found herself walking two steps behind and shaking her head at. "Nobody here has a right to tell you what to do. That's certainly not what *I* signed up for."

"You didn't *sign* anything."

"Never do, sweetie. Best to live unfettered." She tapped a finger against her lips. "Air races are dangerous for most. But after Emrakul, the perils of goblins with rockets strapped to their backs seems distinctly...non-perilous for you."



Goblin Test Pilot | Art by Svetlin Velinov

"One of them had rockets in his *boots*. But he blew up. *Boof!*" Chandra's hands cupped and spread apart, describing an expanding cloud of yuck. "Chunks *everywhere*. *Super* gross."

"Charming. Did you enjoy your evening?"

The younger woman grinned, the freckles on her cheeks scrunching up into an adorable mess. "*Yeah!* I love air races. I haven't seen once since—" her mouth hung a moment, and she blinked twice, rapidly. "Not for a while, anyways. Not big with the monks," she said, with an unconvincing laugh.

Liliana studied the fall of the noon sun across Chandra's hair, remembering the brittle feel of it between her fingers. "Beefslab wants everyone downstairs in an hour. We have a guest."

"Who?"

"I'm sure I didn't ask."

"What? No, I mean...*Beefslab?*"

Liliana let the corner of her mouth slide up again, placed one hand on her hip, and waited for it.

"*Oh!*" Chandra snorted a laugh. "Gids."

She waved pale fingers in the air and rolled her eyes, theatrically. "Surely you've thought the same? It feels like I have to ask him to put a shirt on every other day."

Chandra rubbed her left eye and yawned again. "Hey, I don't mind the view. I wanna get breakfast on the way. Lunch. Whatever. You coming with?"

She moved to brush past Liliana, who stopped her with a hand to her exposed shoulder. The skin was radiantly, unnaturally warm, as if she'd been lying in the sun. She'd noticed that on the rare occasions Chandra sat still for five minutes, her lap inevitably attracted a small pile of drowsy cats.

"Before we go downstairs, sweetie," she said, "you might wish to put on pants."

"What are you, my m—aunt?" Chandra grumped. She turned and wobbled toward one of the piles of laundry, toes curling up at the cold of the hardwood. That settled the question of which pile was the clean. Hopefully.

Liliana silvered a laugh into the air. "I'd rather you think of me as...a sibling, shall we say?"

Chandra pulled a pair of leggings out of the pile, sniffed, and tossed them over her shoulder with a grimace. "I don't have any siblings. Anyways, aren't you like two hundred or something?"

"Ah, but two hundred going on twenty-nine."

"Not wearing armor today?" Liliana asked as they walked to the stairs.

"Around the house? Nah. You think maybe I should for this meeting?" Chandra was looking down at the lacing of her shirt. She'd been trying to work out a knot, but only managed to get a thumb caught. "I left it downstairs, in that room Jace keeps all his cloaks." A puzzled frown bent her lips. "He's got an *awful* lot of them. Hold on."

She paused by one of the open bedroom doors to work her thumb free. It was Nissa's room, theoretically. The curtains were pulled wide, letting noontime sun fall on undisturbed bedding and a dusty bureau. Chandra glanced in. "We've been here like three months, but I've barely seen Nissa since In-nistrad."

"You won't find her in there. Let me see that." Liliana turned and batted Chandra's free hand away from her shirt's lacing. The other hand was now connected by the thumb and an additional finger. "The first morning you all were here, she stumbled out looking like death warmed over."

Chandra brightened and opened her mouth.

"Yes, yes," Liliana sighed. "I'd know best what that looks like."

"Aw..."

"Sweet girl, trust me. I *have* heard all the necromancer jokes." Liliana sucked in her lower lip as she dug in her fingernail to tease a knot free. "Nissa mumbled something like, 'Can't sleep. Too many angles.' She's been staying in the roof garden ever since."

"Weird." Chandra watched dust motes swirl in the air. "What about you?"

"What *about* me?" Liliana pulled at another knot.

With her free hand, Chandra pushed her goggles further back on her forehead. "Jace offered you a room too. Right? Like the rest of us? But you went and got your own place, even when everything's so expensive here."

A final, firm tug, and Chandra's hand was free. "I dislike relying on the mercy of others," Liliana said, forcing lightness into her voice. It had the virtue of being true, if not the *entire* truth. "Now let me tie this for you properly."

Sleeping under a roof that *Jace* paid for? Not just "no," but "hell no."

"There." She patted the lacing on Chandra's shirt. "Don't touch it again. Next time you'll probably get a toe caught."

"Thanks," Chandra grinned, then wrapped one warm arm up around Liliana's bare shoulders and squeezed. "I'm so hungry I could eat an Eldrazi. Maybe even one of the gooey ones." She launched herself toward the stairs. "They don't get breakfast on Ravnica at *all*. It's like they get it all *backwards*. Big dinners, long lunches, skipped breakfasts. Crusty bread with butter? For *breakfast*?" Chandra made a lemon-pucker face. "Come the hell *on*."

"Is that why you can't get up in the morning here?" Liliana asked, mildly.

Chandra slugged her in the arm. "*Jerk*." She was taken so off guard she staggered. Chandra walked obliviously ahead as Liliana rubbed the potential bruise. Her steps quickened as she warmed to her topic and gestured to an audience only she could see. "*Listen*. A real breakfast starts with methi thepla. With ginger, chilis, and some yogurt in the mix. When you wake up to that smell—" she paused; swallowed; shook her head. "With pickled mango! Mango is the best. Anyone who says otherwise should be pitied for their tragic and inescapable wrongness."

Liliana shook her head. "I have no idea what mango is."

"A fruit." Chandra said. "Nothing else tastes like it in the multiverse. At least in the parts I've been. When it's perfectly ripe and you take a bite..." she cupped both hands under her mouth. "...the juice just runs down your chin. Sweet and tangy at the same time—and sharp in the back of your nose. Like the way juniper smells, a little. They're like a sunrise in your mouth. So big and bright it spills out."

"They sound...messy," Liliana allowed.

"I guess. Sometimes. But *so* worth it," Chandra grinned. "For the *second* course, do you know what a chickpea—*oh*." They had turned into a hall that opened over a courtyard on one side, open to the sky and brimming over with green. Chandra's forward momentum trickled to a halt as she drifted toward the balustrade.

"We've got time for one more go before the meeting. Whenever you're ready." The booming voice of Gideon. "Let's do this!" An echoing clap of meaty hands.

She moved to stand beside Chandra. Below, Mancake settled into what was probably a Theros wrestling stance, braced as if expecting a blow. Across from him, the willowy Zendikari elf stood with one hand gripping her opposing shoulder, looking like she wanted to fold into herself and disappear.

"Are you sure?" she asked the grass. Her voice was uneven, scratchy with disuse.

His laugh echoed off the stonework. Liliana was fairly certain she heard distant glassware vibrating. "If I know it's coming, I'm indestructible. The whole point's to see how far *you* can go. *Trust* yourself, Nissa. And if you don't...trust *me*. I can absolutely take it."

