
Breaking Points

Doug Beyer

From set *Aether Revolt*

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After the disastrous loss of the Aether Hub, the Gatewatch and several of their renegade allies escaped via the newly-launched skyship, Heart of Kiran. Jace broke from the rest of the group to help the pirate Kari Zev disrupt Consulate defenses from the air. Meanwhile, the crew of Heart of Kiran approaches Ghirapur's Aether Spire, where Tezzeret's operation nears its endpoint.

Gideon raised a spotting scope to his eye. Lenses swiveled, and *Skysovereign* came into crisp focus. The Consulate ship sagged in the air, nose tilted toward the ground, dragging a curtain of smoke like a giant's closing eyelid. It sank through the sky in slow motion, gently passing the tops of Ghirapur's buildings. It drew a swarm of other, smaller Consulate airships to it as it descended, handmaidens to an ailing queen.

"It's fallen," Gideon said. "And the blockade's gone with it. Jace and Captain Zev were successful."

Chandra slumped beside him at the bow of *Heart of Kiran*, propping her weight against the railing. "Then we don't need the Aether Hub anymore. We have everything we need right here. We can take on Tezzeret directly."

"Our target is the Planar Bridge," Gideon said. Seeing Chandra wearily cling to the railing made him wince. Her battle with Baral had taken a lot out of her. "And you're in no state for any more one-on-ones."

Chandra drew her knees up to her chest. "I'm fine."

Gideon held up the scope again and watched *Skysovereign*'s slow droop. He hoped its impact would as be gentle as its descent, complete with warning klaxons and evacuation procedures. The people of this world, even those of the Consulate, weren't evil. He wished no further harm to come to anyone—only to stop the completion of the artifact.

"Girl's right." Liliana was reclining on a deck chair. Her eyes were shaded under a parasol. "We shouldn't miss another chance to take out Tezzeret."

"We stop the device, we end the threat," Gideon said.

"Don't fool yourself," Liliana said. "The device is, ultimately, nothing."

"When it goes, Tezzeret goes. In any case, we can't attack yet. The Spire is still heavily guarded. We don't proceed until the inventors have better options for us."

On cue, Pia Nalaar came up the stairs from below decks. "We've got something to show you."

Gideon followed the others down the stairs, glancing behind him. Beyond the slumping ruin of *Skysovereign* rose the glimmering Aether Spire, where the Planar Bridge was being assembled piece by piece.

The belly of *Heart of Kiran* was a compact chamber framed by a web-work of filigree girders. Gideon felt how close his feet were to open air; the wind whistled in through the seam of the hatch in the metal floor. He thought of how long it would take to fall all the way to the firm, firm ground, with his body surrounded by volumes of roaring space. He then decided this was a very bad thing to think about and abruptly stopped.

Saheeli and Rashmi stood next to a shape covered by a tarp, as long as a coffin and tapered to a point at one end.

Pia stepped forward. “With *Skysovereign* defeated, the blockade has thinned. Within a couple of hours, we should be able to punch *Heart of Kiran* past the perimeter, giving us a clean shot at the Consulate Spire. Once we’re in, we think *this* is the best way to disrupt Tezzeret’s plans.”

She pulled back the tarp. Suspended from the ceiling was a gleaming, sleek, sharp-nosed flying device, as long as Gideon was tall, with a sizable propeller at the rear.



Hope of Ghirapur | Art by Lius Lasahido

“Rashmi and Saheeli have designed a specially modified thopter,” said Pia. “Its payload is an aetheric disruptor, a device capable of incapacitating the Bridge and stopping its operation for good.”

Saheeli slid open a panel on the top of the device, exposing the complicated equipment inside. “It took us every part we had, but it should work. The disruptor will generate a one-time energetic shock that will fry the Bridge’s inner ring. The structure of the Planar Bridge will look largely intact, but it’ll be useless—its central mechanism utterly destroyed. Tezzeret will be left with nothing.”

Rashmi looked like she was ready to hurl the thopter at Tezzeret with her bare hands. “I call it *Hope of Ghirapur*,” she said with forced calm.

Gideon nodded. Rashmi had to be distraught about what became of all her work in the Fair. Now she had channeled all that ingenuity into destroying the monstrosity her work had become—a sleek new innovation that had been specifically engineered to undo her previous one. “It looks fast,” Gideon said.

