

In This Very Arena

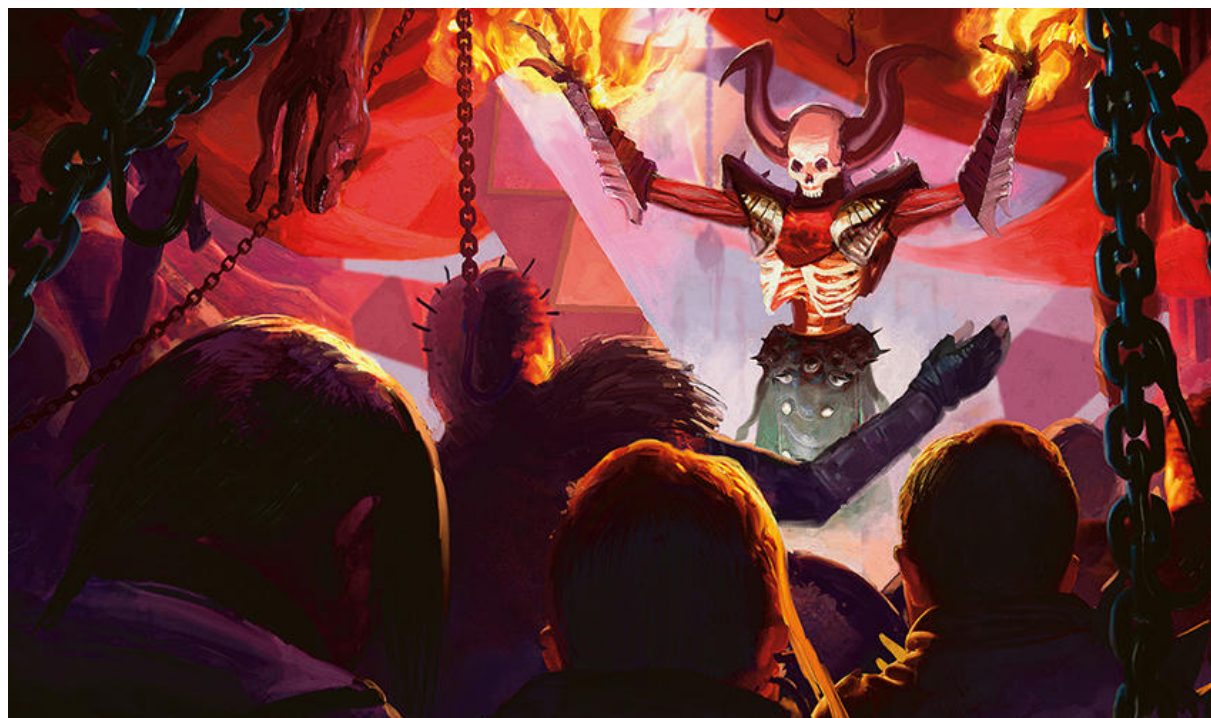
Doug Beyer

From set *Kaladesh*

Chandra and Nissa went looking for Chandra's mother Pia, using Mrs. Pashiri's Kaladesh contacts. But instead of finding Pia, they found themselves trapped in an underground Consulate prison facility. Only the timely arrival of the leonin Planeswalker, Ajani, saved them from having to make a deadly choice. Liliana has left without the others, concerned about Tezzeret's presence on Kaladesh, while the rest of the Gatewatch, Jace and Gideon, remain on Ravnica.

RAVNICA

The carnarium was crowded, loud, and full of minds. Performers swung on long chains tethered to the ceiling, teeth and spikes gleaming. Jace sat in a middle row, out of range of the acrobats and fire-swallowers, but in the center of the laughter and noise.



Rakdos Ringleader | Art by Jason Felix

The Izzet mage who sat down next to him wore a mizzium gauntlet that arced with streaks of energy. Jace sensed the concern behind Ral Zarek's electric aura. He opened a mental ear to the mage's mind.

