

# Release

## Chris L'Etoile

From set *Kaladesh*

*Twelve years after she watched her parents die, Chandra Nalaar returned home to Kaladesh. She found her mother had survived...but Pia Nalaar, now a leader of the renegade movement, was arrested by the ruling Consulate at the command of the Planeswalker Tezzeret. Chandra tracked her mother with the aid of Nissa Revane and Mrs. Pashiri, but all three found themselves trapped by the cruel Baral.*

*Sealed in a magic-proof chamber filling with poison, the only possible escape is to planeswalk. But Chandra will not leave Mrs. Pashiri...and Nissa finds she cannot leave Chandra.*

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He was still getting used to the hands. That's why he almost fell off the final roof.

The mechanical fingers Grandmother had provided were strong, and surprisingly responsive. Nearly like wearing gloves. But like a hand in a glove, their grip was different. He had to consciously remember to use less pressure while holding a glass, and more when jumping across alley roofs.

After the wind of his passage had fallen silent, after his feet had silently bounced him to a stop against the faded dust of the bricks, he felt his weight shifting badly. The ledge was sliding away. His fingers—the real ones—clenched within the encasing gauntlets. With silent efficiency, the mechanical fingers tensed, digging into masonry. He felt the balance steady, and swung his legs up over the lip of the roof with a rustle of wind-snapped cloth. Azure sky and towering chiaroscuro afternoon clouds wheeled past his vision.

It had taken only a breath.

He paused, listening, smelling the wind. A dozen aromatic spices he'd had no names for five months ago wafted from the kitchens below. He now knew them as cardamom, turmeric, cloves, cumin, and others. Most people would scent no more than those, overpowering as they were. Beneath them, he caught sun-hot stone and brass, the musty scent of old oil, and the sweat of a dozen Consulate inspectors.

The hummingbird buzz of surveillance thopter wings throbbed down from overhead. A trickle of gravel tumbled from the holes his metal fingers had left, clattering across the alley floor.

A rustle of fabric. "This place is falling apart." One of the inspectors, her voice echoing off brick walls and cobble pavement. "The Consuls should knock it down and build over."

Another voice, male: "Maybe they will. I heard urban funds were tied up building venues for the Fair..."

Satisfied they found nothing amiss, he padded silently to the far side of the roof and scanned the wall below. Balcony, balcony, rain spout, awning—would that support his weight? Maybe the street lamp instead. Then the wall, finally the street. He was on the ground in a few breaths, metal-clad fingers pulling the borrowed cloak closed.

He looked down at the glittering brass gauntlets. Only the hands were visible from the flowing sleeves of his cloak, but they extended up past his elbows. They'd been crafted by the Glint-Sleeves, a group that specialized in such bodily attachments. Grandmother had them made for him. They would not be

questioned here. The cloak she'd made herself, using cunning devices that spun and ticked. "That one you wear is such a bore! That makes you stand out in a crowd even more, you know." He'd held the bolts of silk for her, answering questions of color and pattern with respectful disinterest.

He settled his shoulders, hunched over, and slid into the muttering crowd, listening, ignoring the heavy reek of nervous sweat.

"...what are they doing...?"

"...been in there a long time..."

"...said the renegades have been setting traps..."

"...papa, when can we go back...?"

"...never seen so many..."

From the shadows of his cloak, he observed the clockwork patterns of the orbiting thopters and the irregular pacing of humans and vedalken in Consulate inspectors' uniforms. Grandmother's building was surrounded.

He slipped into another alley, and ascended back to the rooftops. He rested against a shack packed with gardening tools to review the memory. The gold one passed around the back every twenty-second breath, the orange passed behind the building to sunset every fortieth...The scents of the residents' spice garden crowded his nostrils.

It could be done.

He waited, listening to the heartbeats of the thopters cascading from overhead.

*Now.*

He rolled, threw himself across the roof, pushed off.

The landing pressed the air from his lungs.

Sprinting now, zagging around a skylight, zigging around a chimney.

The pulsing of wings thundered off the brickwork, echoes scattering. Moments left.

Grandmother's building was the tallest on the block. He leapt upwards, extending the metal gauntlets over his head, the bright blue and gold of his cloak snapping behind him...

His brass fingers locked over the lip at the roof's edge. His oversize boots touched softly against the brick.

He grunted—so loud!—as he pulled himself up and over.

He lay there for heartbeats, breathing through his mouth, forcing the air to pass slow and quiet, listening for a change in the thopters' patterns, or a cry from the street.

Nothing.

Grandmother had a terrace on the far side of the building, facing the Consulate's towering Aether Spire. She had her own names for the edifice, the kindest of which was "eyesore," and the rudest of which involved an escalating series of shockingly specific scatological references. He sniffed over the edge. Only her orchids; nothing that suggested the immediate presence of inspectors.

He dropped silently among the plants and slid into her home. *Forgive this trespass.*

He crouched, listening, as the wind folded her faded linen curtains around him. Two voices. No...three. One with a tone of crisp command. All down the hall, in her sleeping chamber. The apartment had

been rudely searched, the contents of the old wooden drawers tossed across the painted tile floor, the couch pillows disemboweled.

He moved silently across the tile, careful to avoid stirring the contents of the spilled drawers, listening to the conversation in the other room.

A woman, her voice deep and serious: "You checked that closet?"

A young man, querulous: "Of *course* I checked the closet. Nothing."

The third voice, male and sharp: "There has to be *something*. Some *proof*. She's stood beside the heart of the movement for over a decade. She couldn't keep *all* those secrets in her head. Why don't you two...I don't know. Go search the parlor again."

Footsteps in the hall. "You hear that Rashmi made it into the next round?" the young man said. The cracked-metal scent of aether-charged air wafted in their wake. Armed, of course. His voice pitched downwards with doubt; "Doesn't seem to be much use for a vase teleporter."

"You have to think of the long-term implications," the woman replied, carelessly. Glass burst and scampered from under her boot, and she swore under her breath. "Today vases, tomorrow gearhulks..."

He placed his feet precisely, rolling them to avoid any sound, gliding down the hall and into the parlor. The inspectors stood beside each other, surveying the mess they'd made in matching red-and-orange uniforms. Hissing black metal artifacts hung from their belts.

"Did you see her pet?" the young man asked.

"Doesn't have one," the woman answered. "She's a lifecrafter. Makes her own." Her scarred hands described bird-shapes in the air.

He moved swift and silent across the tile, extending his arms as if to embrace the intruders, the wind gathering under the hood of his cloak.

The boy started to turn, brows furrowed. "...But there's white fur all over the couch."

The shadow of him fell across the boy's face. He twitched, hands moving to his scabbard, eyes widening as they focused.

