

Renewal

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From set *Aether Revolt*

Tezzeret is defeated. Dovin Baan has disappeared. Rashmi's Planar Bridge, a threat to life across the Multiverse, lies in pieces, and the inventor has sworn to her friend Saheeli Rai that the work will not be duplicated. Now the Gatewatch and the people of Kaladesh must decide their paths into the future...for those who have a future.

For Chandra and her mother Pia, reunited after twelve years thinking each other dead, the days are all too brief.

The Dhund compound was a hive of underground tunnels that coiled around its central core beneath the city of Ghirapur. Inside, scores of informants, Consulate soldiers, and prisoners toiled under the watchful eye of the Chief of Compliance, Dhiren Baral.

That was, at least, until a few weeks ago.

It had taken extended inquiries through a trail of sealed lips and greased palms for the new Consulate to determine the breadth of the Dhund's secret activities. Soon after, plans for reform were written, passed, and set into motion.

The informants and soldiers were redistributed to new posts throughout the city. Some were themselves placed under arrest. Hundreds of prisoners—most of them mages and renegades who had “disappeared” long ago—were released in the space of a couple hours. The hallways reverberated with the shrieking protests of heavy cell doors on ungreased hinges that nearly drowned out the deafening cheers of newly freed citizens. They left without looking back, abandoning what little they had in their cells.

Next, the foremen arrived to begin demolition of all but the central core that held the few remaining prisoners. Mighty pneumatic hammers punched holes into the vaulted ribs of the ceilings. Chunks of granite and brass rained down with thunderous crashes that shook entire blocks of the city above.

Today, though, the hallways were empty. Construction paused while two days of festivities covered the city in a blanket of lights and colors. The celebrations were held in honor of the new Consulate leadership—one that promised to embrace renegade interests. One that included even “Renegade Prime” herself, Pia Nalaar.

This new Consulate would be, as Consul Padeem had promised the crowds outside with rare enthusiasm, an...“impressive” step forward for Ghirapur.



Call for Unity | Art by John Severin Brassell

Two sets of footsteps filled the emptiness of the Dhund's remains as Pia and Chandra Nalaar made their way through the ruined hallways toward the compound's intact core. Through the holes in the ceiling, they could see bright explosions of vibrant teals swirled with metallic particles light up the sky—fireworks from the processions in the streets overhead.

"Those *colors* ! How'd they do that?" Chandra gasped. "Even Keral Keep's never done stuff like this!"

Pia tilted her head to one side. "Who-all keeps what?"

"*Ker* al. It's...a long story. I'll tell you later."

"As for the colors, that's just a little copper powder mixed in with the fireworks. I'm sure Mrs. Pashiri can get a whole satchel of it for you," Pia said, and gave her daughter's cheek a quick kiss.

Thick columns of late-afternoon sunlight cut through the dim interior. Arched catwalks overhead anchored an encroachment of jasmine and madhavi vines. Patches of fallen earth on the scuffed floor offered refuge to scattered seedlings that had drifted in on spring breezes.

Chandra peered inside an open cell door at the things left behind by its past occupant. A carving on a wooden table. A single candle burned half away. A pair of small filigreed mage's shackles, sized to fit a child. Chandra ran her fingers over the intricate surface of the shackles, tasting the grim texture of their memories.

In the hallway, Pia pressed the metal fingertips of her glove to the outside of an aether pipe. Nothing. It'd been dark for hours, maybe even days at this point. She opened the cover and found nothing inside save for a residual whiff of aether that burned her nostrils for a moment before fading.

"Rerouted." Pia nodded with satisfaction. "Bound for the Weldfast, as planned." She scrawled her signature onto a gridded chart stamped with the Consulate insignia.

Chandra poked her head out from one of the cells. "Mom, you know you already sound like the..." She cleared her throat, "*Y'know*..." she whispered loudly.

"Young lady—" Pia began in mock protest.

"...*The Consul of Allocation*," Chandra intoned. Her attempt at deadpan formality was betrayed by a toothy grin.

"Oof." Pia winced. "It didn't sound nearly as bad in my head as it does out loud. Here, could you give Consul Mom a hand here?"

The two helped each other over the skeletal remains of a fallen catwalk.

"What was it like up there with the Consuls?" Chandra asked as she knelt to untangle a fragrant vine of jasmine that had wound its way around the catwalk. She gently removed a branch and wrapped it around her wrist to carry with her.

"...*Scary*."

"For you?" Chandra exclaimed. "I saw you out there. You were a damn hero!" She paused for a heartbeat before turning red. "I mean, you still are! Just...if I was that good at fighting stuff... I wouldn't want things to change."

"Change?" Pia tasted the word as it left her lips. *Could I even recall the days before I was "Renegade Prime?" she thought. Before running from the law? Before we'd been all been labelled "renegades?"*

Pia glanced at her daughter as they stepped through a patch of sunlight that spun Chandra's hair and armor into blazing gold. Still her little girl...but suddenly something else entirely. Chandra, a destroyer of titans, a beacon of mana and light exploding outside the Aether Spire. A revolutionary. A grown woman.

"Fighting is all I can remember now." Pia said with an uneasy laugh. "But the world's changed. At least I hope it has. I'll change with it, learn something new."

They rounded the corner and stepped back into the shadows of the prison walls. Suddenly it was her old Chandra again—armor dented and scuffed, a piece of yesterday's cabbage stuck in tangled, frizzy hair. Pia licked the end of her index finger and plucked away the offending vegetable with expert precision.

The hallway ended abruptly as they reached the intact core of the prison, the Dhund's old, bitter heart. The high ceiling was narrow and windowless—shut as tightly as a clenched fist.

A thick brass door faced them. Its worn metal grating was burnished from use and covered a pane of thick glass that looked in on the chamber's contents. A crisp form was tacked to one side of the door: name, imprisonment date, guard shifts. No visitors had been recorded.

"Aether's accounted for. Now..." Pia trailed off and turned to Chandra. "...You know you don't have to go with me, right?"

Chandra wrapped her mother in a sudden, fierce hug. "I know. But turn down extra seconds with you? That's crazy." Chandra said, burying in her face in her mother's machine-grease-and-chamomile-scented hair. "I'm staying with you, Mom."

Bright, warm things swam through Pia's vision. *I've waited twelve years for you to say that*. She thought as she blinked them away.

Pia exhaled slowly and opened the grating.

Behind the glass, the cell was spacious. Immaculately clean. Unlike the cells from the other hallways, this one held no personal effects at all. It held nothing, save for its sole inhabitant.

Perhaps it was his lack of armor, mask, or weapons, but he looked so much smaller than the two women had remembered.

His heavy form was wrapped in a simple canvas tunic. His hands were bound by filigree-and-gold mage's shackles.



Vedalken Shackles | Art by Svetlin Velinov

A thousand words swirled through her head—she could voice only one. “Baral.” Pia said.

Dhiren Baral turned toward the grating. The events at the Aether Hub had reaped their due. Sparse tufts of hair protruded from cracked patches of his reddened scalp. His body was now more scars than skin; long, twisted cords of them coiled about his limbs, shiny pink masses punctuated with flecks of crimson and purple.

“So the inspectors sent you to lead me to my execution in the arena.” Baral rasped. “Fitting. Just like I had for all the other mages.”

Pia shook her head. “There’s no more arena. There are no inspectors. Your sentence begins and ends here.”