"*The Guildpact is a—*" was the thought front-and-center in Ral's mind, followed by a colorfully vulgar and startlingly visual torrent of phrases.

Jace sighed audibly.

Ral muffled a laugh. "*Just testing if you could really read my thoughts.*"

"Test successful," Jace thought. He faced the stage, eyes on the Rakdos performers. Just a regular audience member, cloaked in noise. *"We could have done this back at the Hall of the Guildpact, you know. Unless you really wanted to take in a show."*

"All your official visitors there are recorded and tracked," Ral thought. *"Not safe."*

So Ral wasn't here as a concerned member of the Izzet guild. He wanted to talk to Jace as a Planeswalker. *"What is it, then?"*

"An irregular planeswalk." Ral's mind paused, either to let that sink in or to come up with how to form the next thought. *"Someone planeswalked away from Ravnica in a manner that was...anomalous."*

"What? Who? How do you know this?"

"You've seen the clouds outside, Beleren. Don't make me do all the work."

"Project Lightning Bug?"

"There you go."

Jace furrowed his brow. *"I thought that was shut down after we sabotaged the results."*

"It was, officially." Ral's thoughts coiled in on themselves. Images of magically-created lightning storms and sensitive sensor mechanisms swam through his mind, along with memories of conjuring careful half-truths while Niv-Mizzet's hot breath bore down on him.

Jace couldn't help tilting his eyes to the side, to see Ral's expression. Worry lined the man's forehead.

Ral's mind continued. *"The detectors still trigger when someone planeswalks. I glance over the results from time to time, but mostly I keep them hidden from Niv-Mizzet and most of my guild. I reached out when I saw Vraska's planeswalk."*

Jace was deeply un-thrilled to hear the gorgon's name.

"She left Ravnica," Ral thought, *"with no destination."*

"No destination?"

"She didn't planeswalk to a plane. Only from one."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Exactly."

"A flaw in the detectors?"

Ral gave an impatient flick of his hand. *"The experiment performed perfectly. The pattern of the departure was authentic, but the endpoint recorded as anomalous. Vraska hasn't been seen since. It's like she planeswalked into a void."*

Jace saw the electrostatic pattern in Ral's mind, the recorded planeswalk that faded into a distinct patch of nowhere. He felt how much this troubled Ral. No other finding in his experiment had shown this pattern.



Homing Lightning | Art by Slawomir Maniak

“That’s fascinating,” Jace thought at him. “Wait. Are you saying you can still see when I leave Ravnica?”

“First to Zendikar, then off to Innistrad, was it?” Ral was still watching the performers, but his elevated eyebrows were all for Jace’s benefit. “So, will you be staying long this time? Or should we expect you to leave Ravnica without its Guildpact again soon?”

“That’s... Uh... Ral, listen—”

Ral stood up to leave. *“Anyway, I thought you’d want to know. Vraska was none too fond of you, last I heard.”*

“I—Thank you. Ral, wait.”

Jace fumbled over annoyed audience members, following Ral as he made his way out of the theater. “Ral...” He followed the Izzet mage out to the street, and caught up to him.

“Stop worrying,” Ral said, gesturing with his gauntlet. “I won’t give away all your secrets. Just remember there are those who’d love to be in the position you’ve blundered your way into. Maybe consider putting in a little effort while you’re still here, all right?”

“I will,” Jace said. He thought then of Lavinia, who was convinced Jace was still in his office right now, hunched over a sheaf of papers, dutifully doing the grunt work of maintaining the delicate balance between the guilds. Or maybe she had already discovered the studious illusion he left behind, and was in the midst of yelling “GUILDPAAAACT!” at the ceiling in that way that she did.

A finger tapped Jace’s shoulder. Jace turned, and Liliana stood before them, a faint perfume of another world on her.

She glanced at Ral, and looked at Jace, grim as the grave. “You. Kaladesh. Let’s go.”

Ral crossed his arms and raised those judgment-brows as high as they would go.