His metal-shrouded hands caught and knocked their heads together.

He winced at the impact of bone on bone as the inspectors collapsed in a pile of breath and limbs. *The headache you will share is not to be envied.*

Their supervisor's voice floated down the hall. "Basani? What was that?"

He slid to a position near the door.

"Basani?" Footsteps thundered down the hall.

Red and orange silks. Golden metal. Ivory linen. Before he'd even assembled the blur of colors into *man*, the brass fingers had closed on his neck and lifted him off the floor. Old instincts.

The man wheezed, fingers flailing at the instruments on his belt.

He slapped the artifacts away with his free hand, wheeled the man around, slammed his back against the nearest wall. "Good afternoon."

The man clawed at his throat, mouth working silently.

"Apologies," he said, loosening his grip slightly. "These are not my usual hands." The man wheezed a moment, the stink of him increasing. "You smell of fear," he continued, cocking his head to the side. "Scared?"

"Yes," the supervisor gasped, wide eyes searching the shadows of his hood.

"Good," he rumbled. He let the man sweat for two breaths before asking, "Where is Grandmother Pashiri?"

"Custody. By now," he gawped like a fish pulled into the unbearable desert above its world. "Trap. She's renegade."

He'd hoped she'd escaped, that they'd come here searching for her. But no; they had her, and came seeking something to justify it. "What manner of snare?" he said.

"Was looking. For someone. Set word. We had. Them."

Evasive. He lifted the supervisor another fist off the floor. "*Who?*"

"Renegade. Prime." The man shuddered in his grip, gagging, the thwarted need to cough overtaking him.

Grandmother often spoke of Renegade Prime, but only by the false-name she affected. He'd met her but once. A woman of noble mien, with distant eyes and a spine made of such iron that it nearly hid the weights bending her shoulders.

"Where is this trap?"

The supervisor jerked his head side to side. "Don't—don't know!"

"Too bad."

His eyes widened, pupils swelling like black pits. "Going to. Kill me?"

"I don't kill." He cuffed the man across the head with his free hand, knocking him insensate, and let him drop to the tiles. "Not anymore."

He returned to Grandmother's terrace and carefully slid the potted orchids aside. If they sought to lure her, she'd have left the building of her own free will. That was something he could use. He closed his eyes and breathed.

The air was a cacophony. He concentrated, tuning out the spices, the metals, the worried crowds, the omnipresent lightning-crack scent of aether-fumes that swirled through the city.

There.

Just a whisper from the street below; summer fruits, roses, hyacinth, and honey. The distinctive at-tar Grandmother wore. Nearly impossible to find anymore, she'd told him, with stubborn pride. Even fainter, the machine oil and hot brass of the mechanical bird that perched on her shoulder piece to sing coded messages.

The back alley was clear, for the moment. No telling how long it would stay that way. He vaulted the rail, letting the air catch in Grandmother's cloak, and rolled the landing.

The whisper-scent led toward the lowering sun. He moved quickly along the winding streets, nostrils flaring at every breath, doves and tailorbirds fluttering at his passage.

It was a different kind of jungle, but he was a tracker.

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## Six Months Ago

The boy squeezed his eyes closed, placed his hands over his face, and counted. “Ichi, ni...”

Giggles all around, and the floor bounced from the pounding of bodies scattering in all directions. He focused on the sounds, listening to the fall of bare feet on wood and reed. His ears were better than most. “...san, shi...”

He was bad at the game. The littlest and slowest. But he only had to catch one. Just one, and that would be enough. Just one, and the others would laugh at *them* instead. “...go, roku...”

A splash? Sounded like someone was in the pond. That was *cheating*. He couldn't go in the garden. Not like the others. When the rest spilled out to laugh in the sun, he had to sit on the porch and watch, dangling his heavy feet in the cool spring mists. “...shichi, hachi...”

They had to make the rule just for him, when he was it. But he was the littlest and slowest. He was it an awful lot. “...kyu, *ju!*”

He opened his eyes to the bright library, sun shining warm and gold through the paper screens, falling on stacks of books and rustling piles of scrolls. “Ready or not, here's I come!” he hollered. The first thing he did was step through the sliding door to the porch, looking to the cheaty pond and squinting against the light.



Oboro, Palace in the Clouds | Art by Rob Alexander

Just a passing crane, raising its head from the water to gaze at his noise. The mist of the garden stirred and rolled in the wind. Wooden wind chimes tinkled and clicked from the roof, big-headed rain charms swaying. Pink blossom petals swirled around his toes.

He turned and padded back into the house, scratching his side, trying to think about the foot noises. He was in the Sixth Library. It sounded like cousin Umeyo went to the *Third* Library, but Ume was nice. She let him take tooth-stinging bites of her shaved ices, and rubbed his head before she went to bed. So she could have the Third Library, and he'd go anywhere else. Like maybe the Tenth Library, where big brother Hiroku usually went, because that was where his favoritest book was, the one about the field mices and the crows, and Hiro didn't care much about hide and seek anyways.

He padded down the hall through slanting rays of gold, trying to be the quietest version of himself.

A blast of wind flooded from the right, snapping the paper walls taut. The entry room! Someone must have opened the outside door.

He spun and threw the sliding door open. "I *gots* ya!" he yelled.

The outside door was still closed. A pale giant stared down at him. One blue eye blinked. "You certainly do, small hunter," he rumbled.

He should say hello now.

They told him he should bow and say "Welcome to our house."

What's your name. Can I announce you. Have you traveled far. Do you need slippers.

The giant's feet were bigger than his whole entire head, and ended with claws the size of fingers.

The giant crouched before him, and was still twice his height. He smelled of summer grass and strange trees. His blue eye was rimmed with red, like Hiroku's when he stayed up too late reading. Where the other eye should be was just a scar. "I don't think we've met," he said. His teeth were real pointy, and there were way too many of them.

There were footsteps behind him, making the planks of the hall squeak, but he didn't take his eyes off the giant, because what if he turned back and the teeth had come closer?

The giant's sky-colored eye looked him up and down. "You're shaking."

"*MISTER CAT!*" They both jumped at the yell from behind his ear. Big sister Rumiyo's voice. Feet pounded away down the hall. "Ma-*maaaaa!* Mister Cat is back!"

The giant smiled past his shoulder. "Rumi is as loud as ever." He pushed back a step and sat cross-legged, resting his wrists on his knees. He bowed his head. "No harm will come to you from these hands."

He took a step back anyway.

"Nashi?"

He hadn't heard footsteps, because she was big and didn't touch the ground anymore, unless she wanted to. But he could feel the fall of her shadow in the hall, and darted behind her legs. "What is—ah. Welcome back to Kamigawa, my friend," she said.