Baral snorted. “Ridiculous. The safety of the Consulate, of all *Ghirapur* belongs to the inspectors! Who else will track down the monsters?”

“No one—there were *never* monsters.” Pia said.

“It was Baan, wasn’t it?” Baral growled. “These spineless bureaucrats have no idea of the...*filth* that lurks amongst them. Easy enough when *I* kept them safe all these years! They owe me death in the arena—I want my due.”

“This is not about what you want.” Pia said quietly. “It’s about justice. Inspectors, mage-hunts, public executions...we don’t live in that world anymore.”

"What would you know about 'that world?'" Baral's voice turned shrill. "Were *you* born to be hidden away? Freakish?"

"I was," Chandra said as she turned to face Baral.

From the other side of the glass, Baral forced a wheezing laugh out of his chest.

"The little monster! We have unfinished business, you and I."

Pia's nerves stretched taut as sitar strings. "You don't speak to her."

"I know how this ends. Leave your mommy's hands clean and do something right for once," Baral rumbled to Chandra. "Think of it. *Your* blade at *my* throat. The look on my face when you burn this wreck of a body to *cinders*." His blue eyes glittered in their shadowed hollows.

"Chandra," Pia said softly, "you don't have to stay here and listen to this. He's nothing to us."

Baral's pressed his face as close as he could to the cell's window, thick fingers pushed against the glass.

"Even the score. Flesh for flesh—my corpse for your dead daddy's..." A slow smile bloomed over his face.

The air around Chandra shimmered and crackled. Her hands flexed and curled into fists.

"...One monster for another." Baral said. His grin pulled thick ropes of scars tightly over craggy cheeks.

"I'm *not* a monster!" Orange-gold sparks flew from Chandra's clenched fists and fell to the floor like a spatter of raindrops.

Pia put her arms around Chandra's shoulders, wincing from the heat that rose that emanated from them. "No, you're not a monster. Your father and I gladly give our lives for those we love. For you, Chandra."

Pia fixed a stony gaze on Baral. "I wouldn't expect *him* to understand that."

Chandra looked down at her hands as the last sparks danced to the ground and extinguished themselves. The heat had intensified the heady fragrance of the jasmine vine tied 'round her wrist. Its small, full blossoms were pale as stars in the darkness.

"Cool water. A single lantern drifting..." Chandra murmured as her fingers flitted over the tops of the jasmine flowers. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she inhaled their scent.

"Mom," she said, "You remember that old quarry we went to? Outside the city...?" Her voice was wistful, distant.

Pia blinked, then nodded uncertainly.

"...Let's go back there sometime," Chandra said, in that same distant tone.

Chandra's eyes locked on Baral, and her features hardened. "Screw you," she said. "I don't owe you a damn thing."

Baral's brittle smile cracked and fell away. "No! *I* know how this has to end," he hissed. Lurid purple veins strained against the brittle skin of his broad neck. Flares of blue light sputtered and died on his bound hands.

"My daughter and I leave *you* today," Pia said. "Stay and be forgotten." She snapped the cell door's grating shut. "It's your end, not ours."

Dull thuds sounded from the other side of the glass—the fists of the former inspector beating uselessly against the window.

Chandra plucked a single white flower from the jasmine vine and placed it at the foot of the cell door.

“What’s that?” Pia asked.

“Something from...a friend.” Chandra said.

Pia grasped one of her daughter’s hands and held it tightly as the two turned their back on the cell. Ahead of them, the ruined hallways were bathed in sunlight. The howls of the voice behind the glass were small in the vast emptiness of the Dhund. The sounds of celebration from above soon drowned out everything behind them.



Tranquil Expanse | Art by Sam Burley

On the back patio of Yahenni’s penthouse, Gideon sat on a curved bench and smiled.

His friends and allies around the table were somber. Upstairs, Yahenni would be preparing themselves for death.

No. You prepare a corpse. Yahenni was getting dressed for their own wake. Judging by the muffled music coming from downstairs, Yahenni’s long-postponed Penultimate Party had at last begun.

It didn’t seem like the time for smiling. Not after all the fighting in the beautiful streets of Kaladesh, Tezzeret’s escape, Chandra’s reckless, foolhardy—well, just *Chandra*, generally. And now Yahenni’s time had come. Nonetheless, even here where no one but his friends could see him, Gideon smiled.

When a comrade falls, you carry their armor home. And if, with their dying breath (or equivalent), they ask you to smile while you’re doing it?

You smile. Set an example for the others. Don’t fake it—feel it, whether you want to or not.

Nissa was silent. She was still planning to go to the party, which was something. She already had one corner of her mouth propped upward, by force, and that was something too.

Jace and Liliana were sitting together across the table from Gideon, pretending to ignore each other. Jace was pensive, one finger tracing anxious patterns around the table. Liliana leaned back and sipped a drink she'd pilfered from downstairs, and even her habitual haughty smirk seemed a little thin.

Then there was Ajani, sitting next to Gideon. His feline features were unreadable, but his huge shoulders were slumped, his ears low, his single blue eye fixed on something far, far away.

When you grieve, you're not leaving someone behind, Hixus had told Gideon once. *You're carrying them with you. And one person can only bear so much.*

A small meteor landed on the bench beside him and slammed a glass of thick, yellow-orange liquid onto the table.

"I got you lassi!" said Chandra. "Just, you know, the party's started, and I thought you might be thirsty."

He looked down at her, and she flushed, her own lassi already half-finished in her hand.

"It's, uh, good for you. It's got...yogurt?"

He took a sip.

"Thank you," he said. "It's good."

It *was* good. Too sweet. But good.

Nissa wouldn't care for it. Ajani couldn't drink it. Liliana might like it, but she already had a drink. And Chandra, in pitching it to Gideon, had skipped the taste and gone straight to health benefits. They were, slowly, getting to know each other.

"Uh," she said. "Depala says we have about ten minutes before Yahenni's grand entrance. We're all gonna be out there, right?"

"Of course," said Gideon.

Nods followed, of varying sincerity.

"We owe Yahenni that much," said Nissa.

Gideon cleared his throat.

"We're all here, and we have a few minutes. We've got some things to talk about before the celebration takes us our separate ways."

Gideon raised his glass of lassi.

"To the friends we lose," he said. He turned to Ajani. "And those we gain."

The group murmured agreement.

Gideon placed a hand on the leonin's shoulder.

"The five of us," he said, "are united by an oath. All of us, each for our own reasons, swore to keep watch. For threats. For villains. We found one here—one you were already watching."

He looked to the others for approval. Nissa, Jace, and Chandra nodded. Liliana shrugged.

"We'd be honored," said Gideon, "to count you among our number."

The cat-man heaved a sigh.

“If...”

A pause. Gideon tried not to look *too* expectant, not to undermine Ajani’s own part in the decision. He had to want this.

“Yes,” said Ajani. “It would be...an honor. There is an oath?”

Jace smiled at that.

“It’s pretty freeform,” he said. He tapped his temple. “I can walk you through it, if you’d like.”

Ajani nodded. One ear twitched as Jace whispered telepathic instructions in his mind, then he lowered his head.

“I have seen—” he said, before his voice cracked.

Liliana looked away in disgust. Or embarrassment.

“We don’t have to do this now,” said Nissa.