Jace gritted his teeth and said in a low grumble, “This isn’t a good time.”



Art by Dave Kendall

“Don’t care,” Liliana said. “This takes precedence.” She held her shoulders back imperiously, but Jace noticed she was shifting from foot to foot. Her usual, lightly cruel teasing had been replaced by clipped demands.

“Did you find Chandra?”

“I found someone else,” she said. “Tezzeret. Alive and well.”

Jace suddenly found himself incapable of swallowing saliva, and he choke-coughed.

Liliana shot glances at the sky, the cobblestones, and the wheels of a passing vendor’s cart, looking everywhere but directly at Jace’s face. She spoke in low tones. “I know. I’m as unhappy about asking you as you are. If I had any other choice—look. Come to Kaladesh. Bring the muscle.”

Before Jace could respond, her form began to shimmer. It wasn’t like her to planeswalk in the middle of the street, in front of someone she didn’t know. When she was gone, Jace and Ral looked at each other. Jace had a hard time finding words.

“Let me guess, Guildpact,” Ral said. “You...” Jace shrugged slightly, his hands splayed in utter lack of excuse. “...have to leave.” Jace’s head sank slightly into his shoulders.

Ral jabbed a look at Jace, gave a sharp shake of head, and walked off. Jace’s brain conjured up an array of possible explanations, but none of them seemed adequate. Instead he collected himself, took a breath, and dodged down an alleyway to fetch Gideon.

KALADESH

Nissa scanned for the authorities. It seemed they were safe for the moment, she and Chandra, pausing under a bridge with Mrs. Pashiri and the tall cat-man. No Consulate soldiers, no Dhund agents—just the hum of the city around them. One of those huge, heavy vehicles rattled along the bridge above them, sunlight flickering through the gaps in the tracks. Nissa winced at the tangle of light and sound, but at least they were free of Baral’s trap.

“That was a very good thing you did, Ajani.” Mrs. Pashiri beamed, squinching up her cheeks, supporting herself with a handful of his bicep fur. “Thank you.”

“You gave me a scare, Grandmother,” Ajani rumbled gently.

“Thank you, Ajani,” Nissa said. She hadn’t seen any others like him on Kaladesh, and wondered how to phrase the sticky question. “Have you been...here long?”

“Where I’m from, I’m less...unusual,” Ajani said, adjusting a cloak around his significant shoulders. “We’ve been following Tezzeret’s movements here for weeks.”

Mrs. Pashiri patted Ajani’s big paw. “Chandra is looking for someone, too. Her dear mother, Pia. Taken by Tezzeret’s soldiers.”

Nissa glanced at Chandra with furtive concern. The pyromancer was pacing like an anxious show horse, kicking at the mosaic patterns of the street.

“I’ll get Grandmother Pashiri to safety,” Ajani said. “And then I think we should fan out, spread our search across the city.”

“Good,” Nissa said. “With everyone working together, I’m sure we’ll be able to get some sense of where they—where they might’ve.... Chandra, what is it?”

Chandra had become a pillar of fire. She stood stock-straight, facing the opposite side of the street. Her hair was aflame. They followed her eyes up, up the sides of the towers.

The banners unfurled themselves, rolling down the spires via some kind of un-scrolling mechanism. They were huge and identical, printed larger-than-life, imagery drawn in exaggerated lines. A stylized Head Judge Tezzeret stood tall, surrounded by lines of light. Huge letters arced above his head: “IN-VENTORS! COME WITNESS THE SHOWDOWN OF THE CENTURY.”

Glowing from the banner’s corner, surrounded by ugly jagged lines, was a caricature of Pia Nalaar.

The lettering at the bottom shouted: “HEAD JUDGE TEZZERET WILL FACE THE RENEGADE CRIMINAL PIA NALAAR. THE ULTIMATE BATTLE OF INGENUITY. THE GRAND EXHIBITION.”

Finally it read: “NOON TOMORROW!”

“Chandra,” Nissa said softly.