He poked his nose around the turquoise silk of her robe. The pale giant had uncurled from his sitting position and bowed with great respect. "It is good to see you again, Tamiyo."

She turned from the giant to smile down at him, tucking one long ear over her shoulder. "This is Ajani. He's part of our story-circle." Her voice was like one of the porcelain vases, cool and shining. "Like Narset? He can walk behind the air too."

Narset told stories that moved in long, rambling circles, and would sprawl on the roof to watch the clouds with him. She laughed at all of his jokes, and none of his words. Narset liked stories about dragons the best.

Tamiyo laid a hand on his head. "Ajani, this is Nashi. He's part of our family now."

The giant—Ajani—bowed again. "Honor to you."

He stayed behind Tamiyo's legs, but bowed back, the way she'd taught him to. "And to y—"

"*MISTER CAT!*" an ivory blur whizzed past his nose.

Ajani snapped around and *just* managed to catch it in his massive arms. “Oof! Hello, Rumi.”

Her gap-toothed grin lit the room. “You been gone too long.” Behind him, the planks of the hall thundered as siblings and cousins came running, jumping, skipping, and occasionally floating. Rumi reached up to ruffle Ajani’s fur. “I bet you got *stupidulous* stories!”

“Ajani’s back!”

“Tell us about the dragon again!”

“I want to hear about the hole in the world!”

Moonfolk children swarmed around Ajani’s legs, touching his pale fur, his vast and gleaming axe, the long white cloak he wore. Hiroku was the tallest, but only came up to the giant’s chest. Rumi, still perched on his arm, looked down and scolded the others.

Tamiyo clapped her hands twice. “Enough!”

“...and *that’s* why you all gotta listen to me!—oh.” Rumi’s voice surfaced as the clamor died.

“Ajani is a guest. It is impolite to make demands of him.” Tamiyo clasped her hands at her stomach as he lowered Rumi to the floor. “He has travelled far to visit us. Rumi, tell your father to prepare a welcoming meal. The rest of you may help.”

“Well he can’t leave before stories,” Rumi said. She crossed her arms and stuck out her chin. “That’s an *ironclad rule*, mama. If you get to go have adventures, you gotta tell ‘em when you get back.”

Tamiyo looked to Ajani, lips pressed into a stern line, eyes smiling. “She takes after her father.”

“Of course,” the giant said, politely. He looked down at the crowd and placed a hand over his chest. “There will be no departure without a story.”

Everyone still grumbled as they trickled out.

“Come on, Nashi.” Cousin Ume took his hand in hers, lavender eyes huge and excited. “You can roll rice balls with me.”

“All right,” he said, and let her pull him along. He took a last look over his shoulder as they pelted down the hall together.

Tamiyo placed her hand on Ajani’s arm. She wore a face he’d only ever seen her show Genku, late at night, when everyone was supposed to be asleep. “You’ve been away for months,” she said, nearly below hearing. “Where is Elspeth?”

The giant’s neck bent like a willow in the rain. The brightness of his eye closed. “She’s...not coming.” Ume pulled him around the corner.

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The scent had led Ajani to still more inspectors.

He perched on the edge of a gleaming brass tower as they milled below, carefully disassembling every piece of machinery they could find. Like ants, they swarmed at the edges of things far larger than themselves, carefully snipping off minute portions to carry off and place somewhere no one would ever look at them again.

The miasma of a battle still floated up; the ever-present lightning-scent of aether and the grit of burnt metal.

A slight pressure settled against the back of his cloak, just hard enough for him to know it as the point of a blade. "You lost, then?" A musical female voice, faintly amused.

Remarkable. He hadn't heard or smelled a thing. Whoever she was, she was no amateur stalker.

He shifted his weight, slowly, slightly— "Planning to jump?" The blade tip poke-poked him playfully. "Easier ways to die, you want my thoughts on it. If you dance among the aether-streams, you'll only curl your hair."

He relaxed. It was a phrase Grandmother's friends used to identify each other, a veiled reference to the heraldry used by the Consuls. She'd told him the proper response. "Better to kick off your shoes," he rumbled, "and let it curl your toes." A reference to the renegade's inversion of the symbol.

"Ah, excellent!" the blade pulled away. "Begging your pardon, friend. You can see we've had a poor day of it."

He was about to turn when an elf plopped down beside him, dangling her legs over the edge of the roof. She looked to be in her late teens, but an elf could have such an appearance and still be far older than him. Her garb was a haze of dark violets and greys, adorned with a tremendously excessive number of pouches and belts. Dark metal bands contained a cascade of sable braids that probably fell to her waist when unbound. She smelled of almonds, strong black chai, and sweat.

"Quite the show, isn't it?" she peered down at the Inspectors, kicking her feet back and forth like a restless child. A half-dozen tiny metal insects clung to the shoulders of her cloak; brass butterflies fanning silk wings in a cunning imitation of life; spiders of dark-tempered steel that sat perfectly still save for their restless eyes. Living blooms, violet and indigo, pushed out from between their metal ribs.

"What do they seek?" he asked.

"Who's to say?" the elf said, carelessly. "Booby traps, mayhaps?" She trilled a songbird laugh. "*That* would be a lark, wouldn't it just? All this time, looking for something not a one of us would ever use?" She turned merry silver-gray eyes to him. "You can call me 'Shadowblade,' by the by. With a Y in the 'blade.'"

"*Shadowblayde*?" he echoed, incredulously.

She beamed. "Isn't it just a marvelous codename?"

"I...can see you like it," he said, diplomatically. Grandmother had mentioned a talented young life-crafter, one of the city-dwelling Vahadar elves. A prodigy, she said, whose mechanical insects snared and dismantled the Consuls' surveillance thopters. But when he'd asked the prodigy's name, Grandmother had only rolled her eyes.

"Came up with it myself, don't you know. I think it sounds *terribly* dashing." She peered into the shadows of his cloak, and he quickly turned away, tugging the cowl down with his brass hands. "Ah, a man of mystery, eh?" she nudged her elbow into his side. "Brilliant gimmick."

He cleared his throat. "Where is Grandmother?"

Her smile faded. After a moment, she spoke again, and her voice was quieter— *older* . "Can't say as I know. I came here looking for Renegade Prime. She was overdue." One hand went to her mouth, and she nibbled an already quick-bitten nail. "If she was here, I think...the Consuls may have snatched them."

"You're right. I asked an inspector occupying her home."

One of her eyebrows floated skyward. "You *asked* ?"



"Persuasion was needed," he said, pulling one of the metal gauntlets into a fist. "I was hoping to see where Grandmother had been taken from here. The inspectors have confused the trail."