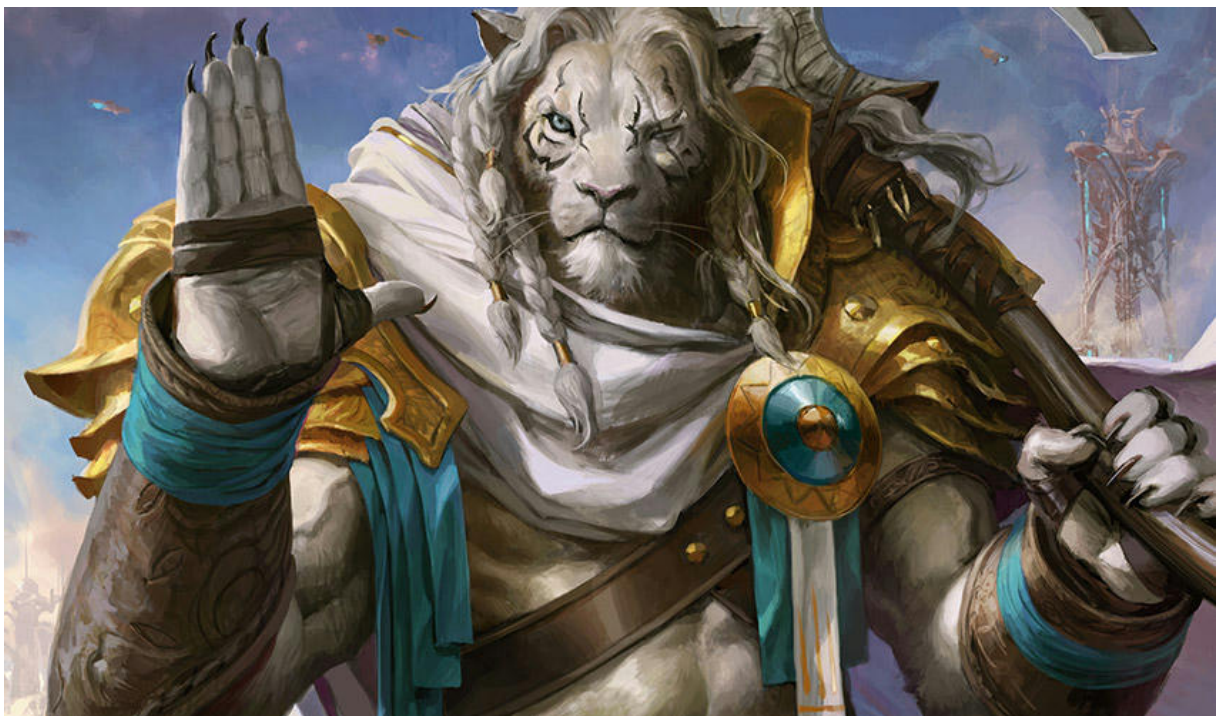
“No,” said Ajani. “No. This is right.”

The leonin breathed deeply.

“I have seen tyrants,” he said, “whose ambitions knew no limits. Creatures who styled themselves gods, or praetors, or consuls, but thought only of their own desires, not of those they ruled. Whole populations deceived. Civilizations plunged into war. People who were simply trying to live...made to suffer. To...to die.”

His left hand gripped the hem of his white cloak tightly. It had Bant-style stitching, Gideon noted. And it was too small for the leonin. What—and who—was the big cat carrying with him?

“Never again,” said Ajani. “Until all have found their place, I will keep watch.”



Oath of Ajani | Art by Wesley Burt

There were murmurs of agreement and affirmation.

"Thank you," said Ajani. "Now. As you say, we have found villains. What do you plan to do about them?"

Liliana had briefed them already about her conversation with Tezzeret, and a plane called Amonkhet.

"We have to stop them," said Gideon. "Tezzeret is too dangerous to go free. And from what you've said, Bolas is worse."

"I hate it when you say things I agree with," said Liliana. "It's very disorienting."

Gideon took it as teasing. It was easier than being offended.

"We have to do something," said Jace. "We may have disrupted Tezzeret's Planar Bridge, but Bolas's plans aren't so easily undone. Whatever he's up to, he's bound to have contingency plans, because..." Jace paused. "Well, because I would. And he's a lot smarter than I am."

That gave Gideon a chill. The only other being he'd ever heard Jace say that about was Ugin, another elder dragon, whose motives—though apparently less selfish than Bolas's—were inhuman in the extreme.

Gideon turned to Liliana.

"What can you tell us about Amonkhet?"

Liliana blinked, slowly—about as much surprise as she ever showed. *Yes*, thought Gideon. *I'm trusting you to give us intel.*

"Not much," said Liliana. "Bolas controls the place completely. As far as I know, he created it."

"Created it?" said Nissa. "Is he that powerful?"

"We were gods, once," said Liliana. "He said that to me. Back before things changed, the most powerful Planeswalkers could do practically anything, and some did make their own worlds. Never got around to it, myself."

"So it's a nasty place," said Chandra. "Whatever. I say we go there and show this dragon what happens when you mess with my home."

"No," said Ajani.

Five heads turned in his direction.

"We can't just walk into Bolas's lair and expect to defeat him," said Ajani. "I've faced him before. I've actually *won*. And that was only because he was trying to harness chaotic magical forces and fight my unfamiliar abilities at the same time."

"You caught him off guard," said Jace. "That's what the others are advocating."

"You *won*?" said Chandra.

"By cheating," said Ajani. "He knows me now, knows what I can do. Besides, we fought in an aetheric chaos called the Maelstrom, a place utterly hostile to both of us. You're talking about facing him in the center of his power. He doesn't have to be prepared for us personally for that to be a bad idea."

"You're not the only one of us who's faced him and lived," said Jace. "He's an incredibly powerful telepath, and I'm as scared of him as anybody. I know what he can do. But you don't know what *we* can do, and I'm not convinced he does either."

"I've been inside one of his lairs before," said Liliana. "I walked out again."

Jace tensed up at that, but didn't say anything. Still hiding something?

"We don't necessarily need to beat him in a straight fight," Liliana went on. "We can disrupt his plans, split off his allies—"

"There's another way," said Ajani. "Bolas has a lot of enemies. And we have a lot of friends waiting in the wings. Give me time to get some of those friends together. Go find your own allies. Figure out what Bolas is actually planning, and what part of that plan is weakest."

That argument pulled at Gideon. It would pull at Jace too. Ajani knew what he was doing.

"He's got a point," said Jace. "We don't know anything about Bolas's plans. Maybe we should do some reconnaissance on Amonkhet, and bring our allies from elsewhere..."

From upstairs, they heard everyone shout Yahenni's name. Time to go.

Everyone looked at Gideon.

"I hear you," said Gideon. "Both of you. But I don't think we're going to get a better chance at Bolas."

"He'll turn a whole world against you," said Ajani. His voice rose, and his ears went flat. "You are going to get people *killed*!"

Gideon kept his chin up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jace shy back.

Three-hundred-odd pounds of angry cat stared down at him. Was this how Jace felt when Gideon got angry?

"Apologies," said Ajani.

"It's fine," said Gideon. "I'm not going to pretend this is an easy decision."

Ajani fixed each of them with that ice-blue eye.

"Please," he said. "Don't go to Amonkhet. Not yet. Stay here, or go find allies elsewhere. In the morning we can pick a rendezvous point. We can meet up in a few weeks' time, count our allies, compare notes, and plan our next move."

