

Burn

Chris L'Etoile

From set *Aether Revolt*

This story contains references to suicidal thoughts.

The renegades of Kaladesh rose against Tezzeret's corrupted Consulate. Led by Pia and Chandra Nalaar, armed by the criminal mastermind Gonti, allied with inventors and aether pirates, and supported by the Planeswalkers of the Gatewatch, they have seized Ghirapur's vital Aether Hub. Now they must hold it against Consulate counterattack until the airship Heart of Kiran can be fueled.

Skysovereign's plotting table was an impressive display of engineering brilliance, decorative artistry, and the Consulate's seemingly inexhaustible funding. It showed, in clear-eyed detail, how poorly the struggle for order proceeded.

On the table before Dovin Baan, mechanical figurines slid along streets color-coded by district; here the green of Kujar, there the blue of Bomat. Cunning puppets in the shapes of the five Gearhulks whirred, stepping carefully, laboriously encircling the filigreed wedge representing the Aether Hub. Slanting dawn sun flooded through the viewports, casting deep shadows between knee-height buildings of brass and tin.

Overhead, an arm-length replica of the dreadnought *Skysovereign* dangled from the fixtures at the end of an array of wires, pulleys, and servos. Simulated internal lighting winked out from ranks of pinhole viewports.

On a red-painted corner of the Weldfast, another figurine shut its lights off and retracted beneath the map. A dark pin-shape slid down the street to take its place. Peripherally, he heard the report whispered from the operator to his left: "Enforcement squad six-three's automatons have exhausted their aether. The operators spiked the cannon barrels and are pulling back."

On the far side of the command deck, Head Judge Tezzeret—now Special Grand Consul Tezzeret, endowed by the Consuls for the duration of the present crisis—was too occupied with screaming in the face of an orderly to pay any mind to this latest setback.

The Grand Consul seemed to spend more time each day communicating at great volume from short range. Regrettably, one could not dispute the effectiveness of his outbursts (timed, Baan had noted, to occur no more frequently than once an hour). Since the outbreak of the crisis, the command deck staff had been operating above their usual efficiency. Each was a tightly wound spring, noting systemic and situational faults with admirable speed, then moving swiftly to rectify the matter before the Grand Consul noticed himself.

The orderly, a sturdy dwarf bearing an armful of hand-written reports, blinked as a drop of spittle arced onto her cheek. "Sir," she repeated, "that patrol doesn't have the aether. The renegades at the hub have been cutting off the feeds, piping it to some project—"

“So help me,” Tezzeret growled. “If you give me *one* more excuse. Just. *One*. I will *personally* ram your head through the—”

Baan stepped forward, heels clicking smartly on the steel deck plates. To have the Grand Consul threaten the life of a messenger, as if he were some criminal thug instead of a minister of the apparatus of state, would unacceptably undercut the moral authority of the Consulate for all those present. Not the *legal* authority, of course, but one was oft-mistaken for the other.

“This is the potential peril of a centralized aether distribution center,” Baan took pains to keep his voice as neutral as possible; flat, unconcerned, perfectly gray. As cool and nondescript as the mists burning off the Vinday River far below.

Tezzeret wheeled away from the orderly and marched around the plotting table, the command crew pulling back from his path, busying themselves at their dials and kinetic readouts.

“We were assured that the facility would be sufficiently protected,” Baan continued. “Consul Kambal stated that usurpation by elements hostile to the government would be, if I may quote, ‘an utter imposs—’”

Tezzeret glared up into Baan’s face. The skin around his lips pulled taut, prematurely gray hair spilling over his shoulders, the crimson tattoos on his forehead crumpled on his furrowed brow. Baan had not yet ascertained the marks’ significance, though the pondering of that esoteric knowledge had occupied many idle moments in the last week. They bore no descent from any of Kaladesh’s tattooing traditions, and were unlikely to be of his own design; while the Grand Consul’s engineering abilities never failed to impress, aesthetics were clearly a matter beneath the level of his concern.

It was a matter of wonder that none of the command staff—nor, indeed, any of the Consuls—suspected Tezzeret’s origins. Tattoos of indeterminate origin; the physically impossible tensile strength and conductivity of the metal composing his prosthetic arm; his peculiar manners of enunciation. That unquestioning acceptance would surely end once knowledge of Rashmi’s breakthrough became common. Popular imagination would be seized by the possibilities suggested by her device. Entire libraries of speculative fiction would be written.

“I should rip your tongue out,” Tezzeret snarled.

Baan raised one brow, carefully, and clasped his hands behind his back. He pitched his voice to polite curiosity; “Indeed?”



Dovin Baan | Art by Tyler Jacobson

The Grand Consul's nostrils flared as obscenities flew from his mouth. Vile, perhaps even shocking, but lacking a certain creative vitality. Not that it was an endeavor worth marking individual distinctions, he supposed. Beyond Tezzeret's shoulder, a member of the bridge crew winced and sank his head lower between his shoulders.

When the Grand Consul fell silent, Baan returned his attention to him. Quietly, so no one beyond the two of them could hear, he said, "I acknowledge the effectiveness of your harangues at keeping this crew aligned and attentive. I, however, am...unimpressed."

The rage fell away from Tezzeret's face, as abruptly as if it had never been there. His eyes, cold and calculating, tightened to a blazing diamond glitter. The Grand Consul had not seemed a danger a moment ago. Now, there was a gleam in his eyes that spoke of an urge to bend something until it creaked and cracked and wriggled...and hold it at that point, just to see what it would do.

One corner of his mouth bent upward, though Baan could not imagine what humor the man perceived. "I need the Aether Hub under our control," the Grand Consul said, in his normal speaking voice. "We pay you to see flaws. Do your job. Find a way. Make it happen."

Baan inhaled slowly. It had been ten hours since the plan had come to him, but he had been unable to persuade anyone of consequence to listen. "If I may?" he gestured to the plotting table. The Grand Consul gave a curt nod.

Baan stepped down to the table, and worked the controls. The majority of the mechanical cityscape retracted into the table, leaving only the regions surrounding the Aether Hub. The renegade barricades, marked by dark pins, cast an ominous, irregular bulge across the smoothly curving lines of roads, railways, canals, and aethertubes of his city. At the hub itself sat a cluster of pins and six mechanical figurines of glittering brass, each marked with a color-coded banner.

Baan pointed to the renegade deployments around the Hub. "They have positioned the majority of their forces at the Hub. A direct assault would be...calamitous. The criminal Renegade Prime commands the position personally."

The Grand Consul's elongated metal claws clacked into something vaguely like a fist. "Pia Nalaar."

"Yes," Baan acknowledged. Pia Nalaar, partner of Kiran, mother of Chandra. All three had been issued death certificates twelve years and seven months previous. He'd been disturbed to find two of the three alive and delved into the archives. But there they were, exactly as he recalled. Place of death: Bunarat. Cause of death: arson. Witnessed by: Captain Dhiren Baral.

Baan worked the controls, and a spotlight fell on a section of the renegade positions: the thin neck connecting the Aether Hub to the wards they controlled. "This focus on defending the Hub leaves their connection to their comrades under-defended. Sufficient pressure from both sides will allow us to complete an encirclement of the Hub."

Tezzeret loomed over the table on uneven fists, glaring at the black pins representing renegade defenders. "No siege, Baan. Every minute, automatons and vehicles run out of aether. Just keeping the Gearhulks powered—"

"I predict they will withdraw defenders from the Hub to keep this corridor open. The architect of their defensive strategy exhibits a certain...two-dimensional thinking. I think it likely to be the—to be our *guest*, Mr. Jura." Tezzeret lifted a brow at his dissembling, and glanced around at the command crew. If any had noted Baan's tilt to the word, they did not look up.

"He was an infantry commander, according to my research. It is doubtful he has significant experience opposing forces enjoying aerial mobility." He twisted a knob, and a series of black pins at road intersections rose higher. "These are defended barricades of overgrown plants. Almost certainly created by their elven accomplice, Nissa."

Baan's long fingers worked the controls like a concert sitarist, setting legions into motion. "Their defenses are primarily along that outer perimeter, with a reserve at the Hub. Our pincer attack," the ticking figurines pressed the black pins back along the neck of the renegade position, "will draw off that reserve." The pins clustered around the Hub trickled away, bolstering their retreating comrades. "And now..."

A flight of miniature thopters whirred to life on the deck of the model *Skysovereign*. They wobbled across the table, and delicately alighted atop the model Aether Hub.

Baan nodded and stepped back from the dials and control sticks. "Transports loaded with Inspectors. I am reasonably confident that aerial deployment behind Mr. Jura's forward positions would take him unprepared. We land on the upper decks and press downward. If nonlethal glimmersnap and aether-pulse charges fail to dislodge the defenders, canister explosives would be most effective. Few renegades wear full armor, and there would be little risk of shrapnel damaging the Hub itself."

Tezzeret turned to him, a slight tilt to his neck, an appraising look in his eyes. "Why, Baan. What an uncommonly bloodthirsty suggestion. For you."

"This proposal depends upon timing and inertia," he replied, coolly. "If the renegades decline to retreat or surrender, they must be swept aside, lest delay allow them to concentrate fire upon our inspectors. Deaths are inevitable at this juncture. Better they be militants than our civil servants."

The Grand Consul smiled approval. "Can you assure me this will work?"

Baan frowned. "Of course not. I can only make projections based on what knowledge I am privy to. I estimate an 85-percent chance of success."

Tezzeret drummed his living fingers on the edge of the table, then pushed himself back. He tossed a careless gesture at the model Aether Hub, at the brass figures with their colored flags. "What of your *guests*, Baan? They complicate things."

"I would judge each to be worth twelve to thirty inspectors, depending on their individual abilities and training. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to assess their flaws. Most critical is their divided leadership. Gideon and Jace both believe themselves the overall leader. Additionally, Mr. Beleren—"

"I know his flaws." Tezzeret's teeth appeared, momentarily, humorless as a cobra tasting the wind.