“He’s calling me out,” Chandra said. “I have to face him.”

“He is. But we just got out of one trap...”

“My mother is alive. That’s all there is.”

Nissa looked back and forth between Mrs. Pashiri and Ajani.

Ajani nodded. “That’s all there is. But the four of us won’t be enough to...”

Three armed soldiers in Consulate uniforms were crossing the street toward them. One of them pointed directly at Nissa: “That’s them—over there!”

Nissa instinctively reached out to sense the living roots under the road, preparing to feed their growth to entangle the soldiers’ legs. She wondered, with a glance upward, whether she could take this whole bridge down to cover an escape. Ajani snarled and reached for the shaft of the huge double axe on his back. Chandra was already ablaze, but her fingers bent as she faced them, readying little comets of fire. Even Mrs. Pashiri took action—she produced a small automaton, which spun a set of interlocking wheels and came to life.

But as the soldiers approached, their forms swam and their silhouettes wobbled. Their very bodies seemed to trickle away in rivulets like watercolors, revealing something else in the canvas underneath. As the distortion cleared, their faces became familiar: Jace, Liliana, and Gideon.

"It seems this is a matter for the Gatewatch," Jace said.

Nissa abandoned her spell and wiped a hand down her face. "Your disguises work a little too well. We were about to injure you very badly."

"Just trying to blend in," Jace said. "We heard Tezzeret is here?"

"He's here, and he has Chandra's mother," said Ajani.

"What's a leonin doing with you?" Liliana asked, sizing up Ajani.

"What's a Gatewatch?" Ajani asked, looking down at her.

Unlike the dozen-dozen-dozen thopters patrolling the city, one particular thopter hovered in midair.

It was identical to the dozen-dozen-dozen others, with its rotors humming and its lens swiveling within its glass cornea. This one, though, held itself in the air, having paused its route. It aimed its lens down at several humanoids on the street below, and a tiny brass shutter snapped rapidly. A series of internal gears and prisms pressed the reflected light images into crystallized aether, frozen on little copper plates affixed to a drum within the thopter's chassis.

Satisfied, the particular thopter tilted its stabilizers, spun up its auxiliary rotors, and gained altitude.

The thopter buzzed past the rooftops and kept going, swinging past a vee of migratory cranes. It angled flaps to evade the flight pattern of an overly curious drake, and soared until it aimed itself at a dark shape on the sky. A small round port opened in the enormous wooden undercarriage of the airship *Skysovereign*. The *Skysovereign* accepted the thopter and swallowed it whole, and the opening closed smoothly behind it.

The thopter landed belly-down on a set of mechanical grippers attached to a conveyor belt, and the rotors buzzed to a halt. The grippers cradled the thopter as the belt carried them up through a lightless mechanical duct in *Skysovereign*'s abdomen. The grippers released suddenly, letting the thopter roll into light, and it rode a swifter conveyor through *Skysovereign*'s reconnaissance bay. It trundled there, dropping from one conveyor to another until it clicked into an ornate metal carousel. The carousel rotated, delivering the thopter into human hands.

Consul Kambal set the thopter down on a desk. He flicked the cap of a tool, twisted the tool in the thopter's belly, and clicked open a panel. He removed the drum of images and held the plates up to the light. With each plate, he murmured to himself. He selected one in particular, one that showed the target, Nalaar, daughter of Renegade Prime. She and her compatriots had spied the banners.

"Where's the courier?" Consul Kambal snapped.

A young woman appeared, hands at the sides of her uniform. "Message, sir?"

"Alert Inspector Baan. The bait is set. Prepare the confiscation."

Pia looked down at the links over her wrists and thought of her daughter. Jewel-like manacles bit into Pia's skin just as they had into Chandra's, just like that day when Chandra was eleven. Pia leaned her shoulder against the wall to which she was affixed, in one of the service tunnels behind the arena. "Backstage."