He stood.

"A few minutes alone before the party would be appreciated."

He walked away from the table, but Chandra stood and ran to him. She wrapped him tightly in a hug, and the big cat hugged back.

"I'm glad you're with us," she said. "You're a good hugger. You're even bigger than Gids. And, uh, furrier."

Liliana laughed.

"And you," said Ajani, "are a pleasant little hearth fire. Your mother's life would be cold without you, little flame."

Chandra's smile dropped, and Ajani walked away. She sat down heavily on the bench next to Gideon.

"Well," said Gideon quietly. "What do you all think? Is he right? Do we need more information and more allies before we go to Amonkhet?"

There was a moment of dead silence.

"No," said Chandra. "We beat three Eldrazi and we beat Tezzeret. Let's hit him hard, now."

"No," said Liliana. "I don't relish the thought, but with Bolas scheming and Tezzeret on the loose, I—we—aren't safe anywhere."

"...No," said Jace. "I trust his judgment, and his fears are rational, but he's wrong. Bolas *is* smarter than us. Whatever time we spend preparing, he'll spend it better. You're right, Gideon. This is our chance. Once Tezzeret tells him what happened here, we lose the only advantage we have."

Jace and Chandra agreeing—now *that* was unsettling.

Gideon turned to Nissa.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I don't know Bolas. I don't know Amonkhet. But I know...us. If you all believe we can do it, then I believe it too."

"He's *scared*, Gideon," said Liliana. "He thinks he's lucky to have survived his last encounter with Bolas, and he's terrified of having another."

Scared...? If Liliana couldn't see that Ajani was grieving, Gideon wasn't going to breach Ajani's privacy by telling her.

"Don't," he said. "Don't presume to know what he's been through."

Liliana's violet eyes locked on him.

"We're in agreement, then?" said Jace—deflecting for Liliana.

"Yes," said Gideon. "Whatever Bolas is doing on Amonkhet, he's going to do it whether we're there or not. We're not helping anybody by staying away. And I think you're right, Jace—we're not going to figure out what Bolas is up to before he adjusts to us knowing he's up to something."

Gideon stood.

"We'll pick a rendezvous in the morning," he said. "Then we'll meet Ajani there...after we face Bolas."

"Come on," said Chandra. "Party time. *Smile*."

Gideon followed her inside, and smiled.

I'm getting dressed for the last time.

Caring, capable, darling Depala drapes me in my favorite cape and secures it with my first-favorite broach. The setting sun outside illuminates the gold chest at the far end of my room, and the light bounces warmly around my chamber. Motes of dust catch in the fading light (what a lovely last sunset) and the only noise in the room comes from the soft snoozing of Depala's hyena (Crankshaft is a good girl, yes she is). I have four hours to live, and my Penultimate Party (catered food and all) will begin as soon as I descend the stairs.

"There," Depala says with confidence, adjusting my broach, "you look spectacular, Yahenni."

"Always do," I wheeze.

My best friend's laugh is a little empty. She smiles sadly.

"It's my time, Depala," I affirm.

"I was worried you would never say that."

I suppose I was always a little worried about that, too.

“You sure about this?” she says with a worried brow.

“Yes. Short-term cost isn’t worth the long-term return, and all that.”

“Ever the investor, aren’t you?”

She smiles. She doesn’t need to know more. Gaining a few extra days at a time isn’t worth feeling like I’m dying too. And even if I only killed things that weren’t people, I know I could never get the young memory of my best friend’s screams out of my head. *I* get to decide who I am, on my terms. And I am not a killer.



Die Young | Art by Ryan Yee

“Let’s face the music, darling.”

Depala’s grin spreads to her cheeks, and she fetches my support braces from across the room. Depala scoops me up (fairly certain I weigh less than a bandar at this point) and places me in the support braces. She fiddles with the straps on what’s left of my legs, and I’m up and standing before the door.

The door looms over me.

It is a rich dark wood, and I can make out my reflection in the varnish.

I never noticed how large it was before.

Depala reaches her hand out to open it. She pauses. I feel her project a silent, tentative question. I understand. I’m ready. I nod.

She opens the door, and I nearly fall over from the emotion that slams into me.

“HAPPY PENULTIMATE, YAHENNI! “

I’m hit with a monsoon of fruity, flowery elation. The love of my friends spills over me, and I cannot help but laugh in delight.

My aetherborn family approaches first. We briefly, silently revel in each other’s shared joy, our empathic conversation pleasantly quick and hidden. Our love fuels our support fuels our love. Aetherborn families are, above else, a never-ending circle, endlessly nurturing themselves. Cleanest energy there is.

Looking around I can finally sense how many people are here. My house is *packed*, live music is streaming up from the courtyard, and it all vibrates with the collective joy that only a Penultimate Party can deliver.

This feels like a good time for good deeds, I think. I pull a list from a hidden pocket. The party quiets and looks at me as I stand tall (ish) in the center of the room.

“To my aetherborn family!” I yell, “I leave you half my savings!”

My family cheers and slaps each other on the back, projecting a bashful bready you-didn’t-have-to-do-thaaat-but-THANK-YOUUU toward me.

Will in one fist, I point what remains of the other (two fingers down, three to go!) across the crowd.

“My other half of savings goes to you, red-scarf-wearing human inventor in the corner!”

The human in the corner near the buffet table jolts, mouth full of gulab jamun. They point at themselves uncertainly.

“Sana Ahir? Nineteen years old? You were third in the aeronautical design division, right?” I confirm.

As they slowly nod, their eyes grow wider.

“Great! The other half of my savings will go toward your research!”

Overcome with ecstasy, the human promptly faints. The crowd around us explodes in a blaze of elation and cheers. We are an endless loop of celebration.

I sense a familiar presence enter downstairs and direct one of my relatives to lead the newcomers up to me. The crowd around me disperses to party, and a moment later I am greeted by the vanguard I have come to know as the Gatewatch. (It’s a shame I never bothered asking which gate they’re watching.) I walk forward and lean on my left brace.

Chandra leads the way. Her sari is brand new, and the bruises and scrapes of recent battles are only slightly hidden by the finery. Her face is smiling with pride and exhaustion. From a quick read I can sense that she has been to a Penultimate Party before, and she knows this is a happy occasion.

The others, though...yikes. Chandra must have done a terrible job explaining what a Penultimate Party is. Jace’s mood is ringing a loud, rain-scented HELLO I AM UNCOMFORTABLE at such a volume that every empath in the room is turning to stare. The bipedal cat in the back (heart full of a still-raw grief, poor thing) feels ready to cry at any given moment. The rest are visibly uncomfortable.

“Oh my gosh,” I mock-whisper, “did somebody die?”

Liliana laughs at that, but the others grimace awkwardly.

I chuckle as part of my face crumbles off.

The massive cat standing at the back of the group approaches me and kneels to my line of sight.

"I am called Ajani. What can we do for you, friend, in this time of need?"

Aw. What a sweetheart.

"It's my party, so that means you follow my rules. I want *you all* to have fun, and *I* want to say goodbye to everybody. But it *has* to be fun! *That's* the important part!"

Ajani nods in genuine consideration. I sense Chandra's smile before it manifests.

"Do you need a hand?" she says.