"Hum, hum, hum," Shadowblayde said, thoughtfully. He blinked. She'd actually *said* the words? "There's a renegade safe house nearabouts. Anyone who made it out of this afternoon's mess were probably bundled away there. Let's go ask around."

He inclined his head. "I would be grateful."

She jumped to her feet and brushed off the back of her pants. "Can you keep up if I jump along rooftops and suchlike?" Her voice had brightened again, her worry a high cloud swiftly passing the face of the sun.

Under the hood, he smiled. "Try me."

"Brilliant." She turned to one of the mechanical butterflies on her shoulder, and whistled six notes. To another ear, it might have sounded like a bird call. The metal insect fluttered off and away, following a looping and erratic course over the milling Inspectors. "Just to keep an eye on things here," she winked. "Let's go." And she bolted like an elk, leaping gracefully to the next roof.

By the time he was on his feet, she'd bounced two buildings away and was unsuccessfully stifling giggles. He squinted at the gaps, carefully. With one eye, judging long distances was a matter of intuition, inference, and experience. He got a running start, pushed off, and landed beside her.

Her moonlight eyes curved upward in a smile. "Strong legs, I see."

She led him across sun-scalded rooftops, under lines of drying linen, around chimneys, up piles of debris and crumbling stairs, and over streets choked with a thousand milling lives. It was a roundabout path, spiraling outward and back again. Good. That meant she didn't fully trust him; anyone without his memory and sense of place wouldn't have been able to find their destination again.

They descended into the shadows of an apartment complex, its roof a splinted hole, its top story a shimmering lake of shallow, brackish water. The walls downstairs were stained with black and green columns of slowly consuming life. The aether-lights along the stairwells were dark and cold. His eye had no trouble with the gloom, but Shadowblayde produced a glowing blue stick from one of her many pockets.

"I didn't know such places existed," he murmured into the funeral silence. "From above, all of Ghirapur seems to shine."

"Harrumph," she said, grumpily.

She'd actually said *harrumph*. "Do you read a great deal?" he asked.

She glanced at him in puzzlement. "Bit too much, my mum used to say. Why?"

"No reason."

Their path was blocked by a door, held shut by a complicated, humming artifact. "Six months ago, this whole block still had power." Shadowblayde paused, eyes fluttering closed, and rapidly mimed a series of motions in midair before applying them to the mechanism's controls. The hum quieted and the door sagged open. "Then the Consulate decided it was an 'under-utilized neighborhood.' They cut off the aether to power Inventor's Fair construction." Her mouth twisted as she closed the door behind them. "Funny how all the 'under-utilized neighborhoods' just *happen* to be the ones renegades live in. But they *swear* they'll pipe it back down at the end of the month," she rolled her eyes.

He smelled the fear and stress before he heard the murmur of conversation. When they passed around the corner, the sound stilled.

"Just me," Shadowblayde waved. "Anyone seen Mrs. Pashiri today? We think she was with Renegade Prime."

An vedalken boy appeared from nowhere and attached himself to Shadowblayde's arm. "Va—!" he began.

"*Shadowblayde!*" the elf hissed.

The vedalken backed up a step, eyes flickering between the elf and her cloaked companion. "Um, yes. Miss Blayde. I mean, Shadow. *Ma'am*. I'm...glad you're all right." His young eyes glistened with dewy admiration.

The elf puffed up, and balled her fists on her hips. "No bumble-thumb Consulate inspector could nick the wily Shadowblayde!" she declared.

"Excuse me?" a human woman in a singed gold and azure robe stood, wincing when she put weight on her left leg. She had a magnificent mane or hair—not flat and trailing, not tied up in knots. It rose tall and proud. "I was with Renegade Prime. We separated, but I was on my way to meet her when..." She trailed off, agitated, smelling of bitter exhaustion and acrid fear.

He stepped toward her, lowering his shoulders and stooping. "Please. Can you tell me what you saw, Miss..?"

"Tamni," she said. "I, uh...when I got there, the Consulate had her surrounded. One of them had her by the arm. He had a false limb. Not an attachment, a replacement." She frowned, eyes looking into the distance of memory. "Only three fingers. Dark metal. Lit violet instead of aetherblue. It looked... primitive."

In the shadows of his hood, where none could see, his jaw tightened. "And Grandmother Pashiri?"

Tamni swallowed. "She was there too, off to one side. And three other women I don't know. One had red hair, one dressed in black, another in green. The inspectors took Pia—took Renegade Prime away. The strangers argued for a minute, then the one in black left. Pashiri led the other two away. Toward Kujar."

Kujar. A wealthy neighborhood, wide and green, home to many of the Consuls themselves. Difficult to enter, heavily patrolled. His presence would be questioned.

Tamni's eyes spilled. "I just...I just *watched*." She spat the words on her own feet.

"Are you a warrior?" he asked.

"A war—no! No, I...I just build things." She stared at her singed and shopworn fingers.

He considered laying a hand on her shoulder, in support. But no—he did not know her well enough to presume such familiarity. "To charge rashly into battle, unprepared, is not courage. It is foolishness. It yields only greater death." He kept his voice low, but firm. "This is knowledge hard-earned. Please trust it."

"I should have done...*something*," she whispered, wiping her eyes with the back of a hand.

"You witnessed. You told her story. Now others know what they must do." He bowed to her. "Thank you for this."

Tamni said nothing, and turned swiftly away to the shadows.

"That's a bother, isn't it?" Shadowblayde said. "Kujar's all spread-out, like. Big lawns and trees and such. Lots of walls and guards. And you stick out, friend, even though you slouch all the time." She turned to the vedalken boy. "Dayal! Gather the troops."

His grin was blinding. "Right away, Miss Blayde!"

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm the best lifecrafter you'll ever meet," she said, cheerfully. "But I'm not the *only* lifecrafter." Dayal scurried through the room, picking out people with mechanical beasts perched on them, or sitting close at hand. "I've got my insects. Others have birds, rats, cats, snakes, frogs, and even some little yap-yap dogs. There's only one giant you. But there's thousands of little creations like ours in Ghirapur."

He'd not planned to bring anyone else into these troubles. "I can follow her trail myself."

The elf laughed. "No doubt. But *we* can find her faster. What's the saying? Many eyes make quick search, or some such? And don't worry," she chirped, wrapping her arm around his, "I shall venture beside you. Steer you clear of trouble, like. Er..." she paused, and squeezed his bicep. "If we have to punch down any doors, I suppose I'll leave that to you, then."

The space before them filled with young people bearing brass and greenwood marvels that strutted and ticked. None of her friends seemed to be over twenty.

"How do you know Mrs. Pashiri, anyway?" Shadowblayde asked.