It must have been just like this for her, she thought. The waiting. Hot humiliation building. Just like that day, a man would smile at the crowd, preparing a metallic arm for a spectacle of violence. This was even the same arena, which Pia guessed was a special insult just for her. This was the place where Chandra had searched the stands for her mother before being torn out of the world.

Pia's greatest hope was that she would not see Chandra in the stands today either. *Just stay away, dear daughter*, she thought. *Stay safe. Stay alive.* The banners claimed this would be a quicksmithing exhibition—an inventor's duel using improvised materials, between the Head Judge and the infamous Renegade Prime. But she knew how lies worked. Tezzeret wouldn't display her just for the Inventors' Fair. She was bait.

She could hear the loudspeaker filter through the walls from the arena outside. An announcer was proclaiming that Rashmi had won top prize at the Fair, to an explosion of cheers. The Head Judge's voice was a crackle of showmanship as he described all the benefits of the privilege of working at his side. More cheers, although the sounds were joyless and blunted by the corridors.

An officer arrived with the jingle of two sets of keys. Pia didn't look up until the man spoke, because she recognized his voice—full of gravel and malice.

"Ready to do your part, Nalaar?" Baral said, lifting off his mask. The pale burn scars on one side of his face pulled at his smile, making his back teeth visible on one side.

Pia thrashed against her restraints, but calmed herself. A wave of revulsion swept through her, but she raised her chin and looked past him. "Whatever obsession you have with my family," she said, "whatever ill fragment of your brain tells you that punishing us can somehow make you worthy—it doesn't matter. Because nothing you do can ever harm her."

"Oh, but of course you must not have heard," Baral chided her. "They came looking for you. In the entirely wrong place, sadly. A daughter's rescue attempt that sadly went awry."

She flashed a look at him in horror, but remembered that his was a liar's face. She stared back out at the arena, and bit words through her teeth one at a time. "If you harmed a *hair*.. ."

"We'll have to see, won't we?" Baral asked. "Will she be here? When Tezzeret humiliates you out there, will she come for you?"

Just stay away, daughter, she thought. *Please, do as your mother says, this once.*

"It's time, Renegade Prime," he said. "If you'll come with me?"

He took her restraints and pulled, but she yanked her wrists away and walked under her own power.

They paused at a short flight of steps leading up to the glare of the noon-lit arena. Consulate guards escorted the elf Rashmi and several other inventors down the stairs past them. They were absorbed in breathless discourse. Excitement floated with them like cologne, to the point that they didn't even notice Baral removing the links of Pia's restraints, nor the guards gently separating them from their prizewinning inventions as they swept past.

"And now, friends and citizens," purred the announcer. "We ask that you please remain in your seats for the final act of today's exhibition. The quicksmithing match that will surely be the talk of the Fair. Announcing the first competitor, your honorable director of the Fair, Head Judge Tezzeret!"

Pia didn't even hear the cheers now—her mind raced. Through the doorway she scanned across the stands. She could see no renegades in the crowd, no Chandra, no sign of anyone she knew. Tezzeret's people must have maintained tight security on the entrants, weeding out all her allies—maybe she wouldn't be bait after all. Her only hope was to be as entertaining as possible, to win over the crowd—to do what she could to stay out of cells and manacles.

“So glad I could be here to see you off,” Baral said, his back teeth showing. “I would never miss the chance to say goodbye.”

What did that mean? A cold feeling swirled in her gut.

The announcer was calling her to the floor. “And now, friends and citizens, his opponent,” the voice boomed. “She’s the convicted aether criminal who failed to destroy *your* Inventors’ Fair...Pia Nalaar!”

Baral nudged at her back with a blade, and she stepped up to a chorus of jeers and boos. She walked over to her mark, eyeing Tezzeret. He stood across the arena, not even bothering to egg on the crowd. In front of her was a container covered in an embroidered cloth. An identical container sat before Tezzeret.

The announcer’s voice began as a hush, and built to a manic pitch. “Now, in this historic arena, we come to the final challenge. Now we decide who the greatest of these two famed inventors shall be. Keep your eyes on this match, citizens of Ghirapur, for it will truly define the future of our city and our world. Let the showdown...begin!”