"But..."

"*Indestructible*," he repeated cheerfully, flashing perfect teeth.

"All right." Nissa closed her pine-shadow eyes. "There's not much here to work with."

"We could do this in the garden."

"I meant...never mind." She breathed in, and raised a hand.

The bushes exploded into bloom. Lavender-and-white petals swirled on a sudden wind, filling the air with thick sweetness. Ivy shot up the walls, emerald leaves swelling and unfurling, coating every surface. The grass stretched and bent, whispering in the breeze, lovingly wrapping itself around Nissa's hiking boots.

Chandra took an involuntary step back, inhaling sharply as greenery embraced the balustrade.

Branches swelled and twined, weaving into a single four-legged shape. Maybe some Zendikari beast? Liliana had visited some decades before, but found the place too dull to stay long. The bushes pulled themselves free of the ground, flicking dirt from their root-feet like a fastidious cat.

The bush-beast—more a tree now—reared back, creaking and groaning like the world's largest rocking chair. It shed pastel petals in a constant rain, motes of pollen swirling in the noontime sun. Its front limbs interlaced into a single fist, which it drove down on Gideon like an avalanche.

His flesh shone with liquid gold.

Then he was driven down into the earth, up to his chest.

Nissa gasped. With a wave of her hand, the tree-beast jumped back away from him, landing with a reverberating impact that left Liliana clutching the ivy-clad railing for support. Somewhere in the house, she heard porcelain shatter. Several somewheres, actually.

Gideon laughed uproariously. "That was *incredible*!" He braced his hands on either side of the crater, and with a grunt uprooted himself. He rolled up on to his feet and brushed black earth off his trousers, a grin lighting his face. "You can't hurt *me*, but I didn't even *think* about the floor."

The tree-beast keened at Nissa like a scolded puppy. "Shh," the elf whispered, bending to rest her forehead against the monster's wooden brow. "My fault, my fault."

"Nicely done," Gideon laid a massive hand on Nissa's thin shoulder. She twitched and inhaled sharply. The tree-beast swung toward him and shook itself, leaves rattling a feline hiss.

He stepped back, hands in the air. "Easy, big fella. Not attacking mom."

Nissa laid a stilling hand on the beast. "Thank you. Rest now." It dug its wooden fingers and toes into the earth, groaned, and settled back into mere topiary. Nissa stood alone again, the beast's last pale blossom petals tumbling down around her.

Gideon rubbed his prickly jaw. "Hope Jace is all right with us landscaping."

Liliana glanced at Chandra. She was up on her toes, leaning forward over the rail with a dazzled little smile. "Careful you don't fall off."

Chandra hopped back down, and stuck out her tongue. "Like I would. Come on, I'm hungry."

Liliana smiled and followed. Behind her, Gideon's voice echoed from the courtyard bricks. "Nissa, before you go. That thing I do, where I clap people on the shoulder? Does that make you uncomfortable?"

Liliana paused at the door, listening. If the elf responded, her words weren't audible.

"I'm sorry. I hadn't realized. I won't do it again." Liliana couldn't imagine his expression, but his tone dripped such brown-eyed-shaggy-dog sincerity her lips twitched with irritation.

"Thank you." Barely more than a whisper of wind on leaves.

"If anything makes you uncomfortable, let me know, all right? *Especially* if it's me."

Liliana set her mouth in a hard line and followed after Chandra, boots clicking on the hardwood, silk hem swishing in her wake. If she listened to any more she might vomit. Of course the *elf* gets apologies and promises. Two hundred years ago, *she'd* had to learn to break fingers.

There were a dozen ways into Jace's library, not counting the hidden passages her shades had found. Three stories of overflowing floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, all in alphabetical order by author, and arranged by subject. After a few weeks, she'd started taking random books and placing them on other shelves. It would drive him *insane* when he noticed.

The marble table at the center was normally covered with Jace's neatly squared stacks of notes. He'd moved that into a private office; the library had become a common room because the table was the only one in the house large enough to accommodate them all. He'd visibly twitched when they started taking meals there.



Jace's Sanctum | Art by Adam Paquette

Today the table held only a pitcher of water and six glasses. Jace was already here, of course, pacing, frowning, flipping through a bundle of notes, and trying to keep clear of Lavinia, who'd stationed herself by the exterior door and stared pragmatically into the middle distance. You could almost see checklists and formation marches lockstepping behind her eyes, taking up cycles while she waited for something important to happen.

Liliana had seen her sort a thousand times. Dutiful, observant, entirely unimaginative. If she had a favored tavern, which seemed unlikely, her usual was a mug of room-temperature water.

Lavinia was almost certainly standing by the door to keep Jace from bolting out on some adventure. Of course, if he really wanted to leave, he just needed to be alone for a few minutes. She knew that now; with four Planeswalkers living here (and one availing herself of the amenities, thank you very much), it had been necessary to explain. Jace had invoked some Guildpact bylaw of subsection of article as amended and ratified by who the hell cares to swear her to secrecy.

Liliana smiled to herself as she scraped a chair out from under the table, imagining the guard banging on the door of the privy; "Are you still in there, Guildpact? Respond at *once!*"

Jace looked up at the noise of her chair. "You're early?" He sounded aghast. She was professionally affronted.

"No. Everyone else is later than me." She cast a critical eye up and down his form. Firm, fit, alert, hair combed. She mentally called bull on it. "You can drop the glamour, dear. No one cares."

He sighed, and shimmered as his illusion dropped. *There* was the real Jace; paler, hair ruffled, eyes sunken from late nights, and his chin tinted by the adorable peach fuzz that almost counted as a someday-maybe beard.

"Vanity?" she said. "That's not like you."

He raked a hand back through his hair, which did nothing to calm its random angles. "I should be at my best for team meetings. Project leadership. Confidence. The idea that I know what the hell I'm doing. And why am I telling *you* this?" He looked annoyed at himself.

She raised one ivory shoulder in a careless shrug. "Who else knows you well enough to understand?" Liliana leaned back in her chair and placed her feet up on the table, one ankle crossed over the other. The hem of her dress fell away from her boots in a rustle of silk.

"That's rude," Jace frowned.

"Mm."

His eyebrows collapsed into fuzzy perpendiculars of irritation. "And distracting."

Liliana favored him with a lazy, indolent smile. "I'll remember." She turned her attention to scanning the book spines nearby, and imagined his fuming.

Gideon thundered down the stairs, taking them two at a time as he yanked a shirt down over his various bulges, ripples, and throbbing bits. "Oh, good. You remembered today," she said.

He blinked at her. "What?"

"Nothing." She waved a careless half-salute in his direction. "Carry on, Sir General sir."

Jace set his notes down as Gideon pulled out the chair across from her. "That's nearly all of us, so I'll start. We can catch Chandra up when she gets here."