“Fast enough to speed past normal air-based defenses,” Rashmi said, “assuming we can get in close enough to the Spire to launch it.”

“There’s still a problem—the turret,” Pia said. “Our renegade contacts have told us that Consulate artificers have installed a huge aether-powered cannon at the base of the Spire, and it has enough precision and range to take out anything that flies. Including *Hope of Ghirapur* . Or *Heart of Kiran* .”

“Can we cut the supply lines?” Saheeli asked. “Deprive them of aether again?”

“They’ll be expecting that,” Pia said. “We’re seeing patrols all along the main supply lines.”

“This turret,” Liliana said, picking at a fingernail. “Does it have living operators?”

Gideon wheeled on her, grated by the way she specified *living* . “We don’t harm anyone we don’t have to, Liliana,” he said. “I want every option explored.”

Liliana tilted her head, chiseling Gideon with an extremely-bored-with-your-naivete look.

“We’re not here to bring death to the citizens of this city,” said Gideon, now to the group. “We’re here to stop Tezzeret, and *Hope of Ghirapur* is our best chance of that. But unless we can disable that turret, we’ll be shot down before we get anywhere close.”

“I might have a way to take it out,” Pia said. “But I’ll need support. A ground team.”

“I’m coming with you, Mom,” Chandra said immediately.

Gideon thought about who would be left aboard, and their capabilities, if Chandra left. He shook his head. “We’ll need your fire up here on the ship, Chandra. We’ll be facing a swarm of aerial attackers as we circle in. We need to keep the path clear for *Hope* .”

“I was thinking of Nissa, actually,” Pia said quietly, patting Chandra’s hand. “Someone who can help zero in on the aether lines.”

Chandra made fists. Gideon barely heard her insistent whisper: “I need to be there. To make sure you’re safe.”

“*You* want to be there to protect *me* ?” Pia whispered back with a little smile.

“I failed you once,” Chandra said. “You and Dad. I won’t let it happen again.”

“I’ll go along with the ground team,” Ajani said. “Don’t worry, little candle. I’ll keep them out of harm’s way.”

Chandra’s pouty moue became a quick, fierce hug around Ajani’s waist, and then she crossed her arms. Pia put a maternal hand around her waist.

Gideon nodded firmly. “Then there’s the issue of Tezzeret himself.”



Heart of Kiran | Art by Jaime Jones

Liliana looked up, suddenly interested.

“He’ll see any attack coming,” Gideon said. “And he’ll be able to disable a mechanical device like *Hope of Ghirapur* in no time.”

“Leave him to me,” Liliana said.

Gideon was wary. “We only need to distract him.”

Liliana adjusted one of her silk gloves. “I believe having your flesh scoured from your skeleton can be a very effective distraction.”

A vein bulged near Gideon’s hairline. “I’m sorry,” he said to the group. “Can the rest of you give Liliana and me a moment?”

The others exchanged glances and shuffled up the stairs, leaving Liliana and Gideon alone in the hold.

Once they were gone, Liliana dropped the casual amusement. “I’m your best option here and you know it. You said we’re here to stop Tezzeret. So let’s stop him.”

“We just want Tezzeret to be unable to open doors between worlds.”

Liliana chuckled derisively. “As long as Tezzeret knows this Planar Bridge artifact is possible, he’ll stop at nothing to recreate it. He’ll build this thing again and again, hurting anyone he needs to, ravaging every innocent little inventor-world until he has it.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“It’s what I would do.”

“We’ll contact Jace. He could do something to Tezzeret’s mind.”

Liliana came back with surprising venom. “Absolutely not. The last time they met, Tezzeret *tortured* —” She stopped herself, composed her face, then continued calmly. “You do not want the success of this whole plan to hinge on the two of them, together, in a life-or-death situation.”

Gideon frowned. Jace always seemed to be a fraught topic with Liliana.

"I go; I distract Tezzeret," Liliana said, "and the rest of you fire that thing at the Bridge. That's your best move. It's your only move."

Gideon drew himself up to full height. "All right. But I'm going with you."

"No. You aren't, in fact."

"You going after him solo"—*unchaperoned*—"is out of the question."

"It's the only way this works. The Consulate will see you and send every goon in the area. I can draw Tezzeret into a duel the way no one else can."