He considered. How much to say? "She's helping me find a man. Dangerous on his own. Possibly working with someone even more dangerous."

"Man of mysteriouuser!" she laughed. "Let's be off, then."

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## **Six Months Ago**

Nashi wriggled under the planks, hips scraping floor joists.

He'd found a gap in the wall in his bedroom, hidden behind the trunk they stored his clothes in. His siblings and cousins couldn't fit, and if Tamiyo and Genku knew of it, they said nothing. From there, he could scabble quietly between the lower floors of the great library, peering out through knotholes, breathing and listening, feeling wood press close and safe on all sides. No one could see him in this personal darkness. Sometimes he'd spend hours in there, bringing toys and books in with him, listening as the other children pounded around searching for him.

Sometimes it was all right to be the littlest and slowest.

He slithered toward the dining room, where Tamiyo and Genku sat with the giant. The smells of the food were weird. Not just the dry browns and sharp greens they normally ate. There were also greasy reds, with dust-black traces. It curdled in his chest, made the back of his throat jump forward, though he couldn't guess why. He pinched his nose, breathed through his mouth, and moved on.

There was a knothole in the corner that let him look down across the whole entire room. Tamiyo sat on her usual cushion at the head of the low table, with Genku at her right hand. The giant—Ajani—loomed over the far end, picking politely at a plate covered with marbled brown cubes. *Meat*. He remembered meat. It made him sick now.

Genku rose and bowed to Ajani. "There are matters I must attend to. If you will excuse me?"

The giant blinked. "Oh. Of course. Please."

Genku leaned to kiss Tamiyo on the forehead. She smiled and closed her eyes, laying her head briefly against his chest, their arms and fingers twining like ivy. "Take care of your business," he said. "I'll keep the children busy."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm sure they've already tired my parents." Genku gathered their plates and left, sliding the door closed with a foot.

The giant sat uncomfortably. The wind chimes toned and clinked. In the corner of the room nearest him, the ceramic charcoal stove still smoldered. But when Nashi looked at it, his heart beat too fast and his fingers dug into the wood, so he watched Tamiyo watching Ajani instead. The violet sigils on her forehead were tight-coiled with worry.

When Genku's footsteps had faded, she spoke. "You went to Theros seeking Elspeth. Did you find her?"

"Yes." Ajani looked like would say more, but then didn't. Instead he looked around the room, and gestured toward a pile of luggage with a thick journal on top. "Have I come at a bad time? It seems you're preparing for a journey."

"Do you know the plane of Innistrad?" she asked. The giant shook his head. "I spent some months there last year, studying the moon. It's *fascinating*." She leaned forward, eyes wide and shining. "All the magic of the plane bends toward it, is patterned by its cycles. Even many of the native creatures..." She paused and fiddled with the cuff of her sleeve. "The last time I checked in with Jenrik—a local I work with—he reported anomalous observations. Changes in the patterns of mana, the run of tides. I'd like to observe the effects on the native life."

"I see." He laid his massive hands on the table and stared at them.

"Ajani," she said, "if you will not speak to me, why have you come?"

The giant breathed slowly, massive weights moving behind his face. "I... I did not see Nashi last time I visited. He's not like his siblings."

Tamiyo sighed, the way she did when she and Genku were arguing, and he tried to leave her to her books. "Nashi is a nezumi. One of the rat-folk of the swamps."

Nashi squirmed in ceiling, wanting to listen, dreading to hear.

Tamiyo said, "Some years ago his village was burned by Planeswalkers."

The breath stopped in his throat.

"Burned? But why?"

The charcoal stove breathed beside the giant, monstrosly.

"I don't know. Not precisely. It was at the behest of a planeswalking criminal named Tezzeret. He wanted them to bend their necks. To serve his consortium."

The glowing charcoal spit red-gold light across the floor, dancing and flaring and eating and growing and darkening everything that wasn't it. He scratched at the spot on his side where the fur came in patchy. Where the skin stayed red and jagged.

He had to go.

"Tezzeret? I've heard of this man. Elspeth...she met him on Mirrodin."

He had to go *now*.

He closed his eyes. Pushed away from the knothole. Shuffled backward in the dark. He rolled on his side, certain the hammering of his heart on the ceiling would be heard. *Bang, bang, bang, bang—*

"He worked with her enemies. That was...two years ago?"

*Night and stars. Heat and pain in rolling waves. The roof's on fire! Take the boy! Get out!*

*The huts are ablaze. Everything is hot and bright, a yellow like sick. Mama lifts him. Runs. Where's papa? Stop, where's papa? Can't leave papa!*

*A crash. Mama stomps to a halt. He peers over her arms. The huts have collapsed. The way out is blocked. There's fire behind them. It rises up on two legs, bellowing at the stars. Roofs burst into flame as it stalks through the lane, trailing sparks.*



Fire Elemental | Art by Slawomir Maniak

“Two years? Impossible, Ajani. Tezzeret died...three years ago, I think? Betrayed by his comrades. Nashi's village, those that survived, they killed him. A dragon bargained for the corpse.”

“...a dragon?”

*You're going to run and not look back. Mama's fur smokes around the words. No matter what you hear, you run.*

*She wraps her arms around him and leaps through the flames. Pushes him on. Staggers. Go! Run!*

*He runs. His skin cracks at every painful step. He wants to lie down, dig into the earth. Mud is cool. It will be all right if he can bury himself.*

*A scream. He looks back—*

*Mama's on fire, held aloft by a man of living flame. She's shrieking, twisting in the air—*

*She smells like burning meat.*

He sobbed. Just once. He couldn't help it.

The conversation fell silent. He put his hands over his eyes and curled in on himself, shuddering in the secret dark.

A shuffling of silk below. Tamiyo's quiet voice, just outside his hidey spot; “Please come out, Nashi.” She pushed up on a panel of the tiled ceiling, opening a space for him.

He should run. Hide. Go to the smallest, farthest corner of the tunnels until he wasn't the littlest and the slowest anymore, and no one would make him be it for hide and seek, and no one would laugh, and no one would poke at his patchy fur and lumpy skin, and say he was just a mangy freak.

The moonfolk lady murmured into the tunnel, a voice just for him. "Do you remember what I told you? You can come sit with me if you want."

He tumbled into her arms and buried his face against her chest. The world swayed as she moved and sat, settling him into her lap. Warm arms wrapped around him. He bit his lip and tried to keep still. The giant was out there. He was tall and strong and had big teeth and probably never had to—

She tucked her chin over his head and began to rock him. "It's all right to let it out now. I have you."

The tears came hot and fast, and they wouldn't stop.

"Actions have consequences," Tamiyo told Ajani. "Sometimes people like us...forget how big our feet are."