Liliana blinked and scanned the room. What about—oh. Nissa was sitting cross-legged in a chair under the shadow of the bookshelves, several steps removed from the table. She wondered how long the elf had been there.

"The short of it is," Jace continued, "I'm still tied up with Guildpact work, and will be for a while. When I got back from Innistrad, my desk was covered. Actually, the whole office was a maze of stacked papers and books. It took me five minutes to *reach* the desk."

A faint smile tugged the corner of Lavinia's mouth. Liliana revised her estimate of the woman's creativity upward.

Jace leaned on the table with the tips of his fingers. "I've put word out through—"

Bits of armor clattered and rang across the table. Jace glared up at Chandra. The pyromancer's arms swept up the pile of her spilled equipment. "Sowwy," she said around the pastry she held in her mouth. It dripped cinnamon icing on the marble. She collapsed in the chair beside Liliana, bit off a piece, and started strapping on pieces of armor. "Wha' wersh you shayin'?" she asked from the side of her mouth.

"I was saying," Jace said, with exaggerated patience, "that I've put word out through Tamiyo that the Gatewatch is ready to help. She and other Planeswalkers pass information to each other. They collect news and stories in their travels. The way bards work, but they carry word from other planes instead of the next town over."

"How many are they?" Gideon asked, resting his chin in one hand. "How often do they meet?"

Jace shook his head. "They're not organized like we are. It's informal. Practically gossip. But they move around often, and talk to many people. If someone wants help, they'll mention us. If someone needs help, they'll get word to us." He paused, and looked at each of them. "This has already borne fruit. Someone's sought us out. He's waiting outside."

Gideon grinned and sat straighter in his chair, which creaked at the shift in weight. "Outstanding work, Jace."

Jace nodded. "Our guest is Dovin Baan. He's Minister of Inspections for some kind of inventors' festival on Kaladesh." Warmth bloomed to Liliana's right. "Lavinia, could you see him in please?"

Minister. Hmm. Liliana took her feet off the table, sat up straight, and crossed her legs, brushing the folds of her dress into smoothness. A ripple passed over Jace; he'd re-summoned the neat and tidy illusion he'd been wearing when she entered.

Across the table from her, Gideon eyed their mutual preparations thoughtfully.

Chandra slumped further down in her chair, pulled her goggles down over her eyes, and folded her arms tight across her chest.



Art by Tyler Jacobson

The vedalken man was tall, thin as dueling blade, blue-skinned, and impeccably dressed. His suit was partially encased in whorls and filigrees of brass, bits of which hissed and ticked faintly. He descended the stairs with brisk, precise motions, hands clasped behind his back, and Liliana wondered how he managed it. Surely the bits of metal covering his sleeves would get tangled?

He paused as he passed a painting, frowned, and reached out to nudge it upward on one side.

"Minister Baan," Jace said. "These are my colleagues Nissa, Gideon, Chandra, and Liliana."

As she was introduced, Liliana unfolded from her chair and applied a pleasant smile. She curtsied, keeping her eyes locked on Baan's as she bobbed. His were a fevered, restless fuchsia. A fascinating contrast from his cool demeanor. "Charmed, Minister." Her form was rusty, but she doubted he'd be familiar with the particulars of Dominarian court manners.

Baan laid an arm across his stomach and bowed to her from the waist, lowering his eyes to the floor before her. "Likewise, Miss Liliana."

"I hope your wait was comfortable?" Jace asked, indicating an empty chair at the far end of the table.

Baan glanced at it with momentary puzzlement, but made no move to sit. "The accommodations were tolerable."

Jace's projected face gave no hint of the discomfort Liliana's suspected lay beneath it. "Good. Well. What can the Gatewatch do for you?"

"I have come to inquire with regard to the matter discussed in my previous correspondence."

After a moment of silence, doubtless spent unpacking Baan's baroque grammar, Gideon cleared his throat. "Excuse us, Minister. Not everyone here has seen your letter."

Baan inhaled slowly. "Ah. Very well. I will recapitulate." Claspings his hands behind his back, he began to pace at the end of the table.

"I have the honor of coming before you as an officially and duly designated representative of the Consulate of Kaladesh. I have, of course, educated myself on the means of governance on Ravnica; your system of competing 'guilds.'" Baan pronounced the word with delicacy, as if it were some rare sweet he'd never encountered before. "Our Consulate stands in contrast. It is unified; centralized; meritocratic. All resources are administered and distributed by the rational and equal application of the law. We have achieved a society in which no one *wants*."

Liliana's right arm felt sunburned. She glanced at Chandra. A shimmer of heat-haze danced over the younger woman's head. Stray wisps of copper hair rose and wavered in the updraft. But she was silent, rigid, the muscles of her jaw rippling as she clenched her teeth.

Liliana quietly slid her chair to the left.

"Six months ago," Baan continued, "the Consulate scheduled an Inventors' Fair in the capital city of Ghirapur. It is to begin on the morning following. There are to be expositions of artifice in a variety of fields. Award of grants for exceptional work."

Baan allowed the corners of his mouth to turn up, ever so slightly. "It has been my pleasure to personally inspect all submissions for safety of visitors. If I may be forgiven for saying so, I believe the judges have many difficult choices to make. I am confident that at least one of our luminaries has managed to create an entirely new order of artifice."

He paused at the books stacked along the wall, and tapped the brass of his shoulder piece. An array of lenses whirled into place before his left eye. He peered through them for a moment, frowned, and drew one slim finger across the surface of the shelf.

"In recent weeks," he continued, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket as he turned on his heel, "preparations have been repeatedly disrupted by vandals and malcontents. My safety arrangements have thus far prevented any casualties." He wiped his finger with the handkerchief, carefully folded the cloth into quarters, and slid it back into a pocket. "However, efforts to discover and eliminate the source of this unrest have been less successful."

Baan's lens array ticked back into a storage position over his shoulder plate. "That is all."

Gideon cleared his throat. "So, to be clear, you want the Gatewatch to provide...security?"

"To root out the source of these attacks?" Jace suggested.

Baan looked from one to the other, and inhaled as if he'd smelled something from the bottom of a shoe. "Just so," he said. "As stated in my original correspondence."

"Who are these people?" Gideon asked. "Why do they want to disrupt a *festival*?"

Baan inclined his head. "A logical question, Mister Gideon. I regret there is no logical *answer* for your query. The renegades' grievances largely exist in the fevered space between their own ears. The most significant objection they can muster is that equal distribution to all by the Consulate is somehow 'unfair' to them personally. Put simply, they feel they are entitled to more than their fair share. When the Consulate declines to indulge their selfish desires, they resort to sabotage of government property and theft of resources appropriated for the common good."

Chandra's chair tilted over backward as she bolted to her feet. Liliana snapped out an arm and kept it from clattering to the floor as she stomped away, trailing heat-blurred air and sparks.

"What are you—?" Gideon began, but flinched away from Chandra's flickering hands as she passed him. She vaulted up the stairs two at a time, snarling eye-watering obscenities.