"Then we send you with a weapon. Another disruptor, or something else. You trick your way in, and *you* stop the Bridge."

Liliana shook her head. "The inventors already said they used every ingredient in the kitchen to cook up this gadget. And if Tezzeret suspects any kind of trap or ambush, he won't engage me. I won't be able to distract him. I have to go alone, unarmed, or else your whole plan falls apart."

Gideon took a heavy breath. Painful as it was, he saw the truth of what she was saying. "I want you to explore every option before killing him."

"Of course," Liliana said sweetly.

The Gatewatch had come together to fight the same enemies, he thought. Not to do everything the way he would do it. "I can't believe I'm agreeing to this."

Liliana patted him on his beefy shoulder. "You've explored every option."

It had been almost two hours since *Heart of Kiran* dropped them on the surface. Pia knew the names on the street markers in this part of the city, but she could barely recognize these streets now that they were full of Consulate forces. Nissa's eyes could perceive the shape of the aether lines, though, and Ajani's nose warned when they were too near soldiers. Their small party sidled along side streets and alleyways, avoiding Consulate threats.

In the distance, a beam of energy lanced into the sky, sizzling a renegade whirler. They couldn't see the turret from their vantage point, but they had seen how its beams disintegrated everything it targeted. It left renegade pilots to bail out of their broken airships and turned thopters into dissipating stains of aether and smoke.



Consulate Turret | Art by Eric Deschamps

The turret was their target. But first they had to meet with a renegade contact.

As they skulked between two Consulate foundries, a squirrel-sized automaton poked its head out of a window above them. It skittered along the bricks toward them, halted, and tilted its coppery flourish of a head. Then it sped away along the wall and around a corner.

“Ma’am?” Nissa asked.

Pia nodded, and they followed it.

They tracked it to the back gate of a Consulate complex, and paused by a door. “In here,” Pia whispered.

“Ma’am, that building is directly on the main aether line,” Nissa warned.

Ajani sniffed at the door, once and then a second time to be sure, and then visibly calmed. “Grandmother.”

Pia knocked, and Oviya Pashiri opened the door. She beamed at the three of them.



Oviya Pashiri, Sage Lifecrafter | Art by Magali Villeneuve

“Is the package ready?” Pia asked.

Mrs. Pashiri welcomed them into the building as the little automaton hopped onto her shoulder. The place looked like a Consulate warehouse from the outside, but held a renegade workshop and delivery bay on the inside.

The old lifecrafter led them over to a metal crate that was almost as large as the older woman herself and patted it. “All assembled and ready to ship out.”

Ajani wrinkled his nose at the crate. “Are we sure about this?”

“I think you’ll find this is just the thing,” Mrs. Pashiri said.

Ajani bent at the joints toward the crate, preparing to heft its weighty bulk onto his back. But Nissa had already picked it up, and it lifted readily. “I have it,” she said.

Ajani blinked. And nodded. “What exactly is in this, Grandmother?”

“A weapon against the Consulate,” Mrs. Pashiri said. “To be deployed only when you get close to that nasty turret of theirs.”

Pia hugged Mrs. Pashiri. “Thank you, my friend.”

“Be safe.”

They walked back out the door, only to find the street was now filled with renegade inventors, armed to the teeth with aether-powered devices. They stood in formation, looking at Pia, ready for orders.

“Oh, and I contacted a few friends,” said Mrs. Pashiri.

Chandra threw blasts of fire from the bow. A squadron of needle-beaked thopters, aiming to skewer the hull of *Heart of Kiran*, instead caught Chandra’s blasts and exploded. Fried pieces fluttered. She shifted back on her heels in victory, but she felt her knees buckle, and she stumbled.

Saheeli, next to her at the bow, steadied her. “Are you all right?”

“It’s fine,” Chandra said like a curse, almost more at her own weary body than at Saheeli. She glanced up. “More incoming—”

Another barrage buzzed toward them, but Saheeli reached out with a spell, magically transmuting their delicate metals to clumsy lead. The thopters wobbled, lurched, and whumped uselessly into *Heart of Kiran*’s hull, soft-bodied and blunt.

“You’re good,” Chandra said, once the airship’s path was clear. “Ever consider bringing those talents beyond Kaladesh? We could use you.” She thumped a hand on her forehead. “Crap, I sound just like Gideon.”