"...With saying goodbye to everybody?"

"With having fun?"

I consider this for an entire second.

"Sure, why not."

"Then up you get!"

Chandra quickly reaches down toward me and hoists me above and onto her shoulders. My support braces fall to the floor. I scream in delight.

"Where to, Party Master?" she says through a full-face grin

"ONWARD!" I yell, pointing toward the crowd across the room.

Chandra piggybacks me around for a few minutes, occasionally running, occasionally pretending to lose her balance, laughing alongside me the whole time. When she's had her fill, she yawns and transfers me over to Gideon, who laughs heartily as he carries me under his arm like luggage. He casually passes me over to Depala, who impressively hoists me all the way above her head.

Throughout the entire affair I laugh hysterically and continue to yell out my will.

"Depala, darling, you get my investment portfolio!"

She cheers and passes me back to Gideon with a friendly kiss on my remaining cheek.

"Mrs. Pashiri, you old spitfire, you get my Fleetwheel Cruiser!" I hear Mrs. Pashiri's "Hooraaaaay" from somewhere behind the crowd.

After considerable carrying and tossing and making the rounds, I catch the empathic scent of neroli from across the room. I point Gideon toward the source and he sets me onto a couch near a gently smiling Nissa.

"Nissa! Nissanissanissa. Do you want to pick me up too?"

Nissa shakes her head. "I want to sit with you. Are you in pain?"

"A little," I admit, "But not bad enough to stave it off."

She looks me up and down and raises a hand. That same familiar, warm current of energy flows into my (mostly gone) legs. I sigh with relief. It feels nice like before. Not healing...but helping.

I sense something odd stirring in her.

Nissa dislikes talking, which is fine. I can infer all I need from the silence of my friend while she busies herself with channeling.

Top note: Grief. Trust. Feminine neroli (normal for her psychic scent) and a fresh stream (odd, that feels new). Main body: Old, boggy fear. An alien chalky shame on the edges. Base note: Deep jungle and family. No, not family. Kinship? A connection without words, but one without the challenge and electric brilliance of *personhood*.

I close my senses. She is sad to lose me because she has had few friends like me.

No. That's wrong. She hasn't had *any* friends like me.

I can feel that once, long ago, she distrusted people she didn't understand. It is an old echo, but I can sense just how frightened she was, and how that fear kept her from becoming close with others.

Until the Gatewatch. Until me.

I'm thankful she didn't confront me with these old, long-gone feelings out loud. I'm thankful she didn't use me as a basin in which to spill her guilt for her actions in the past. She would rather work through her problems on her own without needing me for validation. A lesser person might. But she would never do that. She observes and grows on her own, for the sake of bettering herself.

She is extraordinary.

The channel of energy stops. My pain has gone, and Nissa looks into my eyes with a smile, unaware of my insight.

"You've gotten much better at parties," I tease.

She shrugs. "They're not frightening once you get to know them."

Her answer may have been subconscious, but I know what she's trying to say.

"I've realized...I *want* to know more about the things that are unfamiliar," she continues. "If I understand them, I won't be afraid of them."

Her heart is a gentle canopy of humility and orange blossoms.

"I want you to have something," I say quietly. Nissa's mood pickles. "I knew you'd hate presents, but that's dumb, so here you go."

I reach under my shirt and pull a pendant necklace out from over my head.

"The chain is gold from the mountains. I assume the sapphire in the middle on the pendant there is from Lathnu, too. Wear it under your clothing so hooligans don't run off with it."

Nissa holds out a delicate hand to take the necklace. She puts it on gently over her head and tucks it under her top.

"Traditionally you give these sorts of things to someone who misses home, so there y'go," I wheeze. I can feel how much the gesture means to her and relish in our little loop of positivity.

"Thank you, Yahenni. I wish I had something to give you in return."

"You can give me whatever you like as long as I don't have to carry it."

She thinks for a bit.

"Would you like to hear a secret?"

“Always.”

I see before me an elf with an impish smile, but behind her face I sense the vast tree of private joy that grows quickly with anticipation of disclosure.

“Yours is one of an infinite number of worlds.”

What.

“It is a single grain in an endless field. And each of those single grains is a realm unto its own.”

Her emotion rings with truth. Everything she is saying is real. How—

“Sometimes there are...people...who can travel between those realms.”

She gives me a knowing look with the word “people.” Honesty, honesty, warm copper honesty. *How* —

“People who travel to places very far away and very different from their home. And those people know that we are all tiny parts of a vast and complex whole. But the space between those realms, the thing that connects each of those universes, is the same substance that makes up the aetherborn. What makes up *you* extends far beyond Kaladesh. *You* are what connects the Multiverse.”

For a moment, I am silent, absorbing the immensity of what Nissa has told me. I finally land on a response.

“I *knew it*.”



Omniscience | Art by Jason Chan

Nissa grins. I look at the ceiling in wonder. I feel tiny. I feel huge. I feel like I’ve been given the greatest gift of my life.

“So...where are you *really* from?” I eventually ask.

“The world I come from is called Zendikar.”

“Are there aetherborn on Zendikar?”

"No, but there are elemental beings that are sort of like you. There are vampires that are sort of like you, too, but you are much more friendly than they are."

"What is the landscape like?"

"It walks around."

"WHAT."

We talk and talk and talk. Eventually, Nissa talks herself out. The entire time my head is spinning with excitement and victory. I made this incredible person without a home feel so at home that she could reveal the most stupendous of secrets. What a victory!

I see Depala out of the corner of my eye and remember what I must do. Depala leads my aetherborn family over to carry me up to the roof one last time.

"Nissa, I'm afraid I have to go now. You're welcome to join me on the roof, if you like."

Her emotion cascades through sentiment. "No," she says at last, "I should stay here. Farewell, Yahenni."

She is very small on the couch. I cement the image of her looking back at me in my mind.

"So long, darling."

Nissa smiles sadly, and my mind is caught in a loop running over and over through the gift she just gave me. What an incredible Penultimate present...

My family lifts my chair, bathes me with condolence and compassion, and brings me up to the roof.

The Great Conduit curves brilliant and cerulean above me in the night. Hundreds of stars boldly shine through the city lights, and my dearest friends sit gathered around an empty bed, awaiting my arrival. The sky is incredible. A splash of violets and blues and aether and stars. It's a beautiful night for good-byes.

My family around me projects comfort and ease. It works, and I settle into a place of calm. The universe is so large and I am so small, and Nissa has given me the greatest gift I have ever received.

I look into the eyes of my loved ones around me. I have given them all I can give, their joy floods every part of me, and our circuit is complete.

I tell each of them a kind farewell. Taking my time, feeling everything they feel in return, reveling in each individual as I look them in the eye and wish them the best. None of them cry, and all of them promise to use what I bequeathed them to give back some good for the next aetherborn to soak up. I use my last bit of strength to reach down and scritch Depala's hyena behind the ears. Everyone is happy. Everyone is smiling. Everyone is promising to keep the party going after I leave.

I feel the current of my city as it surges on into the next forever. I think of the single grain I call home and the infinite realms beyond everything I know.

My friends tell me it's all right. It's time. You can let go now.

And so I do.

I shudder

and release

(it feels *wonderful*)

I dissipate into the endless sky above

and,
triumphant,
I end.

"I shouldn't have stayed away so long," Chandra said.