Baan's eyes followed her, his eyebrows arching skyward. "I trust she is aware that is not anatomically possible?"

Jace cleared his throat, too loudly. "Minister Baan?" The vedalken turned back to the table as the massive library doors slammed shut. "Are any of your renegades *Planeswalkers*?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Gideon shook his head, "Then I don't see how we can help. I'm sorry, but—"

"Wait." Jace leaned forward. "He said he doesn't *know*. We can prove one way or the other."

Baan closed his fever-bright eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between thin fingers. "Gentlemen, forgive my presumption. Which of you is making decisions for this group?"

Jace and Gideon looked at each other.

"Well..."

"Uh..."

"Gideon is the battlefield commander..."

"Jace is the administrator..."

"But we both..."

"But neither of us..."

Baan was clutching his head as if he had a migraine.

"Minister Baan," Liliana interrupted. She rose in an ostentatious swish of silk and lace, and affected her most disarming smile. "What troubles my...colleagues is the focus of our group. The Gatewatch was formed to stop people like us—Planeswalkers—from interfering with others. Problems from *without*, in other words. It sounds like your problems come from *within*. In which case," she gestured with feigned helplessness, "our hands are tied."

Baan released a slow, relieved breath. "Ah. Thank you, Miss Liliana. Your position is abundantly clear to me to now. I did not fully comprehend the strictures you operate under. Of course I cannot expect you to violate the laws that bind your organization." He bowed to her again. "My sincerest apologies. In the future I will endeavor to be more thorough in my research. If you will permit me, I shall take my leave."

Jace stared at Liliana open-mouthed, annoyance and astonishment warring across his face. *Priceless*.

"Uh, hold on," Gideon jumped to his feet. "Minister, you should at least stay for dinner."

Baan looked at him as if he'd grown several additional heads. "Mister Gideon, even if I considered it acceptable to further impose upon your hospitality, I am sorely needed on Kaladesh. I have no doubt that since I departed, there have been several acts of sabotage."

Gideon grinned at Baan. "Planeswalks can be taxing, and you've already done one today. We couldn't let you go on an empty stomach. Rules of hospitality, let's say. While we get that made, I could give you a tour of Jace's hou—of our headquarters."

Baan stared down his nose at him. "I assure you, my fitness is within acceptable boundaries for one of my age and profession, though I do not believe the matter to be any of your concern. Still. If it is your custom to provide sustenance to a departing guest, I will respect it."

"Outstanding!" He moved to clap the Minister on the shoulder, but stopped himself and disguised the instinct as an awkward stretch.

Lavinia cleared her throat. "Guildpact. Before your associates leave. The other business?"

Gideon paused. "Other business?"

Jace grimaced. "While I was away on Zendikar and Innistrad, a few influential members in the Azorius Senate were...eliminated."

"Certainly a concern," Gideon said. "But what does that have to—"

"You said 'eliminated,'" Liliana interjected. "Not 'killed.'"

Jace nodded. "They were *petrified*. Turned to stone." He hesitated. Liliana raised her brows. Jace speechless? How intriguing. "About a year ago, there was a gorgon assassin operating on Ravnica. A *planeswalking* gorgon, with a grudge against the Azorius. I stopped her, but...irritated her."

"You have such a way with ladies," Liliana said.

"The point is," Jace said, "she swore she'd be back someday."

Gideon rubbed his jaw, eyes flickering to Lavinia. "Huh. Any leads?"

"Not yet," Lavinia said.

Jace turned to Gideon. "I'd like you to investigate this."

He shook his head. "You're the best choice, Jace. Look into it and report back to me."

Liliana's eyes flickered from one to the other. *So glad she had her own place.* Though if things ever came to a group vote, this made it easier to tilt things in whatever direction she wished.

"You have *no* idea how much I'd like to handle this myself," Jace said. There was a faint creak of leather as Lavinia's gloved hand tightened on her scabbard. "I have *paperwork*." He spat it like an obscenity. "Gideon, I'm not going to...it's not an *order*, all right? It's just something that needs to be done. I can't do it myself, and I think you'd work well with the Azorius. Better than Liliana would, at any rate."

"Oh, he's right about that," Liliana said, mildly. She was fairly certain they would still have her wanted posters up from four years ago, when she and Jace had worked for Tezzeret's criminal Consortium. Odd to consider how much had changed since then. Now Jace was the one the Azorius appealed to for aid, and she was more powerful than the guild could possibly deal with.

She laid a hand over the hidden pocket where she kept the Chain Veil. Not that she needed to assure herself of its presence. She could feel the icy sprawl of it against her thigh, and when her concentration lapsed, the whispers of the Onakke spirits possessing it rasped from the darker corners of the room.

"That makes sense," Gideon said, nodding slowly. "All right. Lavinia, I'd like a summary of what the Azorius know."

The guard looked scandalized. "A *summary*? Captain Jura, the witness statements alone total several thousand—"

"I'm new here." He gave her an easy smile. "I need to rely on your expertise. I know it's a lot to ask, but could you get something for me by tonight? Even a little would be great."

Lavinia flustered under his gaze. "Absolutely, sir."

"Thank you, Lavinia," Gideon gestured to Baan, and moved toward the door on the far end of the room. "Jace's kitchen staff is incredible. Perk of being Guildpact, apparently. What's your interest?"

Jace dropped his illusion of calm and glared into Liliana's smile.

"I am content with a loaf of unleavened bread, a thin cut of meat, and water."

A booming laugh. "We can do better than that!" They turned down a hallway.

Lavinia tromped off, making notes on a small pad.

They were alone again.

Liliana placed herself between the table and the door to Jace's office as he gathered his paperwork. He scowled to see her waiting, lowered his chin, and marched past her looking into the distance. She smiled benignly. *Magnanimously*. "In the future, my dear, maybe you should leave the talking to me?"

"I hate it when you do that," Jace said, low and colder than she thought she'd earned. "When you walk in and take over. Like you own everything and everyone. Then expect me to *thank* you." He turned his shoulder to her and brushed past.

Her words came out by reflex, unbidden; pain for pain. She breathed into the collapsing space between them, "I remember when you *enjoyed* that."

Then he was gone, leaving behind only his angry words, each a nail of ice pounded into her heart.

Well, damn it. There went her good mood. She swiped a hand beneath one eye (just being sure, nothing would ever be there), then squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. To Grixis with him, then. Let's see where Chandra stormed off to. That could be fun.

She turned toward the stairs, and noticed Nissa's chair was empty. The elf had left as unobtrusively as she'd arrived.

It was only when she was halfway to the second floor that Liliana realized Nissa hadn't said a single word through the entire meeting.

I keep throwing punches.

The jolts pass up my arms, irregular, staccato. Gids's punchy-kicky bag of sand swings and wobbles under the blows.

If he were here, he'd be telling me to pace myself, keep my arms straight, use short and controlled jabs, so I guess it's just too bad for me he's listening to that Consulate *butt* instead.