"Neither man entirely trusts Liliana. She thinks little of Gideon in turn. Her regard of Jace is more difficult to analyze; a peculiar mélange of protectiveness and contempt. If questioned, I suspect she would be unable to explain it herself.

"Aside from leadership, the group's greatest weakness is Renegade Prime's daughter. She is easily provoked into rash acts, which makes the others overprotective of her. Particularly Gideon and Nissa."

The Grand Consul yanked a speaking tube down from the overhead tangle. "Chief of Compliance Baral to the command deck. *Now*," he bellowed into the tube. He heard the words reverberate through the halls of the ship.

"Your plan is acceptable." Tezzeret examined his false arm and drew a finger down the length of it. The impossible metal flowed like water under his touch. "I'm *improving* it slightly. The Nalaars have other weaknesses."

"I am curious," Baan ventured. "What is the significance of the tattoos on your forehead?"

Tezzeret's eyes flickered up and down the length of him, reading his scrupulously neutral posture. "They are to remind me of a debt." One corner of his mouth bent upward, humorlessly. "I wonder, Baan. What flaws do you see when you look at me?"

He considered, briefly. "On that matter, I think it prudent to keep my conclusions to myself."

The Grand Consul barked a short, sharp laugh. "You're not stupid."

He supposed that was what passed for a compliment from Tezzeret.

Baral clanked on to the command deck in full combat gear, helmet tucked in the crook of his elbow. He stopped before the two and made a perfunctory salute. "Baral. As ordered." After a moment, he added, "Sir."

"You've dealt with the Nalaars," the Grand Consul said.

A slow, unpleasant grin spread across Baral's face, turning his scarred cheek into a wasteland of crags and canyons. "That I have."

"You reported the entire family to be deceased," Baan said.

The Chief Inspector's eyes narrowed. He glanced to Tezzeret, who, uncharacteristically, said nothing. At last, Baral grunted, "The fire the child started. It *confused* things. We discovered the mother among the survivors later."

"Indeed?" Baan said, noncommittally. "It troubles me that the reports do not reflect that."

"Paperwork's your business, Minister," Baral growled. "I *work* for a living. If you spent a day on the streets—"

"Baral," Tezzeret interrupted, "I want you to distract them."

The Chief Inspector's eyes drifted back and forth between the two, puzzlement bending his mouth. "Sir?"

"*Annoy* the Nalaars. Lure them away from the Aether Hub. Them, and as many of their friends as you can get to follow."

Baral chortled through his ruined half-nose. "Easy enough. Then what?"

Tezzeret waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever you want."

The Chief Inspector raised his remaining brow. "*Whatever*, huh?"

The Grand Consul clicked his metal talons together. "Traitors to the Consulate, Baral. Mages with a history of violence. If they won't surrender..." he raised the palm of his mortal hand into the air, face impassive.

Baral straightened, and one canine showed between his lips. Baan couldn't decide if it was a smile or a sneer. "Sure enough. Can't have any dangerous *mages* running about." He turned to leave.

"Take your squad with you," Tezzeret said. "And Minister Baan."

Baral grunted and slammed his helmet down over his shoulder plates. "Hangar seven, Minister," the words echoed out. "We lift in ten minutes." Then he stomped out, metal-shod feet banging on the deck plates.

Baan turned to the Grand Consul. "Explain."

"Baral's an attack dog," Tezzeret said, looking back to the table. "You're his leash. Let him bite, not chase."

Logical, so far as it went. Baan shifted his weight to the other foot. "What of my plan?"

"I'll oversee its execution. Don't worry," he smiled unpleasantly. "I'll credit you. Failure *or* success." The Grand Consul hunched over the display, his claws etching fine lines across the polished brass.

Mom's upstairs, I guess.

That's where all the other Big Names are. Gonti and Kari and Saheeli and probably some people who don't have names that end in *-i*. She's in total and complete Renegade Prime mode, so she's not mom right now. She's an engineer, solving a problem. All of them at the top of the Aether Hub are trying to figure out how to punch the Consuls in the nethers.

I yawn because I didn't get much sleep again. Every night since the crackdown, it's just flames and screaming, nightmares like I used to have at Keral Keep.

I'm looking out over Ghirapur, trying to match the blurry places in my head with the sharp ones in front of me. I'm home, but somebody moved all the furniture.

I haven't been able to find the water tower I used to climb. I remember it being the tallest thing around. We'd watch the air races from on top, me and my friends. The boring official ones at mid-day, or the ones the older kids ran at night, shrieking through the streets until Consulate traffic-cutters showed up. Sometimes they'd swoop over my tower, or around, and I had to hold on as hot lightning-smell rushed past.

Everything's *taller*. The white stone walls and flat roofs I ran across got sunk under brass and turquoise and swirly bits, all glinting and shimmering under noon sun.



Aetherflux Reservoir | Art by Cliff Childs

The wind smells like a thousand million lunches, dust and metal, aether. Across the streets, beyond the barricades, the Consulate's panharmonicons are still blaring "The Gremlin's Wedding March" at us on infinite repeat at double speed. They left them on all night, and after the moon set Nissa started crying, hands clamped over her ears.

I didn't know what to do. I wanted to help but my hands wouldn't go, they just flapped around her like peafowl, and I probably said something dumb again.

Jace sat down with her. They talked a minute and his eyes flashed. She curled up in a big potted plant and didn't wake up until the sun fell on her.

I miss mom.

I missed her for a long time, but I got over it. Twelve years is a long time to walk around being a wreck. Which I guess is funny, since everyone probably thinks I'm a wreck all the time, but for like two years I couldn't even breathe.

Now she's back, somewhere up above me, just a little bit away. She's so busy fighting a war, I only see her—hear her—when she covers me with a blanket. She probably thinks I'm asleep because it's so late when she gets out of her meetings, but I'm always awake, turned away with my face in the pillow, holding my breath and waiting for her to sit down on the edge of the cot.

But she never does and I can't be *over it* anymore.

I want her to hug me like at the arena. To talk to me about anything that's not the Consulate for just ten minutes, to put her hands on my too-pale cheeks and *tsk* at me for getting sunburned when she doesn't. I want to smell spilled oil and electric burns on her coat. I want her to braid my hair, like she did before I took the pruning shears to my own head that summer it got super hot. I came down from the rafters and spun around all proud, enjoying the wind on the back of my neck, and she started crying. Then she got Nani Jalbala's old scissors and evened it out, and told me I looked great, real grown-up.

I want to tell her what I've done, what I made of myself, because she only knows the Chandra that screws up all the time.

The last time she saw me, I was screwing up. Bringing the Consuls down on us.

Getting dad killed.

Is that it? Does she blame me? Is that why she won't talk to me? I would, if I were her. I blame me.

That was what the Purifying Fire showed me, back on Regatha. When I last had nightmares. I thought, *I'm responsible, I did it, I screwed up and got everyone killed*. Dad. The villagers. Mom. That was why the cold of it stopped burning. Why the hiss of the flame whispered, "You can be forgiven." But I never forgave me.

It was a stupid fire anyways. You couldn't even roast nuts with it.

The deck creaks behind me. Footsteps. I swipe at my eyes because what if it's someone I don't know? Or worse, someone I know.

What if it's Nissa?

I haven't thought about what I did on Ravnica. Every time I do, I wanna curl up and pull a blanket over my head. She was nothing but nice to me and I—*It's just, you've been staring at me*. I watched her die a little inside.

My cheeks and hair ignite. I slap out the flames. The footsteps get closer, slower.

Then we got here, to Kaladesh, all I did was yell at her about my mom. I didn't even think about her. Why did she even *come*, after I made her so uncomfortable—

Oh *crap*. I hugged her when we were looking for mom. *Twice*. Without even thinking, because when do I ever? Even though I *know* how she twitches just when someone brushes past her. She must have been mentally clawing the ceiling. I'm such a—

"Chandra?" A big voice, pitched low, hesitant.

Oh. "Hey Gids."

He hangs himself over the rail an arm's length away, resting on big, muscly forearms. The slouch brings his eyes down level with my own. "How are you holding up?"

I look out across the streets. Except for panharmonicons, everything's still and empty. A hundred thousand people hide in their homes, waiting for the monsoon to break. Hot wind presses my hair back from my forehead. "...I'm fine."

A small breath escapes him, half laugh, half sigh. "Chandra, it's...This is none of my business. I know that. I'm sorry. You've had a lot of shocks. Coming home. Finding your mother alive...That's a *good* shock, but still a lot to adjust to. Then the man who—then a man tried to murder you. Now your home's in the middle of a civil war. That's more than anyone should have to deal with in two months."

"So you're saying I'm, what, *unstable*? That it?" Are my hands shaking? My hands are shaking. Damn it, stop that.

I feel big sympathetic Gideon eyes on my shoulder. His voice turns even quieter. Over the frenzied bridge of "The Gremlin's Wedding March" he rumbles, "I'm saying...you feel things very deeply. That's one of the things I—one of the things that's great about you. If you need someone to talk to, or just to vent at, I'm here, all right? Whenever."

He's so damn *sincere*. I liked that about him when we met. After I was done being mad at him, anyway. A very sincere, bossy, kind, preachy, thoughtful, annoying, adorable stick in the mud. With muscles

in all sorts of potentially interesting places. And eyes with a million colors, like a landscape by...some artist who's real good at landscapes. Also abs you could grate cheese on, which I totally did not think about running my hands over for like six months afterward, so far as he knows.

Feels like forever ago. Was I really just nineteen? Like, a kid? I wonder how old he was. Or is. Either'd be fine. I can do math; my mom's an engineer.

I yawn again, so hard my eyes tear up. I don't know why I say, "Gids, you remember when we met?" and look at him sidelong through my hair.

He looks up fast and opens his mouth, but stops and shakes his head. "...Very well."

"I've been thinking about it lately."

He looks out over the streets. "Why's that?"

"I've been dreaming again." I look away into the wind, and it stings my eyes.

He inhales, and tries to make it sound all casual-like. "I see." He hangs awkwardly over the rail, and scratches at his beard. "Like the one you had—?"