Saheeli smiled. She looked out at the Spire in the distance, now in full view. “I don’t know. Right now, I’m just concerned about this fight here, on our world.”

“We’ll stop Tezzeret. And then all this will be over. It will. I may be no good at speeches, but I do believe that.”

“You’re better at motivating people than you might think.” Saheeli pulled out a scope, but instead of looking through it, she turned it over in her hands as the engines of *Heart of Kiran* hummed under their feet. “So many people followed that tyrant, though. Unquestioningly. He showed up, and people just let him take control of whatever he wanted. Did you ever feel like the whole world was against you?”

“Usually feel like *every* world is against me. But I know what you mean.”

“Even if we manage to stop him...I don’t know. There *are* threats out there, beyond Kaladesh. Tezzeret is proof of that. But there’ll still be work to do here, too.”

Chandra shrugged. “If you ever change your mind.” She remembered when Gideon and Jace planeswalked to Regatha, seeking her help in the conflict with the Eldrazi. Felt like forever ago. She’d refused their offer at first, too. Leaving home, wherever you considered your home, was never easy.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Saheeli said, unbidden. “I remember hearing about it when he was... when he died. I was young at the time, like you.” She looked through the scope in the direction of the Spire. “His would’ve been a helpful voice, right about now.”

“Thank you,” Chandra said. “He would’ve thought you were pretty terrific, too.”

Gideon came up a ladder from below. “The Consulate defenses are crumbling,” he said. “Liliana’s begun her infiltration, and the ground force is deployed. Is *Hope of Ghirapur* ready?”

“I’ve triple-checked it,” Saheeli answered. “And the Aether Spire is dead ahead. Our target’s in sight.”

Chandra batted at Gideon’s shoulder. “Are we really going to pull this off?”

“As long as our friends on the ground are able to disable the cannon in time.”

Chandra nodded firmly. “They will.”

Heart of Kiran shuddered, jolted by a hard bump from the stern.

Saheeli and Gideon looked at each other. “What was that?”

“Probably just...turbulence,” Chandra said.

Gideon appraised that theory with a raised eyebrow.

“Errant migratory goose?” she shrugged.

Saheeli blinked, stunned wordless by the even greater magnitude of this theory-badness.

“The skull of a really tall giant—*fine*, I’ll go check it out.”

The turret was surrounded. Wheel-footed guardian automata. Weapon-armed peacewalkers protecting the aether lines. Consulate-piloted vehicles grinding the mosaic streets under their treads.

Pia shouted orders. Nissa set the huge metal container down on the street, and Pia set up a defense around it. Ajani rushed forward with his double axe, knocking aside one automaton and slicing another in two pieces. Nissa raised her staff, and the street buckled as the earth unfolded from underneath, blooming into a web of snaring vines. As one automaton was pulled down, renegade inventors clamored onto it, deploying malfunction hammers and binding traps.



Art by John Stanko

The turret swiveled toward the ground. It glowed with a blue heat, and, as an officer motioned with his hand, fired. The beam roasted the street, leaving a cobblestone-rimmed crater. Pia’s renegades had scattered from the blast, but only just.

Before them loomed an immense rolling peacewalker, its chassis festooned with red Consulate banners that reached from its shoulders to its treads. It stood between them and the base of the turret, rotating at the waist to scan for enemies. From the platform where the thing’s head should have been, Consulate soldiers took aim with launchers, firing blasts of barbed darts into the crowd. Pia shouted and pointed.

A young elf dashed forth and ran under the peacewalker’s armature. She sliced through a vulnerable under-chassis fuel line with the quick arc of a dagger and a laugh of triumph. But when she whirled to sprint back out of its way, the spikes on its treads snagged a piece of her tunic and pulled. She lost her footing and fell sideways, dragged toward the spikes as she struggled to release herself.

Pia heard Ajani shout, “Shadowblayde!”

A thousand fight-or-flight micro-impulses prickled along Chandra's spine as she followed clouds of raw aether down into the ship's hold. Mist swallowed the base of the stairs, and she heard a whistling hiss—the kind of sound she never wanted to hear when aboard an aether-powered vehicle, hundreds of feet in the air.

She didn't see the interloper until she got down into the hold with *Hope of Ghirapur*. There stood Dovin Baan, almost everything else obscured with aetheric steam.