Inventors' Fair? The hell. They *killed* the best damn inventors on Kaladesh. Baan and his sort. The *Consuls* and their damn stupid *rules*.

Now they're trying to hunt down somebody else. Someone else's kid. Maybe someone else's—

The canvas of Gids's punchybag bursts into flames.

"Oh crap!"

There's gotta be—he's gotta have water in here. He's like the king of eight glasses a day. I scan the room. Weights. Wrestle-y floor-pillow dealies. Big ball I'm not supposed to throw at Jace again. More weights. Rack of weird stuff he never explained. More different weights. There!

I slide across the table and grab for the bucket below the window. It smells funny. Maybe he soaks his head in it, I don't know. Just need the water.

Behind me, the canvas bursts, and sand hisses across the floor.

Oh, *damn it* .

I pour the bucket over flaming scraps of fabric.

That's a big pile of mud. I wonder if it will ruin the floor? I stick the toe of my boot in and trace a line across the mess. Maybe I should make a sand castle.

I hate this. I hate the me that breaks nice people's crap. Even if Gids *is* being nice to one of the people who killed my—

My eyes are stinging again. I drop the bucket and rub them. Sparks and embers drift away.

Maybe Gids totally deserves it. Screw his punchybag.

Why am I even here? I don't belong here.

I should go back to Regatha. Do that stupid ritual where you spend all night watching a log burn. Bit by bit it starts to glow. Red, orange, yellow, crawling up the bark. Flaring and fading down again. Then it turns grey and falls into ash. "This is what it means to be consumed by divinity," Mother Luti said. "Transformed." Old life falls away and blah blah blah.

Which divinity? The Eldrazi? The guys who screwed over Gids? I can't believe in a god that burns everyone they touch. A god's gotta be better than that.

I remember the pool.

Behind the power that shook the strength from my legs.

It was there. I saw it. I *swear* I saw it.

She was floating in green and I could breathe there.

That's where I want to be.

I *need* to be there.

It's an itch I gotta scratch. Crawling up my spine and under my hair. Gotta go *now* .

My feet have already taken me to the door. No, stop. Can't just barge in and...I mean, *weird* , right? *Rude* . I don't want her to think I'm the sort that just breaks in and...all right, maybe I *am* the sort who does that, but I'm trying *real hard* to be polite now. I just need to take a few minutes to—

Damn it, I'm already up the stairs. And I'm stomping down the hall like a *big freak* because my legs are shaking and my brain is sizzling. This is *stupid* . I'm going to stop putting one foot in front of the other. I'm going to turn around. I'm going to tiptoe down the stairs real quiet, like a little baby mouse. Any second now. Damn it, Chandra, don't open that door. Stop gawping at the ginormous flowers that weren't here a month ago. Bad Chandra, no cinnamon pastry. Just turn around, go back downstairs, and never think of doing this agai—

"Chandra?"

FFFFFFFFF...

"H-hey. Nissa? You in here?" Yeah, that's it. Casual. *Smooth* . Be all nonchalant, like Liliana. Nothing gets to Liliana.

"I mean, heh, 'course you're in here. 'Cause you just talked. I mean, uh, you got a minute? Maybe?"
All right you can stop talking now .

"Yes. I'm behind the kass—behind the purple flowers."

My hands are shaking. I push branches aside and walk toward her voice. The leaves feel like sandpaper. Just a little farth—

She's sitting cross-legged on a patch of moss. Dark hair unbound, spilling in waves over her shoulders, trailing across her lap. She's woven little flowers around the crown of her head. Butterflies are dancing around her. She pays them no mind. A shaft of light through the leaves paints her in golden sun. She smells like anyone's best childhood memory.

She hasn't taken her eyes off me. Just sits. Listens. Waits. It's making me itchy and I think I'm sweating. When was the last time I took a bath? Aren't elves supposed to have super dog noses or something?

Also, I'm standing bent over under a branch, holding leaves out of my face like a freaking idiot. "Uh. Can I sit?" I'm breathing through my mouth, fighting for air, struggling not to be loud about it.

"Please." She gestures. Her arm moves like water. Just sorta *flows*.

Then I manage to trip and fall on my face.

"Oh!" she reaches out, but her fingers seem to bounce off an invisible bubble a handspan away from me. "There's a root..." She pulls her hand back, cradles it with her other arm.

"I'm fine!" I blurt into the dirt, then roll on to my knees and grab my head to make sure I really am. Bleeding from my face would be super embarrassing during this conversation. "Are you fine?"

She cocks her head to the side. "I..."

"Ha-ha-ha! 'Course you are. Sorry. I'm the one who fell on her face." *SHUT UP SHUT UP*.

I try to sit like she is, but the armor on my shins digs into my thighs. I lean against a tree, stretch out my legs, cross them at the ankles.

Wait! My feet are almost touching her knees. I shouldn't do that. She might not like that. I shift my weight, point them off to one side.

Great. Now I have a root jabbing into my butt.

She just watches me. Silent. Patient.

I giggle and try to push the hair off my sweaty forehead. I'm steaming under her gaze, skin gone molten. "I think I'm crushing your flowers."

"They'll be fine." Her eyes are so deep. When I was a kid, there was this quarry outside Ghirapur. It had filled with water, and moss and floaty green stuff grew all over it. Deep, black, still. If you fell in, you'd never reach the bottom. That's what they said, anyways. I'm standing at the edge, too scared to jump.

She clears her throat. "Can I help with something?"

I swallow, but my throat's dried up and it takes a few tries. "I—I just thought that...You know that time on Zendikar, when our minds touched? I felt Zendikar's anger, right? The power of a whole world. *Your* world. And it was *amazing*. The most incredible thing *ever*. But behind Zendikar, behind the anger and the power, I felt *you*. Your mind. And it was real tranquil, you know? You kinda...centered me, I guess. You were all calm and connected-y."

Then my brain shuts off, but my mouth keeps walking over a cliff.

"When I touched that part of you, it was like when you're swimming, and you just lie back and float, looking up at the sky. Nothing below. Just blue and air above, and everything's cool and still. You can see forever, and don't have to worry..."

WHAT IS COMING OUT OF MY FACE?

I run a hand back through my sweaty hair. “Ha ha, wow. You must think this is dumb, huh? I come in here and start spouting bad poetry—”

The tiniest of smiles. “I thought it eloquent.”

I grab a strand of my hair and yank until it hurts. That will keep me focused, I bet. “Anyways. I was thinking there are times when I get super pi—uh, real angry, and usually something blows up. But I think I’d rather be able to touch that place again. What your mind felt like. Calm. *Grounded*. I mean...” I make the mistake of looking up and her eyes are just *there*, watching, and all the air in my throat jams up and refuses to move.

I struggle to pull in a breath. “I think *Jace* would prefer that. So I don’t wreck his house. I mean, he’s got this expensive stuff all over.”