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A mechanical tailorbird, an uncanny simulation of life, swayed down on the greasy smoke from a food cart. The core of it was mossy wood, dotted with flowers; the frame white-gold metal; the wings brightly-dyed silk. It fluttered, extended cunning brass legs, and delicately alighted on Ajani's broad shoulder.

He looked at the little round creature in puzzlement as it peeped up at him in regular, staccato rhythms, as Grandmother's brass bird did. "Is this...speech?"

"Mm?" Shadowblayde's moonlight eyes turned up to him, her cheeks bulging with roasted poultry. "MM! MMF!" she pointed at the bird with her stripped kebob stick and swallowed some of what she was chewing. "Mihir!" she said around the rest. She swallowed again with effort, pounded her chest, and dropped the stick into a bucket of other empties by the cart she'd bought it from.

Although "bought" might be stretching the definition of the word. The owner of the cart, a venerable and inscrutable elf, had watched with a twinkle in his eye as one of Shadowblayde's mechanical spiders fished a coin from the purse of a passing Consulate inspector, and deposited it in his hand with a stiff and ticking bow.

They were on the edges of Kujar, in a bustling marketplace that divided it from a less attractive neighborhood. A place, Shadowblayde said, where people came to slum or to hobnob, depending on what side they entered from. She seemed endlessly fascinated by the passing crowds, pointing out people she knew and telling him a hundred charming and forgettable stories about the history of the street.

He had a pounding headache. The musical device installed on the opposite side of the square had been piping and blapping madly since they arrived, its lights throwing lurid colors across the cobblestone. The tinny high notes and gut-quivering bass hurt his ears.





Panharmonicon | Art by Volkan Baga

“That’s one of Mihir’s birds. The codes we all came up with together. Brilliant, yes?” Shadowblayde grinned, teeth bright against her dark skin. “Pashiri was spotted twenty minutes ago. The *Dhund*. “

“Good,” he said, trying not to yell over the din. “What’s the *Dhund*?”

“You know Gonti’s night market?”

He nodded. An open secret; a sprawling illegal exchange, run in the shell of an old energy plant—a relic of the time before aether. Inventions of questionable safety and dubious morality could be had there, for the right price or the proper favors.

“The *Dhund* is a headquarters the Consuls built under and through Gonti’s market. A maze of tunnels and rooms pieced together. Ducts and sewers and suchlike. They run their spies out of it, and keep important prisoners there. All terribly *secret*, you understand,” she winked.

A guild of law operating in sewers, hidden under the feet of disreputable citizens. Everything in this world was upside down. He looked toward the sunset. “I know how to get to the night market from here. How can I find a way into the *Dhund*?”

Shadowblayde looked offended. “I show you to a door. We know a few of them. Won’t be a problem.”

He shook his head. “You’re not coming.”

Her mouth collapsed in a flat line, brows collapsing. “You are *not* going to—!”

“*Shadowblayde*,” he interrupted, “this was a trap set for Grandmother. It will be harder to get out than in. Help from the outside will be needed. Can you find us a means of escape? Something fast. Secret.”

She inhaled sharply, eyes darting over the bricks of the wall nearby, not truly seeing them. “Thopter,” she said, looking up. “The Consulate’s are all mass produced. Same strengths, but the same weaknesses. Renegade Prime showed me how to steal one.”

He regarded her critically. “Did she teach you to *fly* one?”

“Let’s say mostly?”

"Mostly will do."

"Here," she said, and poked the mechanical bird on his shoulder. She whistled and chirped a long series of notes that sounded like two birds arguing. It flapped its wings and returned a cheerful peep. "He's yours now. When you're close to a Dhund entrance, he'll fly to it."

"Thank you." He turned to go, but her hand fell on his shoulder.

"You're a friend of Mrs. Pashiri. She wouldn't have told you our code words if you weren't. Now you're stepping into the Consuls' jaws for her." She put her chin in the air, and one fist on her hip. "I say you're a renegade now. Anyone who says otherwise has to quicksmith me. But you never told me your code name. Terribly rude, you ask me." She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot crossly.

He blinked at her, at a loss. "I don't have...Some have called me 'White Cat?'"

Shadowblayde gave him a critical look. "That's not even a *bit* dashing. Why'd they call you that?"

He paused. The idea was foolish. But the elf had helped him, trusted him, and never asked a thing in turn.

He pulled back his hood.

Her moonlight eyes grew wide as saucers. He could see his every feature reflected in them; the white fur, the blue eye and the lost one, the whiskers and broad nose.

Then she smiled. "A pity to keep such a noble face hidden."

He bowed to her; not as they did in Kaladesh, but as they did in the Naya of his youth. These people were kind, but so very strange. "I place myself in your hands, Shadowblayde." He pulled the hood back over his head.

"Vatti."

He turned back to her. "Pardon?"

She gave him a lopsided grin. "That's my *mundane* name. Vatti. You gave *me* a secret. Only fair. Now keep that bird in one piece. Mihir will be expecting it back, and I shouldn't want to owe him." She turned and scurried up a drain pipe.

He turned and inspected the nearest wall, flexing his hands within the brass gauntlets.

Window sill. Loose bricks. Rain gutter. Across the dim blue aether tube connecting to the next building.

The path was clear to his eye, as clear as a snapped fern, as a riverbank footprint.

He hurled himself upward, springing on the tips of his feet, sure metal fingers clamping into brick-gaps, locking around wrought iron. The mechanical bird uttered a soft *squark* and took a tighter hold of his shoulder.

He raced across the aether tube, the smoke of the old elf's kebobs curling and churning from his passage.

Then there was wind.

The scents of the city pressed into his nose. Shadow-cools and daystruck-heats flickered over and past. His motion became thoughtless, instinctual.

He dodged around a chimney, or perhaps a tree.

The spaces he passed through were a blur of brass and white marble. He didn't know them. He didn't have to.



He leapt across an alley, or perhaps a chasm.

He knew how to run. The heat in his legs, the sharpness in his lungs, the sun on his shoulders—these were old friends. A long youth of racing across plain and through jungle, swift and silent as heat lightning.

He slammed on to the back of a great bird—or perhaps a thopter—and used it to leap up to a higher cliff, or perhaps a roof.

The mechanical bird uttered a short, soft *perp*. He jogged to a halt, breathing deep and even. “Where?” he asked on the exhale. It spread silk wings and fluttered away.

They had come to the edge of the night market, the smells of the city fading to grease, aether, rust, and papers too long idle in a basement. Beyond the nearest row of buildings, the jumbled, muggy roar of a crowd resounded.

The bird perched on a pile of splintered, oil-stained timbers, turning its head this way and that. It *perped* again.

Behind the lumber, a door. It was sealed with a locking device, not dissimilar to the one on the renegade haven.