Fateful Showdown | Art by Chris Rallis

Pia whipped the cover from the container and quickly assessed its contents. An assortment of gears and metal plates. A few pieces of blown glass. A basic aether fuel line. Some rudimentary tools. Not much to work with. Not much that would thrill a crowd.

She glanced up. Tezzeret was already rooting through his pieces. He had something with legs half-built already. *So fast!*

She jammed her hands into the container of supplies, and at the touch of metal parts, her inventing intuitions came to life. She played to her strengths, snapping and fitting and spot-welding. She let the components tell her what they wanted to be, like her old inventing days...and a basic four-winged design began to emerge. She gave it a light chassis for speed and a stinger on the nose. If only Kiran were here, he could bring it some additional maneuverability, maybe to play to the crowd a bit...

Focus. Just get it flying.

She punched the aether line into the pinion assembly and the thopter came to life, to an audible “O-hhhh!” from the crowd. She sent it buzzing at Tezzeret, hoping to distract him as she worked on her next design.

Tezzeret had already built some silvery crawler of some sort. It unfurled, rising taller than him, displaying an undercarriage of sharp pincers and legs. The crowd clapped furiously. *How did he make that from the provided parts? Is he even trying not to cheat?* The thopter orbited Tezzeret, slicing around his head with its stinger. He batted it away effortlessly as he sent the crawler toward her.



Art by Izzy

She quick-fashioned a rudimentary servo, welding its plates into place even as it scurried away toward the crawler. The crawler scuttled forward and tore into the servo, ripping it apart. But Pia had embedded a surprise—a small detonator. The servo burst in a small sphere of smoke and pieces, and blew the legs off the crawler. A huge reaction from the crowd. *Maybe I can do more than delay the inevitable. Maybe I can win.*

Pia jumped forward to salvage parts from Tezzeret’s crawler. Sure enough, it was full of parts she didn’t have access to—and even metals Pia couldn’t identify. She tore through its chassis and began harvesting it for another creation, hoping her thopter would continue to distract her opponent.

She battled on, folding components together to create radical new designs. But no matter how clever her devices, Tezzeret threw back something that was impossibly faster, stronger, more durable. She was sure she was out-engineering him, yet his devices began devouring her own, consuming her supply of parts.

She turned to dash back to her container, but a pointed metal limb stabbed into the floor beside her, and she fell. She looked up, and saw a newly-created crablike automaton, her thopter skewered on its leg. The thopter fluttered its wings weakly, and went dead.



Art by Izzy

She glanced over at Tezzeret. He was striding over to her, raising his metallic right hand. Bands of metal curved unnaturally at his will, coiling in on themselves to become a small squad of other sharp-legged automatons. They stood up, a silver-shouldered and faceless army, and began to surround her.

The crowd was chanting Tezzeret's name, cheering his victory.

"You've lost, Pia Nalaar," Tezzeret said, just loud enough for Pia to hear. "And now, in the very place where your daughter faced justice for her crimes, I will mete out proper justice for yours."

He raised his arm, and the army of chrome automatons marched in toward her. The metal of the nearest automaton's chest rearranged itself, forming a sharp slicing limb. Tezzeret held his arm high, looking down at her with a gleam in his eye.

He's not just playing to the crowd, she thought. He's going to kill me.

Tezzeret slashed downward with his arm, and his metal creation attacked. Pia tried to roll out of the way, or to deflect the inevitable blow...

The automaton dented, then lurched sideways and crashed onto its side, smoking from a glowing-hot wound. The crowd gasped, turning to the origin. The bolt of fire had streaked out of the audience, originating from an angry-looking, fire-haired young woman.

"Not yet!"

"How many times have I told you, Jace?" Chandra thought back. *"Least. Favorite. Words!"*

Chandra leaped from the stands onto the floor of the arena. The illusion spell had done its best to conceal her, but fell away into shimmering shreds when she started in with the pyromancy.