“I can teach you to meditate, if you wish.”

“Uh, yeah.” Let’s go with that. Sounds good.

Her pencil-sketch eyebrows go all bendy. “Are you unwell? You seem anxious.”

The entire garden is full of floaty sparkly silver things, I spent the last hour trying not to blow up Jace’s house, and my heart’s slamming against my ribcage like I just ran a marathon. *I’M GREAT THANKS FOR ASKING*.

Instead I blurt, “It’s just, you’ve been staring at me this whole time.”

“You’re speaking to me. Should I not pay attention?” I swear her lip trembles. “Is this not—not polite on your world?” She looks away for the first time, and one hand tugs a grass-stem ear. The snow of her cheek is brushed with sunset color.

WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY?

“Wha—uh, no! I mean...Sorry!”

I’m on my feet, slamming my head into a low branch. “Ow! S-sorry. This was dumb.” I back away, clutching my head, pulling in my elbows to hide my burning eyes, stumbling over the *same damn root*, shaking, panting for breath, stomach churning. What did I do, what did I do, what did I do?

She’s on her feet in the turn of a breath. “Wait.”

“I made you feel weird. I should go. I’m just gonna go. Sorry. Bye. Sorry.”

“Chandra, please...”

I turn and run, trailing sparks, trees and flowers smearing around me, banging through the door.

...I think I’m gonna puke.

“What a disaster,” Liliana murmured. She leaned one hip against the door into Beefslab’s gymnasium. After the scene downstairs, she’d expected fire damage. The sandcastle was a surprise.

Gideon’s voice boomed from the stairs behind her, “Up here’s where I exercise. I’ve been trying to train up Chandra and Jace, get everyone able to handle an actual weapon. You know. Just in case.”

“I have every confidence it will prove equally fascinating as the rest of your facility,” Baan replied, wearily.

BANG.

She startled, turning in time to see Chandra hurtle down past Baan and Gideon, a red-haired comet trailing embers from her eyes.

"*Sorry! Blew up your thingy*," she said in passing, the words floating up from underwater.

Then she was gone, the thunder of her feet rumbling down the stairs.

"Careful! You might fall!" Gideon yelled down after her.

Liliana stepped into the stairwell and glanced upwards. Nissa looked down with hands clasped and fretting at her chest, lips parted with unvoiced confusion, long ears drooping.

Liliana shook her head and started down the stairs. Someone had to clean up the mess. Chandra was easy to read. *Too* easy. Yet she commanded incredible power. A convenient combination.

The sun was westering, settling down into a long, hot afternoon. Low slate clouds to the east promised evening rain, the kind that would make the summer air thicker instead of cooler.

Not that heat bothered her greatly. Necromantic powers had benefits seldom mentioned in brochures. For example, a body temperature low enough to alarm healers. It made summers far more pleasant, and her breath frigid instead of warm. Jace had been preternaturally sensitive to it. The slightest puff of air on his neck had been enough to wake him from sleep.

She frowned and firmly pushed the memory out of mind.

Chandra wasn't hard to find. Setting aside the fact that she had a tendency to knock into people and objects when running flat out, her hair was smoking, in a subtly different color from the food carts scattered around the plaza. Liliana didn't even need to summon a shade to help search.

She was crouched halfway down an alley three blocks from Jace's home, its entrance hidden behind a hoarse food vendor whose cart smelled of cheap pork and overboiled cabbage. Curled up knees to chin, back to a brick wall, she tugged on handfuls of her copper hair.

Sibilant whispers echoed from the alley mouth; "Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

This wouldn't do at all. Liliana swept imperiously around the corner, careful to lift her skirts clear of the rainbow-skimmed puddles. "Why, Chandra, here you are."

She bolted to her feet, wiping under her nose with the back of a shaky hand. "Uh, hey. What—what are you doing here?"

"I was on my way to do some shopping," Liliana extemporized. She'd probably believe that. Big Sis Liliana, leading the glamorous lifestyle and whatnot.

She sniffed and gave a skeptical look. "In an *alley*?"

"We don't all shop in the same places," Liliana said. "Care to join me?"

Chandra looked over her shoulder, down at the other end of the alley, where crowd-shadows flickered and danced across the afternoon light. "Anyone with you? Gids?"

"Goodness, no. He wouldn't be caught dead shopping with me."

She grinned. "But if he *was*, you'd raise him to carry your bags!" She paused. "Did you just let me have a necromancer joke?"

"Just this once. Because I like you." The stiffness in Chandra's shoulders relaxed, just slightly. Good.

Chandra wiped under her nose again, then absently rubbed the hand clean on the shawl tied around her waist. "So what are you even shopping for?"

“Oh, nothing terribly important,” Liliana said, airily. “A bottle of wine, a half-dozen dead cats—seven to ten days decomposed, by preference—lavender-scented candles, a twelve-inch bone saw...”

Chandra’s mouth worked for a moment before the words came. “I...can’t tell if you’re joking?”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to come along and see. We can talk on the way.”

All was dark. Cold. Silent. Dampness encased her. A distant warmth filtered down, the lightest breath on the small of her back. She’d waited an eternity, sleeping under moons of cracking ice and pounding rain, feeling the press of quick lives passing overhead.

It was time to move.

Slowly she unwound, pushing back against the softness that pressed in on her. Her limbs stretched, creaking and quaking from an eternity spent huddled in the dark. All around she could feel her siblings stirring. The warmth on her back was drumming into them all, calling. It was time to meet, at last.

...Nissa...

She pushed against the weight above her. Strained. Pale, thin toes sank into the velvet depths below her belly, down where the long cold still lurked and growled, stretching knives of clearest crystal through unknown spaces. She shuddered with the strain.

Maybe she couldn’t do it. Maybe she’d be down here forever. Lost, collapsing back into a forgotten husk. Not dead, but never-lived.

...Nissa?

The darkness broke over her.

She shuddered, aching, unsteady legs pushing up, arms shaking as they unfolded from her torso. Every move was agony. The heat beat down, making cold-choked blood flow, filling her limbs with strength and color. Her head lifted into the light, hair spreading into radiance.

“Nissa?”



Art by Zack Stella

The word cracked across her from a thousand leagues away.

She was yanked away in the span of a breath.

The world flashed past. Jumbles of wood and fungus growing over and through one another, breathing together; wastelands of hissing dust, patiently eating stone; ranks of muttering clouds opening themselves to the earth below; ranks of axe-blade stone clawing open the sky; waters deep, cold, and empty.

She blinked at Gideon, momentarily baffled by his grunting beast-sounds—*words*, some part of her corrected—and by the club-shapes—*fingers*—waving before eyes that suddenly saw light instead of heat. “I..”

I’m not a seed.

Nissa. I’m Nissa again.

He looked at her expectantly. Rain tapped against the windows of Jace’s library. Her words came out broken and creaking, “I’m sorry, Gideon. What did you say?”

He showed his teeth. A grin. “Thought you’d fallen asleep for a minute.”