Chandra lugged the basket of ceramic tiles as she walked next to her mother, who wore her toolbox slung over one shoulder. Pia pointed the way from Aradara Station platform to a side street, and they made their way to their destination.

"It's not your fault. It's not as if you could have just...traveled back whenever you wanted."

Chandra swallowed. "I could've."

"Oh." Her mother hitched up her toolbox as they rounded a corner. "Well. You didn't know."

"I should have known. Somehow. I should have felt the mom-waves floating through the aether."

Her mother gave her a look. "Is that how it works?"

"No!"

"Oh. Well. Too bad. Mom-waves can be very soothing."

Chandra kicked a rock. "They would have been."

"So how *does* it work? The—being what you are. Traveling away from home. How is that possible?"

Chandra laughed ruefully. "Asking the wrong person."

"But...you can just *do* it. Right? Like your fire."

"Not like my fire. Not exactly. But it lets me move to other worlds. I've been able to ever since that day in the arena. It's a different kind of gift." Chandra caught her mother watching her face intently. She knew this wasn't parental concern—this was the thopter engineer in her. Her mother had always relished opening the guts of machines and seeing how they worked. "You want to pop open my hood, Mom?"

"All I am asking for is a series of detailed schematics."

"Well it's not like that. It's more like...when you unfocus your eyes, and you see patterns that weren't there before."

Her mother slumped with disappointment.

"Or when you're barely listening to the sounds of the train station, and for a moment, everything lines up and makes a melody."

"Metaphors are not schematics," her mother said.

Chandra shrugged. "That's the best I can do. I don't know why I am this way. I don't know why this is what I'm about now."

They turned another corner, and found the place. Dad's place. The broken mosaic in the wall was an old portrait of her father, one of dozens of mosaics of well-known inventors around the city, likely built by some admiring artist. It was the closest thing they had to a burial plot, a spot where his memory had soaked into the city.

The portrait had holes and chips in it from years of neglect. Chandra set down the basket and got to work, selecting ceramic tiles of the right hues.



Lost Legacy | Art by Greg Opalinski

Her mother snapped the tiles with pliers, breaking them into the correct shapes. She smeared putty into the gaps with a gloved finger, and Chandra pressed the tiles into place.

They worked together in silence for a time. No tears came—in fact Chandra drew a simple, industrious pleasure from it. It felt good to work alongside her mother, to dirty her hands in the act of making something, here in the middle of Ghirapur. An uninterrupted creative act. Chandra squashed a small square tile over her father's eyebrow, and she paused, looking into his eyes.

"I'm going to stay," she said.

"What?"

"Stay. Here. On Kaladesh. With you."

"But I thought—" her mother started. "I—I'd be glad for that, Chandra. But don't you think..."

"I'll live here, and we'll be together again." Chandra filled in part of her father's goggles with red-tinted tiles. "A family."

Her mother didn't say anything for such a long time that Chandra turned away from the mosaic to face her.

"Mom?"

Her mother's face was a closed curtain. "Don't make me go through it again, Chandra."

"Through what?"

"My heart can only handle so much."

"Mom. That's why I'm staying!"

"You're not staying. Don't say that. You're making this harder than it needs to be."

"Making *what* harder?" Chandra asked, jamming a tile into Dad's chest so hard it broke.

"*This* is our family now." Her mother pointed with the pliers, back and forth between herself and Chandra. "This is who you are, this is who I am, this is who we are together. We're a mother and her *visiting* daughter."

"No. I'm not leaving you again. Ever."

"Don't say that, don't you *say* that!" her mother almost shouted. She sighed and sat down heavily among the tiles. She picked up a bluish-silverish piece with her pliers and set it gently aside. "Chandra, I'm your mother, and of course I'd love for you to stay longer. But we both know you're more than this place now. I couldn't handle it if you lied to me about this new part of your life. I'd die a little bit every single *day* if I thought I was the one keeping you here."

Chandra felt a scratchy lump in her throat. "I can't go, Mom. I *have* to go—and I can't."

Pliers pointed up at her. "You can. You're a traveler. So you'll go, and you'll come back again, and we'll catch up, you and me. And your dad here. We can stop being a family of leaving, and become a family of arriving."

Chandra was furious at the tears in her eyes. "I am not going to say that word."

Her mother stood up, and she was a fierce, angry, slightly short pillar of love. "Chandra Nalaar, you *say* goodbye to me. You say it to me five times, ten times to my face, and you take the *power* out of that word. Do you understand me?"

"Mom..."

"Because I won't shackle you here with the worry that I won't be able to hear it. I won't hide your gifts from all those worlds that need them. And I won't go to the other side of this building and break these tiles and work on another damned shrine to someone I've lost—" She halted herself, putting a shaking hand over her lips.

"Mom, what?"

"There's...another mosaic. Of you. From when you were eleven."

Tears rolled out of Chandra's eyes. "Why?"

"I told you. A shrine. You think some unnamed inventor-admirer made this? I made them both, you and your father. As soon as I got out. So I'd have a place where I could tell you both goodbye."

Chandra couldn't say anything. She just fell into her mother's arms and squeezed.



Cathartic Reunion | Art by Howard Lyon

Her mother released her, sniffing through a smile. She appraised her with an engineer's eye, straightening the pattern on the shawl around Chandra's waist, tightening the strap that held her pauldron on her shoulder. "When do you have to go?" she asked brightly.

"Soon."

"Very soon?" She brushed a lock of hair away from Chandra's face and tucked it behind one ear, a sneaky excuse to graze her fingers along Chandra's cheek.

"Yes," Chandra said, rubbing streaks out of her eyes. "To Amonkhet. Someplace I've never been."

"Well, you'll have to tell me all about it."

Chandra looked at the mosaic. It still had gaps and chips. "Dad's not done."

"We're almost out of tiles anyway. We'll finish him when you get back."

"It might be a while."

"Gives me time to fire more tiles."

"Can we work on mine, too? Next time?"

Her mother's smile made her cheeks taut, with little creases of joy. She pushed her goggles up cock-eyed, took Chandra's hand, and looked into her eyes expectantly.

Chandra made herself say the word, so that she could say it, and its opposite, again and again in the days and years to come.

There were rivers in the air; they carried her like a mote of pollen.

Great hearts were pounding in the deeps of the sky, singing slow symphonies of joy. Wordless, they expressed the sun breaking over the edge of clouds; the sharpness of stars over frosted peaks; the awareness of a new life growing within, nestled and patient, waiting for its first breath of radiance.

She drifted bodiless among the singers, listening. Back and forth they called, echoing across cloud and current, composing shared dreams of weightlessness, rain, and memory.

An eye the size of a house blinked. Radiant curiosity washed over her, like the return of sunlight from beyond the edge of all things. *There is something new in our sky*, it sang in language of sensation and vibrance; quickened heartbeats and quivering muscle; caught breath and a hundred shades of blue. *How wonderful there should be a thing we don't yet know.*



Aethersquall Ancient | Art by Sam Burley

Elsewhere, vibration caught her attention. The sky rushed away.

She opened her ears to footfalls on steel, her nose to fried food and sweat, and—finally—her eyes.

Chandra walked across the twilit platform of the Spire, loose-limbed with fatigue, rubbing the gray circles under her eyes. “Hey, Nissa. Thought you were asleep.”