He leapt down, sending up a cloud of sun-parched dirt. The mechanical creature peeped to him—not like a bird, but in the code-speech it had used before. It fluttered before the lock, tiny wings blurred and snapping, and used its slim beak to press a series of blocks on its surface. The faint hum of aether charge faded, and the door sagged open.

“Thank you,” he murmured to the bird. It peeped again, and darted away.

He pushed into the cool shadows.

A figure in crimson slid away from the wall, sunlight shining white on the edge of a blade. “Where do you think—”

Within the gauntlets, his hands curled into paws. He backhanded the guard into the wall and winced at the sudden scent of blood. “Sorry,” he muttered to the unconscious body.

He pressed deeper into the blue-lit tunnels, away from the guard, nose flaring. He pulled back the hood of Grandmother’s cloak and let his ears turn this way and that, listening for footsteps.

The Dhund was filled with unpleasant scents. Heavy old sweat, cloying urine, too many people confined in too small a space. It reeked of despair and the disappeared. Of teeth in the dark.

There. Faintly, from a tunnel to the left. Summer fruits, roses, hyacinth, and honey.

He hurtled through the tunnels, chasing the scent of her sun-drenched parlor, slipping around pockets of footsteps and muttering.

An open space ahead. The blue-white light of afternoon sun.

He glided to a halt, listening, tasting the air. Murmurs, bent and shattered by too many echoes to be understood. The deep keening of metal and an unfamiliar hiss. Boots on stone. A muffled pounding.

He moved in cautiously.

The room was made of circles. Brass rings stretched from floor to vaulted ceiling, connected by sweeping arcs of catwalks. Oval windows just under the eaves let light in from high overhead.

The room smelled of Grandmother, but she wasn’t there.

Near the center of the room, two guards in crimson and gold scrupulously ignored some manner of... box. Squat dark metal, huffing and whispering unpleasantly to itself. There was a scent he didn't recognize, a bilious sweetness that coated the back of his tongue. He could see a door on one end, with a small inset window.

A fist struck the glass. Then a hand, weakly.

He couldn't see the faces from here. He didn't need to.

The hand slid downward.

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### Five Months Ago

They'd closed most of the doors. The clouds were towering and gray, a pile of soaked cotton bearing the scent of rain.

Ajani had laid his possessions out on the floor. White cloak, bronze armor, his enormous weapon. Nashi peered at it all from the doorway as the giant carefully rolled his futon for the third time. Every day it took him several tries; his hands were too large, the movements still strange to him. Ume and Hiro had offered to help. Rumi had thrown up her hands and skipped out into the back garden. She was cartwheeling through the mist in exactly the way Tamiyo had told her not to, her robe a sodden mess, pearls of water dripping from her nose and ears as she laughed.

Tamiyo had left last week, telling them to take care of Ajani while she watched somebody else's moon.

Still the giant knelt, patiently folding, tying, rolling.

"You can come in if you wish, Nashi," he said.

He slid across the room, toward the giant's axe. It was strange, dark on one end and light on the other. He wondered if that meant something.

Gingerly, he pressed one finger against the edge of the shining blade. It seemed thick. Harmless. The giant looked up.

"Shouldn't it be sharper?" Nashi asked.

"It doesn't need to be. *Speed* makes it cut. *Weight*."

He pressed harder.

"Be careful. It's not *completely* dull." The giant picked up the rolled futon and put it in the closet.

He sat back and looked at the face carved into the flat of the blade, a cat-face with bared teeth and a long thin beard. "You're leaving, aren't ya?"

"Yes," he said.

"Where ya going?"

The giant studied him. "To find the man who killed your family. Our friends found him in a place called Kaladesh. Someone's given him money and secrets. He used them to buy his way into power."

Nashi scratched his side, where the fur grew funny. "I seen him, you know. When the shamans kilt him? We was all in the woods. Watching."

The giant sighed. "They shouldn't have made you watch."

He blinked. "They said it was impro-tent."

"Important?" Ajani began strapping on the plates of his armor.

"Yeah. Because he done wrong by us. We hadda see it done right. It was about honor, so we hadda see. Thass what they said." The sky rumbled. He rubbed his nose. "He had a weird arm. Another man cut it off. When that man talked, it didn't make sense, and my head hurt."

The giant hefted his weapon, and slid it into the straps across his back. The edge of the dark blade glittered coldly.

"Are you gonna kill him?" Nashi said.

The wind kicked up, making the porch chimes clatter and clack. "I...don't know." The giant looked out to the terrace, his hand falling on the white cloak. The whole world smelled of suspended water, aching to fall. "Maybe that's the right path after all. There are too many who don't watch where they walk."

Ajani picked up the white cloak in both hands. There were faded patches on it, off color, pink like cherry blossom petals. He pulled it to his face and breathed in, deeply.



Art by Volta Creation

"Does that make you sad?" Nashi asked.

"What? No." The giant blinked and straightened, brushing under his eye with a thumb. "This belonged to a friend. Elspeth. It's a reminder of her."

"Where is she?"

"She's..." the giant ran his hand over the fabric. His eye was like the sky, Nashi noticed. The blue had gone gray, clouded over. "...I lost her."

Oh. "Like I lost my parents, you mean."

The giant closed his one great, bright eye. "Yes."

Nashi swallowed and looked out at the towering clouds. "She's dead."

A tremor went through the giant. "Yes," he said, softly. Hot glass wound away from his scar. "Elspeth is dead."

The sky rumbled. Rumi was yelling about something in the back garden. He tried to remember what the shamans told him when mama and papa died, but couldn't remember much. Everything had felt like the garden fog back then, numb and cold and close. He'd watched the man who'd done it coughing up blood and silt, and felt nothing. Sick, maybe.

He'd felt nothing for a long time. Mad, sometimes. Like when people said he had to call them mom or dad. There were a lot of people like that. He didn't remember much of them. Until the moonfolk lady had come from the library, to ask for his story and tell her own in trade. "Call me Tamiyo," she'd said. "Nothing more."

The wind swirled the flower petals on the porch. He stuck out his foot and pinned one under his toe. "Tamiyo says when you lose someone, it's like getting hurt. I mean, like when you fall down and get hurt? When you scrape your knee, it's gotta bleed ta get better. And she said that tears are how your heart bleeds. You gotta let them out so's ya get better."

The giant's jaw rippled. "Tamiyo is wise."

"When I get sad, she sits with me. Maybe I can sit with you?"

"I think I would like that."

The giant curled his legs under him at the edge of the porch, where the library ended and the sky began. He laid his axe on the wood beside him. Nashi sat on the other side, dangling his feet in the clouds. The blue of the sky was almost all gone now. The distance muttered.