"On Diraden. Yeah." Diraden, where night was forever, and we slept in one sagging cot that smelled like mold in a rotting village full of jerkwads. I woke up sweating and panting and gritting my teeth so I didn't shriek from another dream about Bunarat burning. And his big arms locked around me, holding me awake in that horrible present and not the nightmare past, and he didn't let go until my shakes went away.

"Sorry," he says quietly, blushing at the deck. "I shouldn't have done that. Not without asking first. I just woke up, and you were...*hurting*."

"Yeah, I was." I punch his arm, but I'm not feeling it. It's more a tap. At least not a whiff. "If I hadn't been all right with it, you *better* believe I'd have told you. Then set you on fire."

"I was wondering why you seemed tired lately." He picks the peeling paint on the rail. A flake pops off and spins away on the wind. "You told me then that you came from a place where magic, especially fire magic, was illegal. That your family tried to hide it. That you were responsible for a village being burned, for your parents' deaths." He hunts for words. "You confessed...a shadow of the truth."

My brain brings old thoughts back, foggy and full of holes. A darkened cell, lit by shimmery moon-on-water light from spells that kept me from casting. *You face the things you've done*, he said, *and accept the weight of your responsibility for your deeds. Without lies, or excuses. What did you do that left you with ghosts to carry?*

Just for a breath, I'm back in that cell, feeling sick, ashamed. Wondering if there was a bucket I could puke into, and if not, where I could aim that would miss his shoes?

"I didn't know you, Gids. Not enough, not then. Everything I said was true, it just wasn't *all* the truth. I told you the important bits. The fire. The screams and—and the smells, and how it felt. How it was my fault. H-how I got them all killed." I clear my throat to hide the break in my voice, which he probably heard, but wouldn't ever say, because that's the sort of Gideon he is. I rub under my nose with a shaking hand, sniff, and wipe it off on my shawl.

He sighs, and slides his hand next to mine on the rail. Not quite touching. Just...offering. One part of me wants to grab it and hold on. "Well," he says, "what you admitted must have been enough. The Purifying Fire wanted acceptance of responsibility. Not all the i's dotted and t's crossed." He pauses. "At least, that's what they told me. I didn't walk through it like you did."

I crack a smile and reach up to ruffle his hair. I have to stand on tiptoes for it, and lemme tell you, that's not easy in armored boots. "A good guy like you wouldn't have had anything to worry about."

His arms tense. "I wish that were true." He glances at me, then turns his head aside, like a shy puppy. "I'm responsible for things I can't make up for."

My hand drifts under my nose, and I pretend to rub away a sneeze. My fingers smell like his hair. Like herbs that don't grow here. Is that what the wind smells like on Theros?

"I blew up a museum," I blurt. *WHAT?*

He looks back to me, wide-eyed. "*What?*"

Roll with it, Chandra. "I didn't mean to! When we met. On Kephalai. Remember? The Sanctum of Stars. Trying to steal the Dragon Scroll? You turned me in for it. Prison, snake-head guys, all that?"

He winces.

Wait, no, wrong direction, put the thopter in reverse, ARG! "You were right, though. When you said I was hurting innocents. I—I don't know about the *guards*. I don't trust guards. Not anymore, maybe not *ever*. But the Sanctum was all full of people, and—"

When the walls came down, I thought of all the people I'd seen inside. The grandmothers pointing to displays and saying I remember that, in those days, now here's a funny old story, in exactly the same way Mrs. Pashiri used to, and the children rolling their eyes, bouncing in their fraying shoes and looking for a place to run, someplace not dusty and faded but full of light and impossible things. The stones came down on all of them. My fault. Not what I wanted, but *my fault*. Another screw up.

I think I've been quiet too long, because he takes a step toward me. "Chandra." He does lay his hand over mine this time. It's warm and dry, rough with old callouses. "You didn't *mean* it."

"But I *did* it, Gids. There are these times when I'm sitting in the bath, and the memory comes up on me outta nowhere. I cringe and I say 'stupid,' like actually out loud, and then I sink under the water. And, um, usually the bath turns into a sauna at that point..." When was the last time I took a bath, anyway? After the last few weeks, I must smell like a goblin blacksmith. "You of all people—"

"I know." He takes his hand away and passes it through his hair, settling the bits I left standing up. I kinda want to ruffle it again. "Chandra, you didn't think about them at the time. Now you do. That you regret it now...it means you've grown. And that you're a good person. *Fundamentally*."

I turn away and pace across the deck. There's a potted ornamental jasmine by the stairs in full bloom. I pull off one white petal and twirl it between my fingers. "It means I'm a screw up, Gids."

He takes a breath, and winces again. "Sometimes," he says, "yes. *Sorry*. But you're always...doing your best. That doesn't always help, but it matters. It means you can make it right."

My lips twist. The petal tumbles from my fingers, carried away by the wind. "Anyway...my point is that whatever you've done, it can't be as bad as all the things *I've* done, and if the Purifying Fire would let someone like me through, someone like you—someone who thinks about the things they do, like, *chronically*—would have no problem, and if it couldn't see that it's *definitely* a stupid fire, and I'm glad I broke it." The words stop tumbling out, and I take a breath.

He looks at me dubiously. "*That* was your point?"

"Maybe not when I started talking, but that's what it is now." I fold my arms across my chest and make a fake frowny face up at him. "So do you feel better or not?"

Gids blinks. Then he laughs, broad and deep. “I actually do. Thanks.” He steps back and glances up the tower. “But I should get back upstairs. See how the defenses are shaping up. If you need anything, just ask, all right?”



Oath of Gideon | Art by Wesley Burt

I need my mom. I need to sit next to her, feel her arm and shoulder and hip bumping against me as she eats one-handed while scribbling equations. I need to eat methi thepla she made just for us, even though she always burns it a little. I need to rest my head on her shoulder. I need to feel her arms around me because it’s been so long.

He’s five steps away when I blurt out over the rail, “Wait! This is dumb, but I could use a—a hug. If you don’t mind. I know; that’s weird. I was just thinking how I hadn’t had any time with mom, not even *just ten minutes* , and—”

“Chandra.”

“You don’t have to. Hugs are super personal, right? I mean, you saved my life and all, but that’s not a hug. Anyone would save anyone, that’s just what you *do* . Maybe not Lili. And anyways I saved you back, so that doesn’t even count—”

“Chandra.”

“And I know *asking* for hugs isn’t normal. You’re supposed to *offer* them. There’s this moment when I’m looking at someone, and it’s like gravity or something. It’s like I just *know* , but I don’t know, you know? *Sorry* . This is all coming out wrong, and—”

“*Chandra* .”

Am I shaking again? I clench my twitching fingers. What the actual hell, Chandra? I swallow hard, wipe my eyes, and turn. He’s standing with arms wide, smiling. His fingers wiggle *come on, come on, you big silly* .

Right. Now I have to be cool. Walk over slow, like it doesn't matter *whoops* I'm already up against him with my arms around his waist. I'm absolutely sure that I didn't run over, so don't you tell me teleportation magic doesn't exist anymore.

He's so damn huge. My head fits under his chin. He smells like sweat and oil, the grime of a long day *lifting* things.

I burrow into his arms like a puppy, rest my cheek on his chest, and close my eyes. His heart pounds under my ear. He wraps himself completely around me, armor and all, breath tickling the top of my head.

It's been a long time since anyone held me like this. If Gids had done this four years ago, it would have made me feel tingly in all the places I like. Now it just feels...

...*Safe*.

There's a gentle clatter of porcelain.

I open one eye and peer over a bicep to see—*OH CRAP*.

I shove at Gids, but he's so big I stumble backward instead. His jaw drops, and he takes a step back, looking at me in horror. Oh no, Gids, you didn't do anything—

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

Nissa sets a plate of eggplant and potato curry on one of the benches, eyes down, careful, long fingers sliding porcelain across steel. There's a huge, perfectly ripe mango nestled in the crook of her arm. Her braid sways in the wind.

"You're not." I paw at the rail, grab, steady myself. "We were just talking, and—"

"Don't mind me, then." She pulls apart the stem of the mango—was she growing that out of her *clothes*?—and places it beside the plate. "I brought this in case you were hungry." She straightens and looks straight at me, calm, hands clasped before her. A million years of suspended green.

BLINK . BREATHE . Don't screw this up. Just have a normal conversation with her.

"Gids came down to see how I was, and we started talking, and there was this time he got me arrested for blowing up a museum—" *YOU ARE SCREWING THIS UP* —"but actually he didn't want to, and we ended up on a plane where we fought this creepy I'm-a-gentleman-m'lady vampire, and then I was thinking about my mom and—"

She lowers her eyes, lashes falling. "Tell me later, if you wish. Excuse me." She turns, framed by the ornamental jasmine. All its blooms have pulled tight, sealed and green.

How do I keep screwing up like this? Innistrad gone all explodey? Perfectly fine, thanks. Talking to Nissa? *Human trash fire*.

That can't be my hand falling on her shoulder, making her shudder at the pull, because I know better, don't I? "D-don't go," I stammer. "I mean, you're upset. I upset you."

"No?" she says, cautiously, testing the word. "*No* . There is...much I don't understand. But I'm not upset with you. Believe that."

She raises a hand, and gently peels my burning fingers from her shoulder. Hers are cool and smell of summer fruit, sunset bonfires, twilight rain. Or maybe I just imagine they do. "You needn't be concerned."

"*CHANDRA NALAAR!*"

It's probably real funny, the way we jump.

I should be more freaked out about freaking Nissa out by brushing her arm as I whirl around, but I'm too busy looking out across Ghirapur because "The Gremlin's Wedding March" has finally fallen silent and *I know that voice*.

"I know you can hear me." A deep rasp, magnified and tinny, bouncing off the stone and steel around us.

"Who is that?" Gids. He puts his shoulder in front of me, frowning out at the glittering roofs. His whippity-swords snake out.

I try to say "Baral," but my throat's full of dirty water.

"I was wondering. Have you told your friends the story? About how you got daddy killed? How you got mommy locked in a cell for five...long...years?"

Everything goes white. Sparks are flying from my eyes. I don't care.