“I was...” A flower struggling out of spring tundra half a world away, delighting in the first touch of the sun. She searched his kind and open face, but found no capacity for understanding. No context she could appeal to. No words that could explain.

“...I was just thinking.” She looked down at her lap, where a bowl of food sat untouched.

He speared a hunk of meat from his plate with a utensil—*fork*, she remembered—that was all but lost between his thick, calloused fingers. “I was telling Minister Baan what you did on Zendikar. You and Chandra.”

Chandra. The blood surging hot through her freckled cheeks, the sharp, swift movements of her hands. They’d moved like birds.

Nissa fed birds sometimes, in the garden. They would peer at the seeds cupped in her hand, hungry and needing, but fluttered off when she moved the wrong way.

She'd moved the wrong way, and Chandra had flown.

All her senses and instincts were off.

Ravnica had beaten against her since she arrived, the hot, constant breath of a beast on the back of her neck. The sun was blinding white, the smells thick and unpleasant. Every surface seemed to have edges made to cut and tear.

An endless array of faces milled and circled the streets, strange and terrifying. More faces than she thought could ever exist. They melted into one another, became a single monstrosity with a thousand heads that jostled past her. A walk around the building left her sweaty and trembling. She had to crouch and study the lone flowers that struggled through the cracked cobbles, had to ignore the milling, noisy shapes that shoved and kicked and poked.

There was no silence. Discordant anvils rang by day. Endless banquets hissed and roared from a thousand ovens. The wail of sirens and the crackle of mana by night. A million voices constantly yelling and screaming, crying in pain and grief, lust and anger, overlapping in babble. She hadn't heard the shush of wind through trees for three months. She hadn't heard *nothing*.

The faces. The noise. The million and one unfamiliar smells that settled in the back of her throat to gag her. When it was too much to bear, she'd curl up in the garden, cover her ears, and the trees would hold her safe.

Everything here was hard, and bright, and sharp.

Chandra. Eyes like sunrises. Every passing thought writ bold across her face. Fearless.

Oh, Zendikar, how did I offend her? What did I do?

But her friend—her *best* friend, her constant companion for two score years—couldn't answer. The corner of her mind where Zendikar had lived was silent and empty. *There's so much I don't understand. I wish you could be here.*

She'd never been among so many, and never been so alone.

"Nissa?"

"Yes." She lifted a small red fruit from her bowl. *Tomato*, Jace called it. Taut skin flush with water, smelling faintly of acid. "What did you want to know?"

Baan laid his utensils across the edges of his plate at an angle so precise it hurt her eyes, then steeped his fingers. "Indulge my curiosity, if you will, Miss...Nissa." He frowned as the title made him hiss. "I am given to understand you have the ability to perceive and manipulate naturally occurring patterns of magic. Through the land, I believe?"

The golden filigree over his coat was ticking softly, a counterpoint to the clock on the far side of the room. She could hear energy within it sizzling and snapping, imperceptible to Gideon, and perhaps to Baan; his ears were as small as a human's.

"Leylines," she said. "Yes."

His nostrils pinched as he inhaled sharply. "A fascinating inversion. On my world, similar energies stream through the upper reaches of the *sky*. Aether, it is called. We siphon this power—on mountain-tops or from thopters—store it within mechanical devices, and release it for various productive uses. Do people do the same on your world?"

Dagger-blade stones floating in the air, bending the world. A web, a cage...a lattice.

A wave of nausea passed through her.

"No," she said to her bowl, shoulders drawing inwards. "Some did, but they..." The tales piled up against the back of her teeth. Where could she even begin? "The land isn't—we ask. We don't take."

"Ask?" Baan echoed, turning the word sideways in his mouth. "Ask *whom*? Your leylines are naturally occurring phenomena, surely?" His voice thinned with saline contempt. The shape of his eyes changed, tissues settling into harsh angles. "Would you ask the mountain for its kind permission to shape the iron at its root? Would you beg the tree for the fruit that sustains you?"

"Yes," she said, and nothing more. She placed the tomato in her mouth and bit down. The water flooded out—the sharp light of a white sun beating down, rows of dark earth spiced with the remains of those gone before; gently tilled lanes, the hush of elves and dryads swaying among them; tilting cans to set brief, borrowed rains tapping and shivering down leaves.

A lifetime carried in a mouthful of sweet flesh. Months of patience. *Thank you*, she thought, and swallowed.

Gideon shifted in his chair, leaning forward, subtly placing himself between them. "Minister, things are...different on Nissa's world."

The heavy door at the far end of the room opened, and Jace trudged out looking drained. Lavinia drifted into his wake. When he muttered, "I could really use drink," she pushed a mug of tea into his hand, its steam fragrant with lemon, hibiscus, and several herbs Nissa didn't recognize. He blinked. "How did you know to...?"

"It's my job to anticipate you, Guildpact," she said, crisply. "Should I get someone to reheat your dinner?"

"No. Thanks, Lavinia." He pulled a chair out—old oak, dark and worn from years of sun. Nissa wondered where the chair had come from. It was far older than the house. The life it had held was just a whisper now, a shadow cast on a cloudy day.

Jace's plate contained some yellow-white mass involving cheese and grains. Even cold, she could smell it from the far side of the room. He frowned. "Did they put *broccoli* in this?"

"You need iron," Lavinia said.

"I hate—"

"You won't even notice it's there." Her voice brooked no argument.

Baan regarded him coolly. "You were bullied as a child."

Jace coughed on his first mouthful of food and struggled to swallow. "I, uh, don't remember my childhood." A dozen unvoiced thoughts flickered behind his eyes.

The Kaladeshi raised his brows. "One need not consciously recollect an event to fall into habitual behaviors determined by the experience. It is not inconceivable that one could forget their entire life. I would safely wager that were that the case, the subject would still tend to make similar lapses of judgement, and would be drawn to associate with the same sorts of people." He waved a hand, the swish of an ox's tail dismissing flies. "The nature of mortals is not so malleable as some would naively suppose. A person of religious inclination will always find something greater than themselves to place their faith in. A criminal will forever remain a criminal."

Jace put his fork down. "That's a very...deterministic point of view, Minister."

Baan blinked, first one eye, then the other. Not a wink, but some form of body language unique to him, unlike any Nissa had seen before. “The mortal corpus, even the mind, is merely a series of sophisticated mechanisms. It is simplicity itself to observe a mechanism in action, and draw appropriate conclusions.”

There was a moment of silence. Jace cleared his throat. “Did you enjoy the tour?”

Nissa looked down at her food. She plucked out a piece of steamed fish with her fingers and let the flavor melt across her tongue. *Quicksilver bodies flickering under green shadows. The grit of suspended peat, the faint tang of metal.* It was not her first language, but there all the same. *Thank you*, she thought. *I will use what you’ve given with wisdom.*

Baan’s chair creaked as he settled back. “There are a number of structural and organizational deficiencies I believe it best you be made aware of. The load-bearing beams on the lowest levels are cracked. Application of sufficient force would cause them to give way. The arrangement of furniture in most of the bedrooms is inefficient, leaving many “pockets”—if you will excuse the imprecision of the term—of floor space too small to make practical use of. There are seventeen books that were returned to incorrect shelves in this library. A number of lamps on the second floor lack appropriate protection from drafts...”