"We have to understand what's behind his presence here," came Jace's urgent thoughts. *"Keep him occupied!"*

Her mother looked surprisingly stern. "Chandra, get out of here right now," she said. "This is a trap!"

“Uh, yes, I know?” Chandra said, gathering mana for a fresh fire spell. “And I’m here to bust you out of it.”

“That’s just what he wants!” her mother snapped. “Leave me and go. *Now*, young lady.”

“I’m not young anymore,” Chandra snapped back. “And I’m *not* losing you again!”

“Is that you, the smaller Nalaar?” Tezzeret was pressing his asymmetrical hands together. “Joining the competition that your mother just failed? But this is so touching.”

Chandra could see spectators all around sitting forward in their seats, charmed by the family drama. “I’m not going to build against you, Tezzeret,” she said. “But I am going to beat you.”

“But *here*?” Tezzeret cooed. “In *this very arena*? Do you dare face me in the *same place* where you were once about to be—”

“YES,” Chandra insisted. “I get it. Where I was about to be executed. Very poetic. Now can we *please fight*?” She focused on a spot on her palm, and a ball of fire grew in her hand.

Whispers raced through the crowd. Consulate soldiers hurried in to surround Chandra, to arrest her. But Tezzeret raised a hand to halt them. He conferred briefly with one of the soldiers, then dismissed him and turned to face Chandra in a fresh light. His automatons turned along with him in unconscious puppetry.

“I will face you, child,” Tezzeret announced, now playing to the audience. His automatons took a step forward. “But just you versus me would not be much of a fair fight.”

Chandra tore the ball of fire in two, and both her fists went ablaze. “Nobody said anything about a fair fight.”

A host of illusions dissolved behind Chandra, and one by one, a team of Planeswalkers emerged.



Dramatic Reversal | Art by Eric Deschamps

Her compatriots drew weapons and readied spells. Chandra noticed that Tezzeret, for his part, took a nearly imperceptible step backward.

After a moment of silence, the crowd came to their feet with a cacophony of shouts. As far as they knew, Chandra thought, this was part of the show, the dramatic finale of the exhibition. “Take them down, Head Judge!” some yelled. “Kick his ass, renegades!” others fired back. A few voices called out, “Tezzeret cheats!”

“Chandra,” came Jace’s voice in her head. *“I think his automatons are still blocking my telepathy somehow. You’ve got to get us in closer.”*

“Blow up metal things,” Chandra thought. *“Got it.”*



Art by Raymond Swanland

As soon as she saw Ajani and Gideon rush to protect her mother, Chandra unleashed. Fire flew, slamming like fists into Tezzeret’s machines, felling one after another. One automaton melted on the spot. One got close enough to slice at her off side, grazing her cheek, but it immediately became the rusty centerpiece of a spontaneously-grown vine garden.

At the bidding of Tezzeret’s curved metal claw, scrap metal bent and reformed into new mechanisms, crawling under Chandra’s blasts of fire and extricating themselves from Nissa’s vines. As they advanced, Chandra threw punches that became jets of fire, dimly aware of Gideon and Liliana covering her flank, and Nissa and Ajani crushing a stray automaton that threatened her mother.

The audience took a moment to decide exactly how to react. Frank displays of deviceless spellcasting were rare on Kaladesh. But Chandra could hear them opting to cheer on the spectacle.

Tezzeret staggered back, and for the first time Chandra thought she saw a hesitation before his next assault. She thought at Jace. *“Have you read him yet?”*

“No,” Jace thought, his mental state coming through like a swear word. *“Something’s still blocking me.”*
“Hurry up!”

“He’s too closed off,” Jace responded. *“We’ve got your mother. I think we should go.”*

Chandra looked at her mother, and back at Tezzeret. *“I think I should end this. Right here.”* The flame on her fist extended down her arm, and her vision blurred with fire.