"Mommy and I talked every day. Oh yes, we did. I reminded her of everything you did. Every day. Did she tell you?"

Mom?

"Maybe she was too ashamed."

No!

"Some days she cried. When I told her how your flames took daddy. How he died screaming, skin black and cracking. How he died cursing your birth."

"THAT'S A DAMN LIE!" It comes out shrill and ragged. The voice of an eleven-year-old.

Gideon's yelling up the tower. Something about spotters, thopters, I don't know. Lightning cracks above my head and puffs of dust rise from the rooftops across the road.

Baral's laughing. *"So many died that day, little monster."*

"I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna burn him." The words hiss through gritted teeth, falling like the stars from my eyes.



Exquisite Firecraft | Art by Chase Stone

“That’s what he wants.” The only thing I can hear apart from heart-thunder is Nissa. Why is she still here? Why would she stay?

“I can’t leave this.” My hands are balled up, glowing, wreathed in flame. “Don’t stop me. I can’t let him—”

In the corner of my eye, her hand hovers over my arm, not quite touching.

“I know,” she says. “I’ll stand with you.”

Gideon bellowed at the upper decks, “Everyone on alert! This could be a diversion!” He squinted up into the noon sun, caught the acknowledging waves. He turned back. “Chandra—”

Was gone.

Over the bray of amplified laughter, he heard the thunder of her boots on the stairs, the shriek of metal on metal when she slipped on corners taken too fast, curses echoing skyward.

“You should have stopped her!” He bolted to the rail and leaned over.

Nissa was on the stairs leading down, one foot halted in midair by his question. “Why?” she said.

He clenched his fists. “This is—She could get herself *killed*. Calling her out like that? He’s riling her up for an ambush. She’s not thinking, just feeling, and we should be the ones who...” His stomach pulled taut, stabbed by ice, suspended in free-fall. Why wasn’t he halfway down the stairs already?

Nissa’s head tilted to the side. “This is who she is, Gideon.”

Far below, a shock of flickering red flame leapt from the Hub, making his heart claw up his throat for long mid-air moments. Then she tumbled across the adjacent roof and staggered up to her feet, still snarling curses.

“Jura!” a voice from above, faint on the wind. “The Gearhulks are advancing on our lines!”

"I—" He was going after her. Wasn't he?

He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled the hot midday air in through his nose, slowly, focusing on the scents of oil and smoke. The tinny bleating of the man on the loudspeaker fell away. A tremor passed up from his feet, as a hollow boom sounded in the distance.

There comes a time, boy, Hixus' voice echoed forth from years long gone, *when you must choose between what you want to protect, and what you need to.*

He opened his eyes, fixed them on Nissa's endless ones, and exhaled through his mouth, forcing the air into words that tasted like ash; "Keep her safe." She nodded and disappeared.

He bolted up the stairs, and tried not to think about the fleeting heartbeats when he'd been privileged to hold a tiny, maddening, precious sun against his chest.

Baral's boots crunched into the pavement upon landing, driving the air out of his lungs. He was on his feet and running again in seconds. It was all going as planned.

He was already slowing, though. Panting, breaths like handfuls of needles heaving from his lungs. He'd never had to run in the armor before. At least not more than a few dozen steps. Just enough to get within arm's-length of whatever would-be mage thought their abilities gave them a range advantage.

He was old. Heavy. *Slow*.

He'd never recovered the feeling in his left arm. Oh, it hung at his side still, and after years of painful effort, it moved obediently again. But he'd never again be entirely sure he was holding a weapon or soup spoon tight enough. Once, in winter, his sleeve had caught on fire from standing too close to the barracks heater. All he could do was laugh as the already-ruined flesh charred and stank. It was too hilarious not to. He even wore the helmet less than he used to, in the years after the monster had burned half his face off. It had become another tool of intimidation, a reason for accused mages to flinch away.

She'd ruined him.

Baral clunked down the alleys—left, right, left again—in the order that Baan had insisted he repeat too damn many times on the flight in. Around him, the buildings were no longer new and bright, but trickled away in a slow decay of gravel and dust. Sweat pooled in his collar, hot breath thickened the air in his helmet.

Behind him, the Nalaar girl raged and cursed, random obscenities echoing along the stone alleys.

He grinned. She was taller than he remembered, but her brain seemed no bigger. Just as prone to screaming and throwing punches when staying quiet would be wiser. Blundering into one trap after another since she'd come home. That's why he'd win.

That's why he'd ruin her.

The location had been Baan's suggestion. A maze of old-construction stone buildings along the river, stripped and bare, their yards long dried up and blown away. Nothing *combustible* anywhere.

He swung around a corner, tipped up the filigree mesh of his helmet, and bellowed over his shoulder, "All that time your mother *suffered*. Thinking you were *dead*."

She sprinted around the far corner, wreathed in a crimson cometary nimbus. Lips pulled back from her teeth as she spread her fingers, stretched out her arm, and *shoved*.

The air between them ignited in a rush, a sucking roar he had to steady himself against the pull of. A curtain of white-gold fire rippled toward him like the Aradara Express.

He raised a single hand, fingers spread through a corona of frigid blue, and with a dismissive wave evaporated the blast. Stray embers tumbled along the road, finding no purchase among the dust and stones.

“And what were *you* doing while she rotted?” he sneered. “Off enjoying life?” He ducked around the corner as she stumbled and swore, sparks streaming from her flaming hair.

A high, giddy laugh of glee welled up from the pit of his stomach as he raced away from her, but he didn’t allow it past his teeth. He’d spent thirty years suppressing the things that bubbled up from within him.

The air reverberated with the whirl of thopter wings. Almost to the target site. His squad would be circling around behind the monster, ready to spring the—

He wheeled around the next corner and skidded to a halt.

The road was blocked by a wall of red-black brambles, hook-tipped thorns, and spreading emerald leaves.

That...wasn't here before.

He spun just in time to launch his armored boot into the girl’s stomach. She folded around it, retching.

He stumbled back and raised his sword as she vomited into the dirt. The flames enfolding her brightened to fever yellow as he charged forward, swinging the blade.

She swung her armored forearm into the blow, sparks flying as metal slid across metal.

Her left arm, wreathed in flame, swung around...a wide miss, passing behind him.

He almost laughed.

Then she spat bile on the road and lowered her left shoulder, slamming into his chest. Something popped. She gasped.

He stumbled backward into furious heat.

She set the thorns on fire!

With his dead left arm, he ripped the flaming cloak free off his pauldrons and dropped it in the street.

He needed to get around her. She couldn’t force him back into the blaze.

Thopter buzz set pebbles of old pavement into clattering migrations. “*Chief!*” a voice called down over the din, flat and tinny with mechanical amplification.

The girl gritted her teeth, sparks whirling from her eyes, and moved to shove her left arm at him—but she only gasped, eyes unfocused with pain. The arm dangled limp at her side.

There.

He swung his sword into her corona, twisting to strike at the limp arm. She skittered back, overcompensating. Not a trained fighter. Just an angry child.

A roiling ball of flame spun to life around her right fist, and...she went down hard, the dead weight of the limb pulling her down into the dust.

He knew how an arm that wouldn’t move affected balance. Yes, he certainly did.

Flickering thopter-wing shadows passed over him as he raised the sword. The metal had been forged for heat tolerance, but passing through the girl's yellow-white blaze had already left it radiant and warped. He drove it down at her neck.



Art by Min Yum



His arm was yanked to a halt, wouldn't move.

He glanced to it—*wrapped in a flaming vine?*—and that was all the mistake she needed. The fire held in her hand burst open, flaming petals licking across his armor, searing through his faceplate.

He blinked away smoke, and coughed a laugh. By the smell in his helmet, he'd just lost the other eyebrow. The girl was scrabbling away on her back, gasping with pain as her limp arm trailed behind her. Overhead, his squad's thopters arced in, trailing streamers of white vapor across the blue sky.

A trio of vines leapt up from the neighboring streets, raining debris. They snapped around the lead transport's cabin, pinning one of the fluttering wings. It slewed off balance, engine roaring, and slammed into the side of a building.

He blinked away from the fireball. The building collapsed, pulsing out a wave of pale dust that rattled across his armor.

His eyes leapt to the roofs. There!

"Two hundred meters south!" Baral bellowed over the din, waving toward the silhouette. *"Elf on the roof!"*

The second thopter spun, unleashing staggered forks of electricity. Thunder cracks rolled across the city.

A wall of black earth and plant life reared up behind the elf, cupping massive hands of wood and soil around her. The bolts dissipated across them. The plants lunged up, twining into a four-legged monstrosity that crouched protectively over its mistress.



Guardian of the Great Conduit | Art by Christine Choi

Roaring, the elemental beast bounded after the support thopter. The elf leapt gracefully to the road, sprinting to the Nalaar girl. She was staggering to her feet, red hair extinguished by pale dust, cheeks streaked with tears. Of pain or anger, he couldn't tell. It didn't matter.

This trap had failed. If the elf hadn't been here, he could've salvaged it, but—no time for that. He gestured to the final thopter and unlatched his warped gauntlet-blade, hurling it blindly at the two women.

The thopter came in low over the road, raising a sandstorm of pale chalk.

He armed and aimed his grapple. Baan leaned out of the cabin, frowning at the situation, then stumbled backward as Baral's hook slammed into the lift cage.

The elf had reached the girl, who stumbled toward her, nostrils flaring. “I can’t move my arm, *I can’t move my arm!*” she panted, eyes wide.

“It’s all right,” the elf said, running her hands over the shoulder. “Just dislocated. Let me...”

The grapple engaged, yanking him up as the Nalaar girl loosed a sharp yelp of pain.

Baral swung into the cabin as the pilot lifted away. “I want a Gearhulk on the elf. *Now!*” he snapped.

Baan’s eyes flickered over him. He grabbed a replacement gauntlet-blade off the rack and latched it fast, as casually as if he did it every day. When would he have learned that? “Chief Baral,” he shouted over the engine’s din, “we are not authorized to call in—”

“We have to crush them,” he growled. He clamped his dead left hand over the ceiling rail and leaned out into the wind, looking behind them. The other thopter was ascending, nose ducking as it accelerated toward—

The elf’s elemental leapt up from the streets and clawed it from the sky.