The curve and sway of music gave way before jagged angles of speech. Words returned in scribbles and scratches. “Sorry,” she croaked. “I was...”

Chandra squatted an arm-length away, sunrise-colored eyes darting from one corner of her face to another. Nissa searched her face, warm and flush with fluttering, nervous life, but found no capacity for understanding. No context she could appeal to. No words that could explain.

Still she said, “I was listening to skywhales,” and it seemed important that she should.

Chandra blinked upward. “What? Where?”

Nissa felt the curl and bustle of the aetherstreams. She turned her head, and weighed the bearings’ change. “Far east, and several days south. Dawn is breaking over them.”

Chandra yawned, with an intensity that made her jaw tremble and her eyes water. “You’ve got good ears.”

“I was with them.”

“But you’re right here?”

She took a breath, and dove. “I can feel leylines. Or aetherstreams. When I meditate, and sometimes when I’m just sitting, I...become one with them. My perceptions, my thoughts, they slip away. I become one with the world.”

Chandra rocked back on her heels, fingers lacing nervously around her knees. “Spooky. That an elf thing? A Zendikar thing? Would *I* drift off like that if I meditated?”

“No.” Nissa looked away, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. “It’s just...a *me* thing.”

Chandra bolted to her feet, hair sparking and lifting in ripples. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to—!”

Nissa reached up. “Please don’t run.”

She watched Chandra’s fingers tremble against the violet sky. “I upset you again.” Her hair sputtered and crackled. Auroral ribbons of orange shimmered across her scalp. “I always seem to—”

Nissa’s eyes squeezed shut, and she forced scribble-words into the air. “Y-you didn’t!”

Chandra turned back, holding her breath, unable to meet her eye.

Nissa swallowed past the desert in her throat. “I don’t speak often. I lived alone for...decades. Zendikar was my companion. We understood each other at a level deeper than words. I...I don’t know *how* to talk to you. I’m trying to learn.”

Chandra looked up, eyes wide and startled. “*You* don’t know how to talk to *me*?”

“I will make mistakes,” Nissa said. “Pick the wrong words. Misunderstand yours. I’ll act strange and won’t know that I am. But if you can be patient with me, I would like to be...” Waves of sky-song memory welled upward, symphonies of color and warmth, resonant movement and shared breath. She stilled them, reduced them, and forced out angular words shaped in a pallid shadow of acceptable truth. “...your friend.”

Chandra’s hands leapt out to enfold hers, warm as a bird’s nest. “I dunno,” she sniffled, one corner of her mouth quivering upward. “I think you’re pretty good at picking words.”

“It took all afternoon to decide how to say this.”

Chandra laughed, but it ended in another yawn. She released Nissa’s hand to cover her mouth. “Ugh. Sorry.”

The shadows under Chandra’s eyes had grown deeper. Nissa gestured to the space beside her. “Do you still wish to learn meditation? This is the stillest point in your city.”

“I dunno,” Chandra looked back over her shoulder. “I thought, it’s our last night here, maybe I could show everyone around? There’s gonna be air races, and fireworks, there’s a restaurant in Bomat that

makes the best undhiyu, and I saw this little green girl selling mango-flavored snow..." She paused. "But you wouldn't like any of that, would you? Crowds and noise."

"I'd go," Nissa said, as Chandra paced, the heels of her boots tapping like rain on leaves.

"Mrs. Pashiri said I should show you around, just you and me, because all we did before was walk around prison and get locked in a box." Chandra frowned. "She *also* said I should change into a sari. Even had one picked out. I was like... 'I'm gonna climb seven million stairs to meet her on the Spire in that?' Such a weird thing for her to—wait, what did you say?"

Nissa felt the corners of her mouth ascend on their own, without the conscious thought *I should smile now*. "I'd go."

Chandra blinked down at her. "...Uhwuh?" she said, eloquently.

"I'd like to see your home."

"I thought you—?"

"I'd get anxious. Yes," she admitted, fingers fretting in her lap. "I'd need...to step away and be quiet. But I'd be with you. Not alone."

"Oh," Chandra said. "Well, there's still time. We could catch a late dinner. Or drinks, maybe."

"Ah. I have something for you," Nissa said. She reached behind her to get the covered mug she'd bought earlier, before the sun slipped below the clouds.

"What's that?" Chandra said, spilling to the ground beside her.

"I'm not sure." Nissa removed the lid and sniffed. "The man I bought it from said it would be calming." She handed the mug to Chandra, who was yawning against the back of a hand. "I'm afraid it's grown cold. It should be drunk warm."

"I got this," Chandra smirked, and rested base of the mug on one glowing palm. She cautiously inhaled the rising steam. "Sweetened milk. With pistachio, almond, and cardamom." Her eyes glistened in the dark. "Dad used to make this for me. When I couldn't sleep."

Nissa cocked her head, trying to fathom if this was a good or an ill. At last, Chandra sipped carefully, smiled, and wiped at her eyes. "It's very good," she said.

"I'd like you to imagine something."

"Like a meditation?" she said, putting the mug aside. "Should I sit like you?"

"However you find comfortable."

Chandra tried to tuck her legs one under the other, but grimaced and began unstrapping pieces of armor, setting them aside in a clattering, sliding pile of lacquered steel. "And I'm not gonna float off with the skywhales?" she grinned.

"If you do," Nissa said, seriously, "I will catch you." She closed her eyes. "I want you to imagine a river."

"What kind?"

"Fast. It dashes over rocks. The spray is forming rainbows."

"What color?"

Nissa frowned in the dark behind her eyelids. "The rainbows? They're all—"

"No, the water. The *river*. Is it muddy, or clear, or...?"

"Whatever you wish. Imagine it tumbling by, frothing over the bank at your feet."

"Am I wearing shoes?"

"It doesn't—you're barefoot."

"What's on the shore? Are there trees, or is this a canyon, or—?"

"Shh."

"But—"

"*Shh*." She waited. Silence. "Just—"

Very quietly, Chandra whispered, "*I'mshushingnow*."

"...Just listen to my voice. Listen to the wind. To the waters rushing over the rocks, white and wild. Let the river grow wider. Deeper. As it spreads, the passing water slows. The spray over the rocks falls into stillness. The crash becomes a murmur."

She'd chosen a river because Chandra had soothing memories of floating. Already, her breaths came slower, her fluttering bird's-heart steadied.

"Walk into the river," Nissa murmured. "Slow steps. The water parts around your feet, silent and shining in the sun. One step at a time. It cools you. Your ankles. Your knees. Your waist. There's soft mud between your toes."

She spoke low, in a heartbeat rhythm. Her mother had told stories in this way, after they'd been driven from yet another Joraga camp, after Nissa's tormented dreams and the flowers that bloomed to greet her had made the other elves mutter and gesture superstitiously. Tales of mountains that floated away, silent under starlight. Of trees that dropped fruit at orphans' feet and scooped them away from charging baloths. Stories in which the world was not a path between thorns and teeth, but an endless garden of profound and miraculous beauties, each waiting for a listener.

It was many years before she'd realized they were animist stories, lost and suppressed, forbidden as heresy. Stories no longer remembered by any living soul, save herself.

"Spread your fingers, and let the water flow between them. It's at your chest now. Lean back. Let it lift you. You weigh nothing. You're floating beneath the clouds. Be silent. Be still. You're only breathing."