Jace's thoughts had a tone of warning. "*Chandra, if he knew to block his mind, it means he was prepared for this. He knew all of us were coming. We've made a mistake...*"

Chandra's fist closed, compressing fire into a tiny point of blinding, seething heat. Her teeth clenched, and she trembled. "*I could just...*"

Liliana's thought carried through the telepathy clear and sharp: "*End him.*"

A stark shadow passed over the arena, and Chandra looked up to see the airship *Skysovereign* eclipse the sky. Its majestic bulk spanned the entirety of the arena, hovering with a droning churn of internal engines. An enormous turret swiveled on its underside, crackling with aether, its cannon aiming down—not firing, but threatening to fire.

With a broad grin, Tezzeret announced to the entire arena, "And this concludes the Inventors' Fair, everyone. To the brilliant inventors of this world, I say sincerely—thank you." He gave a gracious little bow, and rose from the ground on a column of filigree steel.

A panharmonicon played an anthem, and a few celebratory fireworks popped off the towers around the stadium. The sounds were garish and odd against the utter silence of the crowd.

Chandra's eyes flicked down to the hot point of fire in her palm, and up to Tezzeret's rising face. He was retreating. After threatening her mother, he was getting away.

"It's over," Nissa said quietly, next to her, and Chandra was startled how desperately she wanted someone to tell her that. "Another time. It's over."

Chandra nodded to her, holding in a brimming wave of gratitude and relief. The pinpoint of fire compressed in her fist dissipated into nothing, forgotten.

As a child of eleven, Chandra had looked across this arena, searching the stands, holding onto the slim hope that she might see her mother's face. She never did. Now, in this moment, she looked across the arena again, and found her simply standing there.

Her mother held her arms open. Chandra ran and fell into them.

Chandra had indulged in imagining a moment like this a thousand times, while staring out across the smoking volcanic flats of Keral Keep. If she could have just one moment with Mom again—what would it feel like? Would her mother still smell faintly of welding compound and rose petals? What would she say? What grand thing could she ever say that could sum up her affection, her gratitude, her longing to be home and safe with her again?

She opened her mouth, and her eyes blurred, and all that spilled out of her was, "Mom...I'm sorry."

Her mother murmured something comforting into her hair, pulled her in, and squeezed her close.



Cathartic Reunion | Art by Howard Lyon

Above them, Tezzeret rose and rose, the filigree unfolding to stretch him into the air. The *Skysovereign* welcomed him into its hull, and closed up again with him inside. The panharmonicon continued playing in empty celebration. The crowd was silent as *Skysovereign* slowly turned and moved away, and the sky turned bright again.

It was only as people started to leave that Chandra heard them start to shout in protest. She moved through the crowd, her arm around her mother, and the others followed them out of the arena. She was starting to notice the new strands of iron gray in her mother's dark hair, and the lines in her face, when the crowd became dense with distressed faces, loud with rising panic.

A woman with ornate golden ornamentation around her dress emerged, facing Chandra and her mother directly. "My name is Saheeli Rai," the woman said, "and I must talk with you, and you, ma'am." Her face was deadly serious.

"What is it?" Chandra asked. "What is happening?"

"The inventions. They're gone."

"What?" Pia and Ajani said simultaneously.

"I think they took Rashmi and the others," Saheeli went on, "along with every device that was entered into the Fair. The winning inventions. The passion projects. Rashmi's breakthrough. They're all gone. Taken. I saw what you did in the exhibition...Can you help?"

Now Chandra could hear what everyone around her was shouting about. They were inventors, competitors in the Fair. "My creation!" "I spent everything on that design!" "How could they just take them?" Consulate soldiers and automatons were out in force. She couldn't remember security being this tight when they entered the arena.

"This was Tezzeret's plan," Pia said with a scowl. "This was all one gigantic distraction."

“We have to get out of the stadium, and regroup,” Jace said. “And then we have to stop him. He’s planning something.”

Ajani snarled low. “He’s *building something*.”