He swore at the fireball. *Just goddamn dirt!* “The Torrential could *wash* this damn thing away—”

“We are a *diversion!*” Baan insisted.

He stepped back from the edge, teeth bared, and loomed over the Minister. Baan stared up at him coolly. “You have no sensation in your left arm. I have determined three ways to use that knowledge to fully impair your movement.”

They glared at each other for long breaths.

“Four, now,” Baan said.

“Fine,” Baral snarled.

He tapped the pilot on the shoulder and made a circle-around hand gesture. As the thopter banked, he grabbed a megaphone off the equipment rack, and positioned himself by the bay door.

The Nalaar girl glared up, swiping at her eyes in the light of the burning wall of thorns. The elf stood by her side, one light hand on the injured shoulder.

“*Does she know, little pyromancer?*” he bellowed down at them. “*Did you tell her? About the village that burned because of you? The screams of the children?*”

The monster just shrieked, high and inarticulate, hair ablaze. A gout of white flame shot upward.

The thopter couldn’t evade in time.

He reached out and felt the red threads that bound the flames together. His fingers sank into the weave of it, flexed, ripped them apart. The flames scattered, impotent.

At his side, Baan stiffened.

The girl hollered obscenities up at them, constellations of sparks spinning from her eyes in the down-draft.

Baan yanked the megaphone to his mouth. “*Those devices are certified for external use only. A malfunction could seriously injure one’s sph—*”

She gestured up at him, emphatically.

“*I am only interested in the safety of all citizens,*” Baan said, huffily.

Baral slapped the megaphone out of the Minister's hands. It pinwheeled into empty space. "She's *diverted*. Get me someplace visible from the Aether Hub." He grinned. "Someplace we can inspire *mommy* to join us."

Baan held his appraising eyes on him for a moment, then looked away out of the cabin as they lifted away from the street. "The next phase of the operation has begun."

Baral followed his glance. High above them, the black specks of thopters lifted from the decks of *Skysovereign*.

Gideon shoved the old man clear and had just enough time to look up before the massive steel foot stamped down on his head.

Darkness.

Grinding. Metal on metal shrieks, vibrations through gravel and dirt.

Daylight, filtered through downward-spinning motes of dust.

He reached up, grabbed splintered pavement edges, and pulled himself out of the hole. The old man, sprawled by the side of the road, gaped at him. Gideon gave him a reassuring grin and shook the dirt out of his hair with one hand. "It's all right," he called, with forced cheer. "I'm indestructible." The ground shook as the Gearhulk's foot fell again. He'd have to thank Nissa for their practice back on Ravnica.

Nissa. *Chandra*. Where were they?

No time for that. On your feet, hoplite. Observe the situation. Keep moving. Turn the initiative.

He staggered to his feet, dust trailing from his clothes, and stumbled over the edge of the footprint-crater the Gearhulk had left in the pavement. A blast of air pushed him forward as the machine swung its hammer-arm in an underhand arc over his head, crumpling a fleetwheel cruiser and sending it careening down the street. Figures on the makeshift barricade down the block dove to either side. The cruiser smashed through the obstacle in a shriek of torn metal and bounced down the road, shredding scraps of brass and crystal.

Well, hoplite, it appears there's a giant mechanical man strolling down the street, malleting parked vehicles through the renegade positions ahead. There are four other giants out there, pressing in. Three on this side, two on the other. You don't know exactly where, though. City streets are canyons, and you're at the bottom of one. Tactically, the worst place to be. Water and fire flow downhill.

What do you do, Gideon? There are lives at stake, and you're standing in the open like a child in their first sparring match.

First, you need to understand what's going on.

He needed a view from high ground. It would take too long to get to a roof. The front line would have moved on. If Ajani were here, *he'd* be able to—

Focus on the possible.

The Gearhulk was the front line, and it towered over the roofs. He sprinted after it, timing the shudders of its ponderous footfalls. There were rungs leading up one of its legs, for maintenance or inspections.

He picked his rung, leapt—

—and missed—

—and barely had time to slap his hands around the next one down, fingers shining gold against the sting of it.

The Gearhulk's leg swung forward, leaving him dangling in midair, heels dragging in the dust.

Jace would have planned this better. *Chandra* could have planned this better.

With ponderous creaks, the Gearhulk settled its weight on the leg. It tilted up beneath him. He barely had time to get his feet under him.

It was a scramble to reach the machine's waist, pausing once more to simply hold on as the massive leg swung out from underneath him.

Four streets to the left, a dual-headed Gearhulk with tubes for arms was hosing down a crowd of renegades with jets of water. A wave of faceless, armored inspectors passed in its wake, swirling around the protestors blown off their feet, truncheons rising and falling with scarcely contained enthusiasm. Dazed and bloodied bodies were shoved back toward oversized prison transport vans.



Art by Daarken

A crew of three renegades scrambled across a roof as the water Gearhulk passed. They hurriedly set up a tubular device on a tripod at the edge of the roof. With a muffled thump, it rammed a spear through the thing's arm. For a moment, as they hesitated, the Gearhulk's operator's raised the arm to inspect the damage.

The arm burst open, water gushing in all directions. The harpoon crew scrambled away.

Looking across the collapsing renegade lines, Gideon could see the other two Gearhulks, far closer than he liked, hulls dotted with a barrage of popping explosions, lightning bolts, and flame jets. As he watched, a thopter hastily draped in renegade blues swerved in at one of them and drove itself into the shoulder mechanism. The monster's arms shuddered to a halt in mid-swing. Of the thopter pilot, there was no sign.

A gigantic bug landed on Gideon's shoulder.

He nearly fell off the ladder before he registered that it was wrought of brass and colored silk. “Hallo!” a tinny female voice piped from it. “You’re ‘Beefslab,’ yes?”

“Uh...”

“‘White Cat’ said that wasn’t your codename, but ‘Night Queen’ was *quite* insistent it should be.”

He looked past the metal insect. Far below, a dark-skinned elf waved from the street, hand held before her lips, a twin metal butterfly clinging to her wrist. She pointed to it, lips moving.

“Just talk into Mr. Wiggles,” his butterfly echoed, crackling.

“Hello?” he said carefully, waving down to her. The metal insect wagged its antennae.

“Yes, hallo! Call me ‘Shadowblayde.’ Spelled with a y, thank you ever so much I’m sure.” Gideon was clinging to the waist of a giant mechanical man, but this conversation had quickly become the most surreal thing to happen today. “With ‘Cloak Boy’ away, I’m running communications.”

“Where’s Liliana?” he asked the butterfly.

“*Night Queen*,” Shadowblayde’s voice said, firmly.

Three streets to the right, one of the other Gearhulks staggered. The living greenwood tree forming its spine shriveled, blackened. Explosive growths of pale fungus spotted its bark.

“Never mind,” he said. “I found her.”

The machine fell to one knee, keening like a wounded bear as the wood rotted away. Unsupported metal caved in on itself. Brackish liquid ran from every joint.

Liliana appeared on a rooftop in a flourish of dark silks, planted one high-laced boot on the parapet, and raised a gloved hand over her head. She snapped her fingers, and the Gearhulk fell to pieces at her feet.

A roar of delight went up from the renegades on the street. She curtsied, ostentatiously, and blew a kiss to the crowd.

“Out of curiosity, did Lili—did Night Queen choose all our codenames?”

“Oh, yes. She was ever so helpful.”

“That’s...great.” The Gearhulk shifted unexpectedly, groaning as the torso rotated. He ducked under a passing pipe and leaned out to see what was ahead.

It was approaching another parked vehicle, raising its hammer-arm to knock it toward the renegades down the street.

The crowds fleeing the water Gearhulk were piled up in front of the barricade now, fleeing through the hole left by the fleetwheel cruiser, the wave of faceless Consulate inspectors pressing them into the line of fire.

It would smash through them.

What are you going to do about it, hoplite?

He looked around the surfaces of the Gearhulk. Solid metal. No obvious mechanisms or weak points, save for the junction where the legs met the torso. There was a large gap between the armor plates, allowing the limbs to move. Within, he could see massive toothed gears whirling and grinding by the aetherblue light of power tubing.

He looked at his sural. Then back at the spinning gears.

To the mechanical butterfly, he said, "You're going to want to get Mr. Wiggles in the air."

"Right," the speaker squawked. A few whistled notes came through, and the insect fluttered off.

He looked into the gap between the armor, took a few rapid breaths, and dropped into the gears. The darkness flooded with golden light.

For too long, there was pain, noise, and motion.

Metal shrieked, the world jumped upward.

Falling sideways in golden darkness, a thousand tiny knives gnawing his legs and arms, pressing into his spine, filling his mouth with the tang of copper.

His head slammed into a wall.

Stillness.

Breaths echoed in the dark.