“Maybe I should write this down,” Gideon said, with a lopsided smile.

“I’ll remember it all,” Jace said.

Baan paused. “I am given to understand that the incident within Mister Gideon’s gymnasium was the responsibility of a pyromancer in your employ?”

“‘Employ’ might be too strong a word.”

“Regardless of the particulars of your arrangement, the lack of appropriate precautionary measures is deplorable. You possess a library of admirable scope and selection. To a pyromancer, this is merely so much kindling. If a conflagration were to start in here—”

“I have...differences with Chandra, but I trust her to...” Jace paused. “Where *is* Chandra?”

Nissa looked up. Chandra’s usual seat at the table was empty.

Gideon shrugged. “I’ve been looking for her myself. We need to have a talk about proper care of other people’s equipment. Last I saw, she was running down from the roof—”

Her breath caught.

“—and Liliana was following her.”

Jace looked up sharply. Lavinia, standing watch by the door, cleared her throat. “Guildpact. Permission to report?”

“What? Yes!” Jace turned entirely around in his chair. “You know where they are?”

Lavinia straightened, almost imperceptibly. “Some time ago, Captain Jura requested I have someone follow Countess Vess when she leaves.”

Jace glared at Gideon, who shrugged. “Necromancer. Only prudent.” He put another forkful of steak in his mouth.

Lavinia shifted weight to her other foot, setting her armor to humming, a tone no one else in the room could hear. “She contacted Monk Nalaar—”

Baan leaned forward in his chair. His eyes narrowed.

"They spent the afternoon wandering the market district, then, ah...planeswalked."

"*Together?*" Jace asked.

"Yes, sir."

Gideon put down his fork. "Where to?"

"No way for us to know, sir."

"*Nalaar*," Baan said, softly. He pronounced it with the same enunciation Chandra used, and none of the others had ever quite managed to reproduce. "You must excuse my consternation. That is a name I have not heard for many years."

Jace pushed his plate aside and laid his hands on the table. "I need you to explain that."

"I would not say it is my pleasure to do so, but I do believe it is my obligation." Baan folded his hands in his lap. "Pia and Kiran Nalaar were early luminaries of the renegade movement. They were criminals, I regret to say, engaged in the theft and unlawful redistribution of Consulate aether resources."

"They're relatives of Chandra's?" Gideon asked. "I didn't even know she was from Kaladesh..."

"Her parents, unless I greatly miss my guess. Twelve years ago, they compelled their daughter—her name was not recorded—to assist in their smuggling operations. I am not familiar with the details, but the girl escaped custody when she manifested dangerous pyromantic abilities. The Nalaars attempted to hide in the countryside. A manhunt brought them to ground in Bunarat, but during the attempt to take them into custody, the village was set ablaze. All three were reported dead by the officer in charge."

"Twelve years?" Gideon said, aghast. "But she's only—!"

"She would have been a *child*," Nissa said, softly.

Baan opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked inward, tapping his fingers on the filigree covering his sleeve. "Please understand," he said at last. "This was performed under the authority of a previous administration. Even then, these actions were considered...extraordinary. The officer in charge of the investigation pursued despite an official recall. I believe formal charges were brought against him for the expense."

"*For the expen—!*" Jace sputtered.

"I don't know what her parents did," Gideon said, his mouth a hard line. "I don't much care, either. Whatever *their* sins were, they had *nothing* to do with Chandra." His eyes narrowed. "Is she impulsive? Sure. I'd be stupid not to say that. But her heart's the size of the moon."

Baan laced his fingers and rested his chin on them. "Mister Gideon, aether is in the very air we breathe. It is in the rain that falls to earth, and in the leaves of the trees. We only dare touch such power through the gloves of artifice; a million pieces of instrumentality, each safely performing its assigned function. By rigorous adherence to this method, we avoid 87.4% of the accidents provoked by mages drawing upon mana directly. If you will forgive me for saying so, pyromancers are particularly prone to...collateral damage." Baan inhaled slowly, fuchsia eyes darting around some image that only existed in his thoughts. "In the past, pyromancers have precipitated...terrible tragedies. Not always by their intent, but universally by their nature."

"So have you outlawed *matches*?" Gideon asked, with a severity Nissa hadn't heard from him before.

Baan lowered his eyes. "May I assume, based upon your reactions, that Miss Nalaar never spoke to you of this?"

"Not a word," Gideon said. He stared at his unfinished meal, one hand curling into a fist.

Jace looked at him sympathetically, "She didn't confide in *any* of us."

Gideon shook his head slightly. "But she should have felt that she *could*."

"That was her choice to make. Not ours," Nissa murmured. She laid a fingertip along the rim of her bowl and slid it down, setting the pottery to ringing. "We all have scars we don't want others to touch."

Chandra had sat across from her, cheeks burning, twisting flower-stems around her fingers, asking for nothing more than a moment of peace. For something that could slow the frantic, bird-like stammer of her heart. But she'd moved the wrong way. Chandra had fluttered and flown.

"If I may inquire," Baan said, "Where do you suppose she might have gone? Surely she could not be so rash as to depart for Kaladesh."

Nissa looked up. Jace and Gideon were exchanging a look. Both glanced at her.

They stood as one.

Jace turned toward the coat room. "I'll head to Kaladesh. It should be easy for me to—"

Lavinia appeared in his path, one hand resting on the pommel her sword. "Again?" she said, in a weary, disappointed tone.

He frowned up at her. "You can't expect me to sit here and do paperwork!"

She nodded to Gideon and Nissa. "They can find Monk Nalaar. They can't be the Guildpact."

Gideon laid a meaty hand on Jace's shoulder. "She's not wrong. Think of the bigger picture, Jace. I can take this one. Although," he winced, "I'm not looking forward to it. You know how she gets when someone tells her what to do..."

Kaladesh. Ghirapur. A city of brass and industry. Like Ravnica, a place that never slept, where the wind smelled of metal and cracking energies, and ceaseless tides of mortal faces buffeted to and fro. An ocean of strangers, gawping and whispering at her. Staring. Pointing. Shoving.

"I'll go." The words had flown before she'd thought them.

Gideon turned to her. "Are you sure?" His eyes drifted down to her trembling fingers. "Nissa, you don't have to go alone."

She balled her hands into fists, stilling them. "I *will* go to Kaladesh. Baan can guide me. I'll..."

What?

Bring Chandra home? She *was* home.

Get her out of trouble? She was a woman grown. She could do as she pleased.

Protect her? Chandra's heart was a baloth. She needed no champion.

"...I'll stand with her."

It felt right.