"When I first came to you and your compatriots, Monk Nalaar," Dovin said, "I had planned to recruit your help. I see now that that my plan was badly flawed."

Through the steam, Chandra could see the access plug. Some sort of mechanical grippers had cut a neat hole in the airship's belly and allowed a single person into the ship. The grippers had then sealed the hull off again, but a fuel conduit had been severed, and the cracked pipe was spraying aether everywhere.

Chandra pulled her gloves tight and advanced toward him. "Get off my dad's ship."

Dovin held up a pair of pliers. Gently held in the thin jaws of the pliers was a piece of torn metal, a tiny filigree cage that housed a compact, powerful module. It was from the aetheric disruptor—the crucial piece of *Hope of Ghirapur*. And just as Chandra recognized it, Dovin crushed it.

"No!" Chandra yelled.

"My error is now remedied," Dovin said. "And I've identified the flaw in *your* plan—a single, unique, easily-destroyed mechanism that is key to your entire operation."

It wasn't just the core of the disruptor. Through the shroud of aether, she could see that *Hope of Ghirapur*'s guts were spilled out everywhere.

Chandra clothed herself in fire and rushed at Dovin.

The peacewalker kept barreling in a straight line toward the renegades. Shadowblayde must have cut a *steering* line rather than the power. Running along with it, Shadowblayde tried to tear out of her tunic, but the wheels bit into the sleeve, drawing her arm dangerously close to the gnashing wheels.

Ajani roared and ran for the elf axe-first. He slapped away a barrage of Consulate projectiles with the axe head, and in a continuation of the motion slashed through the peacewalker's treads to free Shadowblayde.

"White Cat!" Shadowblayde cried. "Thank y—*aagh!*"

Her tunic had come free, but the grinding mechanisms of the vehicle's underbelly still rolled over them, gear teeth threatening to rip at their flesh like knives. Ajani used his body to huddle over her. They tensed, awaiting the crushing weight as darkness swept over them—

—and then there was light. Metal screamed as the peacewalker wrenched and tilted sideways, one tread grinding and sparking against the street, the other spinning freely in the air. Nissa stood under the chassis, her arms holding up the great mechanical beast, a tangle of sinew-like vines twisting around her body and buttressing her strength against the ground.

Ajani and Shadowblayde rolled and leapt clear. As they rushed away, Nissa dropped the peacewalker with a crash. Mechanisms groaned, gears fused and sparked, and the peacewalker took a lurching left and careened into a building.

“Bring the package!” Pia called.

With the peacewalker out of the way, they had a brief, clear line of sight to the base of the turret—but it also had clear line of sight to them. While the cannon turned to aim down at them, inventors hurried forward with the container and dropped it right by the base of the turret, the business end of which now glowed with charged aether.

“Release!” Pia called.

The inventors yanked on the container’s release clasps. Locks clicked open and seams parted, releasing, at first, only a strange chorus of snortling, snorfling, and the scrabbling of sets of tiny claws.

The turret’s charger mechanisms revved and sang with energy. The focal end crackled with air-boiling heat. Renegade inventors scattered as the beam prepared to fire.

The locks disengaged and the container’s sides fell open. Gremlins poured out by the dozens.

They instantly flooded into the street, pointing their snouts toward the turret.