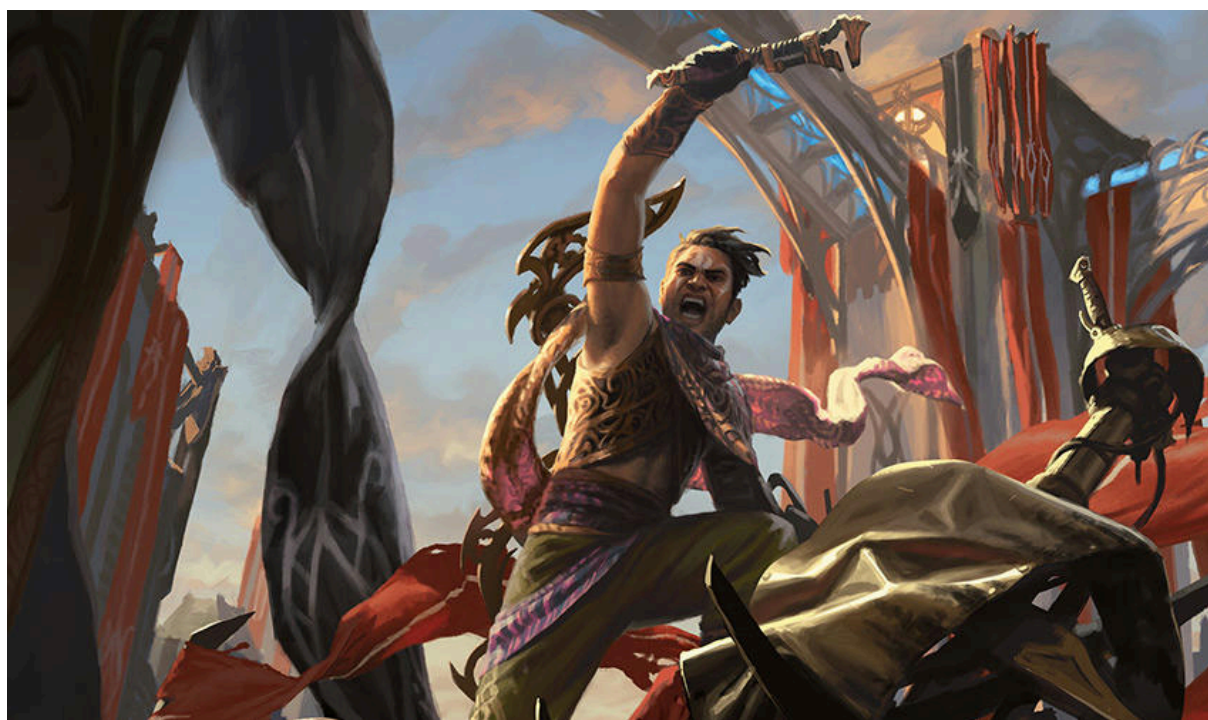
So...he was still breathing?

A portion of the darkness lifted away. Warm brilliance flooded his stinging eyes. *Chandra..?*

A grinning face eclipsed the sun. "Who's a big hero?" Shadowblayde-with-a-y.

She peeled him from a smoking tomb, the shattered remains of finely-wrought gears cascading off him as he stood. His breastplate, bent and punctured, swung from one shoulder strap for a moment, then clattered to the road.

The Gearhulk lay sprawled across the road, collapsed face-first in a building. The leg he'd just crawled out of had been shorn off. A legion of teenagers and mechanical creatures swarmed over the wreck, yanking out handfuls of salvage, trading bits and bobs among themselves.



Art by Winona Nelson

“Found ‘em, Miss Blayde!” a vedalken boy called, waving a six-fingered hand. Behind him, the war machine’s operators climbed out of a hatch, a team of dour-looking dwarves in oil-stained Consulate uniforms.

“Brilliant work, Beefslab,” Shadowblayde grinned, slapping him on one bare, bruised shoulder. “How many more times can you do that?”

Gideon looked across the streets at the three remaining Gearhulks, the sky full of ships. “Not enough.”

Liliana swished up, looked him slowly up and down, and languidly placed one hand on her hip. “...I see you lost your shirt.”

His eyes were drawn to a flock of Consulate thopters approaching the upper platforms of the Aether Hub, wheeling and circling like...

The next breath came in tight, lightheaded, like the last one before your head sinks underwater.

...like harpies over Akros.

“Get back to the Hub!” he shouted, breaking into a run. “*Double time!*”

I’m gonna kill him.

Tripping over stones. Curbs. Shoulder throbbing. Stomach cramping.

Stumbling. Knees and palms scraped raw. Back up! Go!

Not getting away. Never. Bastard.

World’s a tunnel. Dark except for the circling thopter. Laughter echoes from it. Words.

Mommy. Daddy. *Monster*. Dead. Suffer. Murder. *Monster*. Village. Fire. Children. *Monster*.

I don’t hear them anymore. Can’t assemble them into thoughts. Just sounds. Just *kindling*.

No tears left. Just fire, cold and white. Purifying.

I’ll burn the rot from him. From this whole city.

“Chandra, let me.” Nissa, breathless at my back.

She shouldn’t be here. Shouldn’t see me like this.

A massive root lifts from the ground in front of us, stretching up to the roof. The thopter settles ahead there, cackling.

I scramble up, cold dirt caking my burning fingers, boots sliding on damp wood. Raw fingers claw the edge of the roof, leaving bloody prints.

The sky is gigantic, and full of ships. The streets are on fire.

Metal giants wade through the flames, crowds fleeing before them. Thopters buzz in blackfly clouds, whirling around the Aether Hub. The upper decks loom over us.

Where mom is.

The thopters are landing there. Cracks and flashes. Figures running. Dropping.

...mom?

“Look. What. You. *Did*.”

Baral, his ruined face split with a shatter-toothed grin. The lifting thopter blows grit into my eyes. “Maybe it would have been different if you’d been there.” Sun gleams on the edge of his blade. He angles it into my face. “Or maybe...*more* of them would be dead.”

I feel the hair lifting off my scalp. Scalding, frigid light floods the roof.

“You’re not exactly *accurate*, after all. Are you, *monster*?”

“Screw you,” I whisper, and blow his face off.

My wall of white fire twirls away in the wind, scattering into flicks of candle flame.

“Don’t you get tired of that?” He lowers one glowing hand, and drops the visor of his helmet. “Even dogs know more tricks.”

The roof quakes. From one side, Nissa’s elemental thunders, leaps—

—and falls in a tumble of debris, black earth and gray stone, white wood and green leaves. Baral flicks a clod of soil off his shoulder with one glowing hand. “This is Ghirapur. Don’t bring mud to a bot fight.”

A wave of metal heaves up behind him and floods the roof. Brass wheels and steel legs, flame jet nozzles and sparking antennae.

“Find peace,” Nissa murmurs, her hand a warmth passing across my shoulders, there and gone.

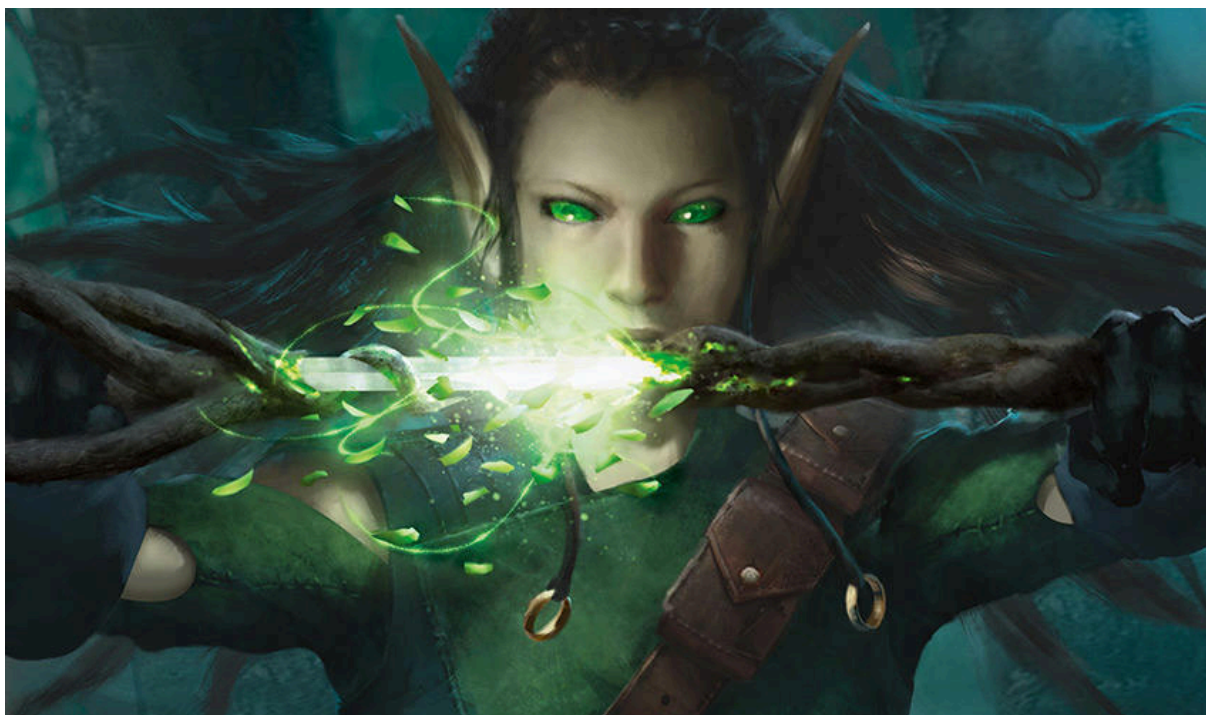
Then she’s midair, stabbing a thin blade through the optics of one automaton, rolling, jabbing an elbow into another, crunching a third with the heel of her hiking boot, slashing, jabbing. A windborne blossom of singing green steel and hard, sure muscle. Like she’d only been touching the ground as a courtesy.

Wait.

Hold up.

This is crazy.

Nissa has a *sword*?



Sword of the Animist | Art by Daniel Ljunggren

The bottom end of her staff rolls across the roof and thumps against my toes.

I blink, and Baral's in my face, swinging.

Left, right, crap, blast, stumble, back, back!

Sharp sunlight. Ice lashes my arm.

Stagger. On my knees. A puddle on the rooftop. A ripple of silver, red fractals exploding. I see his sword coming down on me, as an echo.

Roll!

Wind passes my ear.

I shove power into the puddle, and it explodes into a cloud. The dim figure of him snarls and staggers back, waving it away from his face.

I know what to do.

The roof sealant liquefies into steaming tar. He roars in pain, blade cutting ahead through the clouds.

Thopter-wing stutter overhead. Thunder cracks. Is Nissa all right? Where is—?

I recoil from sudden cloud-shadow. Stinging needles of ice rake across my brow.

Reflex, a firebolt back in the same direction. A blue pulse dissolves it into sparks.

He limps through the tar, laughing. The left half of the world dissolves into a smear of red. I swipe at it, but it doesn't go away. Just makes my hand slippery.

His blade is white from the air around me. Breath echoes from the filigree of his helmet.