She listened. Chandra breathed slow and deep, a warmth radiating from her side. She didn't react to the lengthening silence.

Nissa reopened herself to the surge of Kaladesh.

Aether lifted her over streets splashed with throbbing color. Throngs jostled and skipped along bridges and through squares pulsing with music and laughter, shimmering with joy. Sparks leapt into the sky above the river, trailing streamers of hissing glitter. They crackled and burst, blooming into flowers of red and yellow flame. The crowds along the water's edge gasped and cheered.

Down in the shadows, between glittering towers, the aether moved strangely.

An eddy formed, sinking and coiling into an alley away from the revelry. She let herself dance downward around it and poured her awareness into the weeds pressing earnestly through cracked cobbles. They surged into a carpet of night-flowers.

Wisps of aether streamed in from distant reaches of the city, far shores of the sky, and the blinding immensity that lay beyond Kaladesh. The energies blended, compacted, then puffed outward in a luminous cloud of blues—mid-morning sky, lagoon water, mountain root, sea ice, infant's eye. An exhalation of the world, a new young star throbbing quick, fierce, and steady.

The edges of the cloud darkened, solidified.

The crackling static within it quieted to a sizzle.

The aetherborn looked at their hands, then at Nissa's flowers.

Hello, child . Welcome to the world . She had no idea if vibrations of root and leaf could be understood by the newborn.

They held their new hands over a bloom, as if it were a candle's flame. From the sizzle of energy, patterns emerged, spontaneous and oddly familiar. *Y-you. You? Are scented. You smell as if— smell like... neroli.* They paused, flickers of lightning-thought shivering through their limbs. *What's neroli?*

Vertiginous déjà vu washed over Nissa. *You have a wonderful adventure ahead of you* , she told them.

The aetherborn considered. *What should I do?* they asked.

What would she do, if she had the time again? If she didn't flinch at light, noise, and touch, or speak in gestures and movements strange and off-putting to others?

How could she tell this new life to laugh and weep without reservation or regret; to sing to the stars and waters, or to nothing at all; to love unreserved and unguarded; to treasure every moment with those beloved; to forgive any regretted trespass; to dance when moved to; to savor long silences in warm company; to greet each dawn, each face with the thought, *this will be an adventure* ; to be brave, and kind, and trusting, and...

...like Chandra.

The aetherborn waited, flickering. But why would anyone find her thoughts on the matter of value, anyway?

Don't be afraid to follow your heart, Nissa told them.

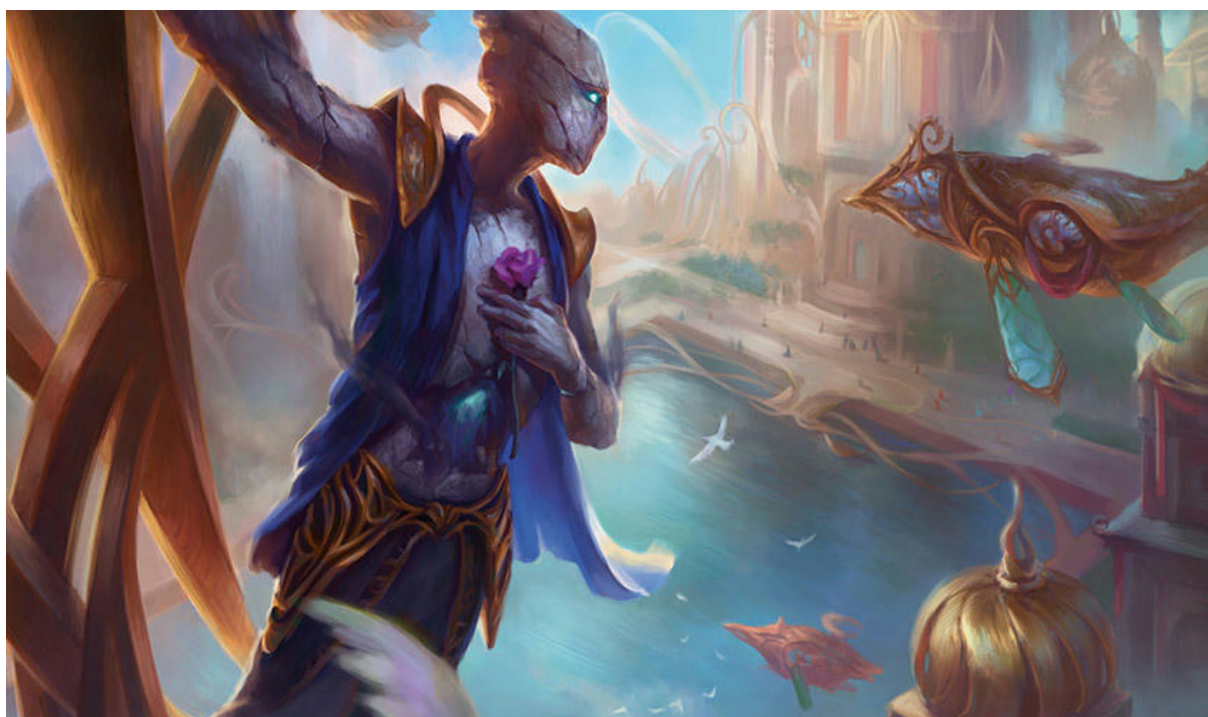
...*Why would that be scary?*

Halfway across Ghirapur, her body exhaled a laugh into the deepening twilight. *May it ever puzzle you.*

Vibrations came from the end of the alley; she could feel them through the fine white web of her roots. The child looked to them. *There are others like me!*

Other aetherborn surrounded them, lifted them to unsteady new feet, embraced. The alley trembled with greetings, vibrations of scent and colorless energies, each body's radiance stirring the others in sympathy. *You're welcome, you're loved, there are marvelous days to come, and you're just in time to see them!*

The group led them away, conversing in quicksilver flashes of thought. At the end of the alley, the child turned and looked back to her flowers.



Live Fast | Art by Ryan Yee

You...you have... they tilted their head, trying to shake loose a thought. *You have gorgeous eyes...sweet-heart*. Half-familiar laughter shivered the air.

THUMP.

Nissa jolted awake in her own body.

Chandra had collapsed against her side. Her head lolled over her shoulder, wisps of copper hair tickling her nose, slow tides of breath ebbing from her open mouth. And she was drooling on her sleeve.

Nissa had hoped this would happen; Chandra needed sleep. There would be time for meditation later. Perhaps slipping away on thoughts of water would quench the fires of her nightmares. If not, Nissa would remain, waiting to help.

But this position was not comfortable. Her arm already grew numb.

Carefully, Nissa lifted Chandra's radiant featherweight, and maneuvered so she could rest her head across her lap. Chandra stirred in her sleep, turning on to her side and curling up, pulling her knees to her chest and her hands to her face. Then her lips parted, and industrial snores pealed across the platform.

Kaladesh celebrated rebirth with pounding music, colors and light, food in a thousand varieties. Bonfires shimmered in the squares and parklands, casting shadows through bright-painted dancers. Crowds crossing the bridges dumped bags of dye into the Vinday, changing the river into a swirling rainbow. The streets thronged with bodies swaying and shifting together, greeting one another with laughter and shouts of joy, tears, open arms and forgiveness.

In the quiet of the sky, Nissa guarded Chandra's sleep.

It felt right.



Nimbus Maze | Art by Jason Chan