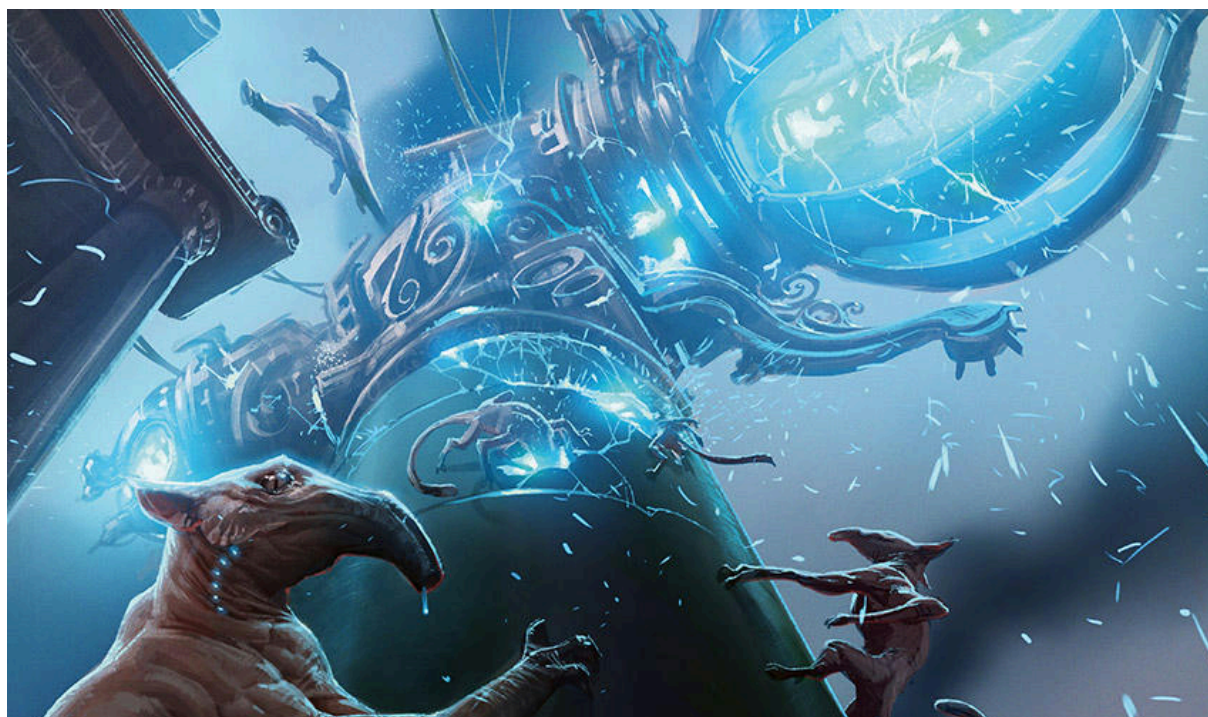


Invigorated Rampage | Art by Craig J Spearing

“FIRE!” yelled the turret officer.

But it was too late. Gremlins swarmed up the struts, sizzling its metal with their acidic drool. The cannon fired, blasting a smoking hole in the street, but meanwhile gremlins clawed open filigree pipes and aether tanks, gorging on the turret’s rich stores of aether.

Soldiers tried to fend them off with dart-throwers and unsheathed weapons, but their strategy quickly turned to locating all available exits.



Release the Gremlins | Art by Izzy

The whole operation became a gremlin feast. Torn open and drained, the turret went dark and the cannon sagged, aetherless and useless.

Renegades cheered.

Pia smirked, nodding at her ground team. “That’s our part,” she said. She looked up at the sky. “Now everything depends on *Hope of Ghirapur*.”

It was hopeless. The outer shell of the modified thopter was intact, but it didn’t matter—its precious, intricate payload was ruined.

Chandra hurled blasts of fire past *Hope*, trying to push the interloper Dovin to retreat further back into the hold, but she could barely see in the misty chamber. She blasted wildly, briefly lighting her advance on Dovin, but she had only succeeded in setting bits of *Heart of Kiran* on fire. Dovin had evaded her every spell.



Hungry Flames | Art by Izzy

“This airship has lost significant fuel supplies,” Dovin said calmly. “For your safety, I would advise to land the ship soon.”

Chandra couldn’t hit something she couldn’t see. She angrily slipped on her goggles, only to see Dovin in the act of giving a slight bow.

“At that time, the crew should commence proper evacuation protocols,” he said. “Farewell.”

And then he began to shimmer and fade. He was planeswalking away.

“Nooo!” Chandra flung a last-ditch blast of fire, but it sailed through the vedalken’s disappearing form. He was gone.

Behind her, she heard Saheeli dashing down the stairs into the hold. “Crew says we’re leaking fuel, what’s going on down—” She must have seen the hollowed-out thopter, because she interrupted herself. “Oh no! Oh no, oh *no* ...”

Chandra opened her mouth and made a sound that was more volume than vocabulary.

Gideon followed the others down into the hold. He took inventory: The chassis of *Hope of Ghirapur* was torn open like a carcass. Pieces of the disruptor were strewn around the ship’s hold like pecked-over internal organs. Saheeli had hastily welded *Heart of Kiran*’s aether line, but the pipes still hissed at the joints. The whole airship rumbled and rattled, and altitude bells sounded shrill warnings.

Chandra clanged on the thopter with her knuckle. “So,” she said through her teeth. “Can we still launch it?”