The building rattles beneath us. He grunts and sways, but keeps coming. Far behind him, dad's ship rises alongside the Aether Hub, trailing torn boarding gantries and snapped anchor lines.

There's not enough air. Can't get enough. I'm staggering, wheezing. Have we been fighting hours? Minutes?

I pitch flames with my left hand. As he dispels it, I punch his stupid face with my right.

His stupid *metal-covered* face. I scream at the crunch.

"Idiot monster," he mutters, and kicks. Hard.

Pain explodes from my gut.

I retch into hot, stinking slime, struggling to inhale, every breath another endless agony. I'm not crying because *screw that guy*.

I need to get up.

He limps over, rasping, boots splashed black and steaming. He reeks of Innistrad in the aftermath, mounds of burning, lurid, warped flesh.

The air won't come. Nissa. Help.

Raises the sword.

I crawl. Help. Nissa.

The blade falls. I want to look away. I want to *move*.

CLANG.

I crack an eyelid to raining brass. A filigree bird, dented and shorn like my neck isn't. It rolls across the roof, scattering gears. Its whistles turn to sighs, then silence.

"Stay away from that child, you *son of a donkey!*" Mrs. Pashiri thunders.

I raise myself on trembling, bloody arms. She's on the Hub, a platform across from us, shaking her fist at Baral. Ajani's beside her, axe in hands, ears flat back and his good eye dilated into one enormous dead-black orb.



Ajani Unyielding | Art by Kieran Yanner

I can only puff weakly, sparks falling from my eyes.

The crowds on the Hub are running to *Heart of Kiran* 's gaping hatches. Half-fitted turrets spark and crack at ranks of faceless inspectors. Consulate thopters drop gleaming aerial torpedoes, coughing to life on wide contrails of hissing exhaust.

“Gunner!” Baral bellows up to his thopter, tossing aside his ruined blade. “Take out the lifecrafter!”

There’s a shriek in my head and maybe I let it out because he turns back to me, I’m on my feet and everything’s going bright blue-white, moonlight on a mirror, cloudless desert sky, and I send streams of eyestrain-bright flame up at the blurring wings and glinting brass—

Baral’s hands close around my fists.

Everything stops. Magic dies.

“Look what you did,” he shouts in my face. “*Watch!*” Mana is all around, but I can’t grab it. It wriggles like oil on water. I reach, and his hands make it slip away. He tries to bend my arms, to break me. “Even

daddy knew. When I shoved the blade under his ribs. I saw it in his eyes as he bled out. The *shame* of you.”

Forks of cracking white light stab at Hub.

Ajani is spitting rage, swinging as Mrs. Pashiri stumbles away from the rail. The thopter-lightning bounces away from his blades. Once. Twice.

“That’s the face,” Baral grins. His breath smells of cheap vendor meat and too much sugared chai, weeks of meals alone. My arms strain against him. “*Despair*. Just like when I had you in the arena, monster. My blade on your little neck.”

The third crack shatters the world.

Mrs. Pashiri seizes and topples, smoke-colored braids flying apart.

He laughs. “Is there *anyone* you haven’t killed?”

Somehow my bloody hands are at his throat, finding the gaps in the metal and pushing through, squeezing as hard as I can, digging in the ragged nails, bloody thumbs pressing into the bulge. I think I’m screaming. My throat is raw.

He slams his gauntleted hands against the sides of my head over and over, until I’m falling down a tunnel with only sparks at the end.

When I can hear something besides my heart, a tin voice is booming, “...under arrest for conspiracy, treason, and assault. Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head.”

Baral’s gagging and spitting into the congealing tar, straining to pull in air.

Overheard, a Consulate airship, a dozen cannons swiveling down at me.

I screwed up. Again. Everything is burning.

“Chandra.” Nissa is beside me, leaning on her blade. She’s scorched and bleeding, her braid half-un-done. Pulse-glowing shards of hot metal sizzle in the unbound waves. Jade spills from her eyes as she looks at me, trembling fingers hovering over the gash in my head.

“You need to go now,” I rasp, and get to my feet.

I’m not a monster.

But I can be.

I gather the air, set it alight, and *squeeze*. Between my hands, sparks ignite, blazing golden fish swarming. They shudder, frantic, turning arsenic-white. Like I’ve done a thousand times before.

Baral tips his dented helmet back. It clatters across the roof. He’s smiling. “I killed your daddy, renegade,” he says. “I killed your *auntie*.”

The wind’s growing. More air. More heat. Pin it down. Press until it can’t move. Until all the breath is gone. I grit my teeth. My light is arctic now, throwing sharp blue shadows.

“And now I’m going to kill you.” He pulls a dagger from his sash. A simple dagger, with old stains on the blade and a charred grip. “And the best part, the absolute *best* part, is that there’s nothing you can do about it.”

It’s so easy. I should’ve thought of it before. We tried it in Baral’s trap but I was too upset. Now everything’s clear. Blank, flat, and desperately clear.

“There *is* something I can do,” I tell him.

I can make amends. For Mrs. Pashiri. For dad. For mom. For the old women and little kids I killed in the Sanctum of Stars. For a lifetime of screwing up. All the awful things I've done. All the people I failed. The air between my hands is packed with stars, vibrating, superheated. Streaks of light scratch through my vision.

"...Something I can *always* do..."

I can take out Baral. The ships and the Gearhulks. Tezzeret and the Consuls. I could take out all of Ghirapur, if I want. It's so *easy*. I just have to bottle it up, and release. I just have to *let go*.

Because it doesn't matter anymore, does it? Everything's ruined.

Let it go.

Close your eyes.

Let it happen.

Let it be over.

Doesn't matter.

I close my aching eyes on Kaladesh, and whisper, "...I can *burn*."



Chandra's Fury | Art by Volkan Baga

Arms from behind. The scent of flowers, and a soft wind at my ear. "But not alone."

Nissa?

"I'll hurt you. Let me go."

Her arms squeeze tighter. "No."

"I can't do this anymore. Let me go." My stars burn the tears away, but my voice is high and wavering, the words tumbling over each other as I start to shudder. I'm falling apart. "Please just let me go."

"I can't. If you leave us like this, you'll have to take me too."

"That's not—" I can't see anything now. There's just light, and her voice.

"Don't go," she says.

Mrs. Pashiri spasms and falls, her braids in a tangle, eyes locked on me, willing me to run for safety. Dad crumples, hands clamped over the red hole in his stomach, eyes locked on me, willing me to run for safety. Dead because of me.

"Don't leave us," Nissa says, softly. "You're loved."

The sucking wind between my hands is pulling a sea from my eyes. Sparks, embers, wobbling saltwater.

I stop adding power. I stop squeezing. The stars slip and shiver between my hands. The light ripples, silver-blue sparks buzzing like angry flies, hissing like oil in a skillet.

Something's wrong.

The fire's gone strange. It's still getting hotter, collapsing inward. It's burning on its own, burning *itself*, without anything from me. I blink, and scratches of light claw through the brief dark.

It's still growing.

I bleed off the heat, careful, slow, but it snaps at me, eager to escape the trap I've made. A wisp of impossibly hot flame jets free. I clamp it down, press my hands close to the raging blue light. Baral gasps. Somewhere nearby, there's the shudder and grind of buildings crashing down.

"I can't do it," I pant. My heart's slamming against my bruised ribs. "It's wrong. It won't slow down."

"Chandra," she says. "Remember what it feels like to swim? You told me on Ravnica. Describe it to me again. Tell me how it felt to float. Just blue and air above you. Everything cool and still...?"

I close my eyes and I'm ten years old. The air is broiling and thick, too hot to sleep. Mom and dad are sprawled across the grass together, breathing slow, still touching in sleep despite the summer heat. I slip away and crawl down the mossy rocks. I slide in backward, and the water crawls through my frizzy hair, cool against my sweaty scalp. My throat constricts.

"There—there was a quarry we'd go to. Overgrown. Green all over. At night I'd go out and float. The stars would reflect in the water. White and blue and orange. Patches of green and rose, like ghosts far away. The ripples would echo off the rocks. The sound of my breaths would keep coming back, keep getting smaller. Like I was falling away from everything. If I laid still enough, it was like...I was in the middle of them. Like I was floating between stars."

"There's a lantern on the water, among the stars. It's the brightest thing you can see. Can you imagine that?"

One pure white torch, burning straight and true, casting painful angles of ice-shine across shadowed rocks. "Yes."

"That flame is growing smaller," Nissa whispers, like wind through leaves. "It's night. It's time for earthbound lights to dim. To let stars and ghosts illuminate. The water is lapping against you. It's cool on your skin. The light is fading."

The savage brilliance beyond my lids is dimming. I'm floating, eyes closed. When I breathe I catch the scents of pine and night flowers from her hair. I'm swaying. A light bobbing on stilling waters. Warm arms across my stomach keep me from drifting away.

"You're a lantern on the water," Nissa says, as she rocks me side to side, rolling my shoulders like spring tide. "But just a little one. A tiny flame, flickering in the night. Can you feel it? You're drifting. A precious light on endless water. And the stars are waiting for you."

The light flickers, and goes out.

Baral swore as the Nalaar girl collapsed back into the elf's arms. One of her eyes was bloodshot and sunken with fatigue, the other sealed with dried blood from the sword gash he'd left across her forehead. Her cheeks were sunburnt and tear-streaked.

"I can't stand up," she said, her voice thready and hoarse from screaming. "My legs...it's like Zendikar."

"Then I'll carry you," the elf said.

He'd almost had her. Wind up a monster until it's frantic with pain and fear, sure enough it will bite its own leg off. He'd made a hundred mages fall to pieces in the cells of the Dhund, in the forgotten dark where no one else knew to interfere.

"Fine." He limped toward them, favoring the leg she'd seared. Sometimes you just had to get your hands dirty. Like father, like daughter. He tightened his grip on the stained old blade. "All you have is fire. If you're not willing to burn, what are you going to do?" he sneered. "*Punch* me again?"

A tree slammed into him from the left.

Metal bars cracked across his chest, and something splintered.