“It’ll probably fly,” Saheeli said. “But what’s the point? Without the disruptor, it’s just an empty shell.”

Chandra’s look was dark. “Maybe we should just ram the Bridge.”

Gideon began to object, but Saheeli beat him. “No good,” she said. “Dovin’s wrecked the fuel system. *Heart of Kiran* is fading fast. We can get in range, but not at speed. It’s the thopter or nothing.”

“But it can’t detonate now,” Chandra said.

Eyes were turning to Gideon. He took a breath, trying and failing to think of a way to protect all these people from the sad truth. “We need to call it off,” he said. “We have to think of something else.”

Rashmi spoke up. “Liliana’s still down there.”

“So’s my mother!” Chandra said. “And Nissa, and Ajani! The rest of the renegades! Our *friends* and our *family* are counting on us.”

“We’re not going to get another chance,” Saheeli murmured.

Gideon crossed his arms and looked at the ceiling. He wished he could scoop up everyone on this world onto this ship, and then reach his arms around the whole thing. Wrap all the soft people in an impenetrable hug. Everyone in his life always seemed to get into situations proving how *fragile* they were.

Chandra ran her hand along the smooth thopter chassis. “I have a bad, bad idea.” She glanced at Gideon, and then tipped her head inside the thopter’s hatch.

“What are you even—?” Gideon started. When he traced forward along her thought process, he put up his hands. “No. What? No. Chandra. Absolutely not.”

“It could work,” Chandra said, her voice echoing from inside the chamber. She popped her head back out. She had that little Chandra half-grin on her face, but she was shaking. “From close range, *I* could be the disruptor. When I fought Baral, before Nissa pulled me out of it, I was just about to complete a spell...” She stopped, her breaths coming sharp and quick. “Little thing. Big boom.”

Gideon shook his head, trying to wave the idea away like candle smoke. “Not going to happen. People—I want other options, now.”

But Chandra was already climbing into the hollowed-out *Hope of Ghirapur*, tucking her limbs inside like a spider crab.

“Get out of there, gods damn it!” Gideon roared. “Absolutely not. That wouldn’t even—even *work*.” He hated how unconvinced he was of that.

Saheeli was looking sidelong at Rashmi. “We’d have to do some modifications to account for the altered encumbrance...” Rashmi nodded. “And we’d pad out the nose cone, of course, to absorb as much of the collision as possible...a filigree harness of some kind?”

Chandra’s voice came from inside the thopter. “No nose cone.” There was a CLANG as she kicked at the thopter’s copper tip from the inside. CLANG. Her foot erupted from the front of the thopter. CLANG.

Gideon’s laugh was incredulous. “Chandra! You’d be a smear on the wall! The impact alone would kill you.”

Chandra’s face popped back up from inside the thopter. She wasn’t laughing. “They’ve cleared a path for us. They’re counting on us. It’s now or it’s never.” She shrugged. “I choose now.”

This strategy was beyond ludicrous. As big an explosion as Chandra could generate, this was not even clever improvisation. It was useless suicide. Why would she even *consider* —

Gideon's heart squeezed for her. Of course. The plane they were on—the very name of the *ship* they were on. Of course she felt responsible. “Chandra,” he said, as delicately as possible. “None of this will bring your father back.”

There were no pyrotechnics. Just a series of even words fired back. “You can shut your goddamn mouth about my father.” And she snapped on her goggles.

Gideon backed off a step. Saheeli and Rashmi looked at each other with a shared, quiet *EEK*.

“I’m sorry,” Gideon said. “It’s just...This isn’t a time for you to go proving yourself. You’re tired. You’ve spent so much rage already.”

Chandra just looked at him through the goggle glass. “My rage is a renewable resource.”

“We can find another way.”

“If you can think of one, let me know. I’m going.”

Saheeli and Rashmi were already holding welders and scrap material to modify the thopter.

Gideon studied the scene for a long moment, trying to freeze this awful situation so that it couldn’t go any further wrong. He stomped around the ship’s hold, circumambulating the thopter. He stuck his head inside the thopter’s chamber, tracing the specifications of the interior space with Chandra in it, evaluating. He sighed, looking around for any kind of different answer.

Finally, he unhitched his sural from his belt and hung it on the wall. He looked at Chandra.

“You’re not going alone.”