He blinked away stars. Breath became a painful chore.

He was crumpled against the guardrail at the edge of the roof. On the far side, the elf now held the girl limp across her arms. Over them both towered her reconstituted elemental beast, flicking blood off a root-fist the size of a thopter. It shook itself, and the leaves on its back hissed like a furious tiger.

"*Leave*," the elf said coldly, and turned away.

The roar of the thopter descended behind him.

Boots clustered around his head.

Baan's voice came over the thrum of wings, precise and clinically distant. "Multiple broken ribs and a hairline fracture of the collarbone. Mild concussion. Damage to the trachea and larynx. Second degree burns on the back, face, and feet. Third degree burns across the left leg. A stretcher, if you please, inspectors." A chorus of guttural acknowledgements as Baral's squad snapped to.

Baan squatted beside his head, careful to keep his shoes clear of the blood. "This is why I insist on the proper installation of safety features. If that rail had not been there—"

"Shut up!" Baral snarled, then huffed out a shallow, helpless breath at the agony in his chest.

Baan's eyes narrowed, and he inhaled sharply. "Chief Baral," he said, crisply. "Your reports from twelve years ago claimed that Miss Nalaar and her parents died in an incident of arson, with her as the culpable party. According to your statements today—which I have recorded with *scrupulous* precision—you took Kiran Nalaar's life yourself, imprisoned Pia Nalaar without a trial, then attempted to turn their daughter's execution into some form of...arena event."

"The Nalaars were aether smugglers. The girl destroyed a foundry."

"Crimes for which they should have been tried and justly punished. However, neither are capital offenses."

"Damn you, Baan, she's a pyromancer!"

"She is a *citizen*."

"A monster!" he barked, and was left breathless by the words. "All mages are monsters," he whispered to the sky.

Baan sighed and tented his fingers, forearms resting across his knees. His face was grave, stained with nauseating pity. "Chief Inspector Dhiren Baral, I charge you with one count of murder—possibly with more yet to be uncovered—and one count of *attempted* murder. I charge you with one count of extra-judicial incarceration—again, possibly with more to be revealed. Finally, I charge you with multiple counts of falsification of the public record, with the express intention of obscuring your crimes.

"You are a disgrace to your uniform, and a disquieting aberration to the ideals the Consulate espouses. Though I personally find your offenses...vexing in the extreme, the law requires that even *you* must be judged in court. Be aware that your every statement from this point forward shall be entered into the official record as evidence."

"They're escaping," Baral rasped. "The elf and the pyromancer. You have to finish them."

Baan tilted his head. "Incorrect. Our mission is complete and successful. The Aether Hub has been regained. The remainder of our detachment shall now redeploy to defend it against the likely counter-attack. Will you come with me under arrest, or shall I leave you to engage in further pugilism with the shrubbery?"

The air flooded out of him. That was it, then. He lay back and looked at the towering clouds. "I won't forget this, Baan."

"Excellent. I do not care to repeat myself."

Gideon knelt and turned his back to her. "Climb up."

"You don't have to do this." Her voice was smaller than he'd ever heard it, low and lifeless.

"It's not a problem, Chandra. Big shoulders, you know. Plenty of room." He hoped it sounded as cheerful as he wanted it to.

Her weight settled across his upper back. He inhaled quickly and quietly as knees and elbows fell across the bruises on his torso. He snugged his forearms under her bare knees as thin arms encircled his shoulders. All her fingertips were burnt, her palms and knuckles wrapped with stained bandages. The forearms beneath his chin were laced with ugly cuts from flying steel and glass.

"All set?" he asked.

"Sure," she mumbled.

"*Up* we go," he grunted, staggering to his feet. She didn't weigh much, not really. He was just...sore. The throbbing fever-heat of her felt good against the bright red bruises hidden under his shirt.

He carried her down the halls of the abandoned apartment building. Crumbling, mold-damp walls were strung with erratic constellations of aetherblue light capsules.

Heart of Kiran had carried the escapees from the Aether Hub to the safety of Weldfast, solidly renegade territory. It now hung impossibly over a wide road, between tall and shambling steel workshops. Cars and trains passed under its bulk as welders in sling rigs cut away and replaced sections of damaged armor plate. A constant background din of thunder cracks from makeshift flak cannons warded away the Consulate skyships. At least it wasn't "The Gremlin's Wedding March."

A group of renegades were clustered in the hall ahead, whispering.

"...everything went wrong when the daughter..."

“...don’t know things would have been different...”

“...hasn’t Renegade Prime suffered enough?”

“...heard she watched it all from the Hub...”

They looked up as he approached, and fell falteringly silent under his glare. Chandra buried her face between his shoulders, arms squeezing tight, warm shudders of breath rolling down the back of his shirt.

They turned into the stairway, leaving the group behind. Halfway down, she pulled one hand back and traced warm fingers across his shoulders with a lightness, a gentleness, that made all the many hairs on his arms stand up. “Do you have these everywhere? The bruises, I mean? You look like you fell down a flight of punches.”

He laughed shortly, for his own benefit as much as for hers, the echoes off it scattering forlornly up and down the stairs. “Afraid so.”

“I thought you were indestructible.”

“I had to get creative. But I’m here, so technically I’m still not...uh, destruct-abled.” He turned in to the next floor down, what passed for a healer’s quarter.

“I don’t think that’s a word.”

“I’m sure Jace has six dictionaries memorized. When Captain Zev returns him, we’ll ask.” He nodded to the renegade minding the door ahead, who pulled it open for them.

Mrs. Pashiri lay on a sagging bed, hands clasped at her stomach, eyes closed, drawn and pale...but breathing. Ajani sat beside her, one massive hand covering both of hers, head bowed in concentration. A faint aura of silver light surrounded them both, ripples of power flowing from him to her.

Chandra shuddered at the sight. “I can’t—I can’t do this,” she whispered. “Take me back, Gids.”

Ajani’s light faded. He looked up and studied her, inhaling quietly through his nose. “You’re quite ill, Chandra,” he said.



Solidarity of Heroes | Art by Eric Deschamps

“What? I don’t feel—”

“You will, very soon. The damage is subtle, but widespread. And serious. You and Nissa both need care. Gideon, you’ll bring them later?”

He nodded. Chandra opened her mouth, but closed it without a word, and looked away. Nissa had carried her halfway across the city to the Weldfast, running most of the way, silent and watchful for Consulate inspectors. After handing her to Gideon, the elf had staggered to a spot of sunlit grass and collapsed into exhausted sleep.

Ajani stood and indicated the chair. “Please sit. She was asking for you earlier.”

Gideon dropped to one knee before the chair, and she slid back into it. Her hand trembled in the air over Mrs. Pashiri’s hands. “Is she...?”

“Grandmother will be fine, in time. She will not be slain while I am present.” Ajani paused and studied her. “This was not your fault, Chandra.”

She looked away to the far wall. “I...I know that.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “It is to be hoped that you do. But you still need to *hear* it.”

Her hand touched down on Mrs. Pashiri’s. “Would you like us to leave?” Gideon said.

Chandra’s fingers curled around the older woman’s. “I nearly got her killed today. Again. I haven’t even been home two months, and I almost killed her twice.” Tears swelled in her eyes, pulsing with the beat of her heart. “She covered for me the day I ran. Did I ever say? Let me hide in the place she worked. Distracted Baral and his men. And I never even asked her what happened when I got back. Like, did they put her in jail with mom?”

“No,” Ajani rumbled. “She went free. When your mother was released, they—”

“But I never *asked*!” she snarled, slamming a fist into her own knee. She wobbled to her feet, took a step toward the door, and collapsed. Ajani caught her with one arm. “Damn it!” she said, through gritted teeth. “I can’t even—I just...I wanna *leave*. I shouldn’t be here. I don’t deserve—”

A door slammed at the far end of the hallway. She looked up and gasped.

Mrs. Nalaar was walking towards them at a brisk pace, eyes fixed and piercing, scraps of old, water-crumpled paper flipping and swaying in her wake, smoke-streaked hair trailing behind her.

Gideon slid beside Chandra and let her grab his forearm. "I have her," he murmured to Ajani. The leonin nodded and withdrew.

"I screwed up," she whispered. "I always do. She's mad and she's got every right. I'm the worst, Gids. I don't know why you're even holding me off the floor."

Three unfair, uncertain, unforgivable words resonated in Gideon's mind. Words that, once loosed, couldn't be taken back.

"Talk to her," he said instead.

Chandra straightened as best she could, one trembling hand clamped tight around his arm, supporting her weight. She didn't look up, but watched the feet approaching.

"*Child*," Mrs. Nalaar said, in a voice high and tight as a lyre string.

"Mom, I—"

Mrs. Nalaar swept her into a fierce embrace, staggering her backward. "I can't lose you again." Her voice had gone husky and quavering. A small plaintive sound escaped Chandra.

She pulled back and looked Chandra in the eye, cupping dark hands on sunburnt cheeks, pressing her forehead to her daughter's as tears rolled across the old grief-lines etched in her face. "Do you hear me? *I can't*. It would break me. *I love you*."

Chandra's eyes spilled. "If you start crying, I'll start crying," she sobbed, the corners of her mouth crumpling.

Gideon closed the door behind him, ground the heels of his hands into his own stinging eyes, and glanced at Ajani. "Mrs. Pashiri will be all right?"

He'd never gotten the knack of reading leonin expressions, but it seemed as if the other man smiled. "Hearing this is better healing than anything magic offers."

"But she's unconscious."

Ajani's tail swayed horizontally, dismissively. "Truer things are sometimes heard in sleep."

A clatter of boots stormed down the hallway; a crowd of renegades in ersatz uniforms, arguing among themselves about checklists, ordnance, and positions. Gideon and Ajani exchanged wry looks, then imperceptible shrugs, then arranged themselves in front of the door, arms folded, broad shoulders blocking any access.

The dwarf in the lead had the harried look of a clerk. "We need to talk to Renegade Prime, immediately," the man grumped. "It's urge—"

Gideon silenced him with one hand and a shake of his head. "In just ten minutes."