He rested his head against Ajani's shoulder. His arms were as big as tree trunks. "You wanna maybe tell me about your friend?"

The giant said nothing.

"You don't have to."

The rainclouds flashed and grumbled. He spread his whiskers into the wind.

"She was born in a place of darkness," the giant said. "She never spoke of it much. A land devoured by evil, ruled by monstrous creatures. The kind that *don't* kill. The kind that make you their own. They hurt her until she was part of the way they hurt others. She held on, cried, and dreamed. Until the day they came for her. She was in their claws when she wished herself away."

"She could walk behind the air," Nashi said. "Like you and Tamiyo."

The giant nodded. "She woke in a different land. It was brighter, with a sky full of stars that scampered and twirled with color. But she was very young, and that world is...not as kind as it could be to the different. She walked on, until she came to a place where the sun was warm gold and the people were kind. They gave her bread, wrapped her in blankets, and held her until the shaking passed. She stayed there many years. They taught her to protect herself, then to protect others, and then to heal those who hadn't been protected."

A pale hand laid itself on the giant's other arm. Hiroku had entered silently, as was his way, and looked out at the piling clouds.

"I met her then, for the first time, as the world was changing. She saved my life. It was my world too, in a way, and we fought together to save it. But the land that had become her home was scarred and sickened by the battle, and all she could see was what had been. She walked on, until she'd forgotten the best version of herself..."

The giant trailed off, his one eye searching for the horizon. The distance had gone away into mist, gray and formless. "She was sought out. By me and by others. The monsters of her childhood had returned."

They had left their own bleak realm. Another world was being turned, a place shining clean, cool, and fine. She went to fight them.”

Ajani paused. He looked to the axe lying beside him on the wood. “I can’t imagine,” he said, “facing the nightmares of your childhood. Seeing them with eyes grown and knowing they’re real after all. Real, and hungry. She walked into their teeth with a trembling heart and steady hands. She fought until there was nothing left to give, no reason left to fight, for everything in that shining land had been stained black. The monsters won. And she ran from them again.”

Cousin Ume knelt gracefully, in a rustle of silk, folding herself like an origami swan. She laid a hand on the giant’s knee, lavender eyes bright with sympathetic stars.

“She returned to the land of colored skies. That was where we met again. In that land, she’d become a renowned hero and an infamous villain, bearer of a weapon crafted by—by those who hold themselves our betters.” A shadow crossed the giant’s brow, there and gone. “Something had happened. Something had broken within her. She never spoke of it, but you could see it pull at her heels. She walked as if into a wind, shoulders bent, eyes never entirely forward.

“That land was nearing an end. For its so-called masters, we journeyed to the end of the world, and stepped among the stars. We fought a monster, and won. And as thanks—” he clenched his hands on his knees, the great black claws digging in. “As thanks, another monster struck her down. Right—right in front of me. And I could do nothing. *Nothing*.”

Behind them, Rumi sniffled. She stood in her garden-soaked robe, looking embarrassed, fiddling with one of her ears. She swayed on the sides of her feet, looking at the door, and escape. “Dummy,” she breathed at herself, or maybe he imaged it, and abruptly draped herself over the giant’s broad shoulders, squeezing his neck tight, burying her nose in his pale fur.

Ajani did not look up, but laid one of his great hands over her small and slender ones. “I went among the people,” he said. “I told them her story, as I’d witnessed it. They had to know. They had to remember. It had to *matter*. I walked and spoke, and did not rest until the words had taken root, and were growing on their own. It was important. And it meant...I didn’t have to think.”

They were all around him now, listening to the story in silence. Cousin Ume. Big brother Hiro, big sister Rumi. The sky flashed and quartered, cracked.

“In the stories my people tell—the *old* ones, the ones that *matter*—the hero loses her mentor. She lives, grieves, and moves on to save the world.”

The clouds rumbled. Poofy-headed rain charms spun and danced on their strings. Nashi didn’t know what Tamiyo would say, so he said nothing. Sometimes Tamiyo said nothing, and that was the right thing.

At last, Ajani whispered, “It should have been me. Not her.”

His big hands were shaking. The sharp hidden claws, the long teeth, the arms like tree trunks.

“My hero is dead,” said, hoarsely. “And all she wanted, all she fought so hard for...was just a *home*. The simplest thing. The *smallest*.”

Nashi put his arms around the giant, but couldn’t reach even halfway. “It’s all right to let it out,” he said. “We all got you.”

Ajani’s shoulders bent and shuddered. He covered his eyes with one hand.

The rain began to fall.

The children sat with him, around him, a forest of hands on his shoulders and arms and back and knees. Saying nothing. Just breathing.

It rained for a very long time.

---

A fist stuck the glass. Then a hand, weakly.

He couldn't see the faces from here. He didn't need to.

The hand slid downward.

They were *killing* them.

*How*

Doing it *slowly*.

*Dare*

Letting them *suffer*.

*They*

Ajani vaulted over the rail, teeth bared.

Grandmother's gift-cloak slid from his shoulders in flight, revealing the white beneath.

He flicked controls within the false hands. They unclasped and fell away.

He slid through the air like summer lightning, bright and silent.

It was like the axe had never left his paws.

He ran on the balls of his feet, an endless fall forward.

Somewhere behind him, the gauntlets clattered to the floor.

A man stared up at him in horror. Dark hair. Thin moustache. Brown eyes. A wave of stinking, soaking fear rolled off him.

Ajani swung for the throat.

*Sometimes people like us...forget how big our feet are.*

Old magic welled up, streaking along his spine. As it had with Tenoch, so many moons ago; in a life so far removed, it now seemed like the tale of another man. The guard's eyes gaped, black pits of fear, and Ajani vaulted through them, seeking the titanic light that lay beyond.

For an endless instant, he held the shining palace of the man's soul in the palm of a hand, and took its measure.

*A youth spent feeling out of place, seeing gray where others saw brilliant color. The sighs of a disappointed father; "Just not an inventor, I suppose." A life of standing in the background for others, waiting for something to happen. Love for a wife with a long braid and fingers perpetually lightning-burnt. An infant that peals with laughter when he makes faces. Mornings off, waking with the sun, he fills a cramped kitchen with the scents of bread and spice.*

A snowflake with a billion glittering facets. Here and there, buried in shame-deep crevasses, there were twisted shapes, yes, dark moments...slicknesses that wouldn't wash away with a lifetime of scrubbing.

But far fewer than Ajani's own soul.

Not a Planeswalker. Not a villain.

Just a man.

Ajani slid his foot, changing the angle of his axe-blade's fall.

It smashed across the guard's chestplate, scattering twisted metal shards across the marble floor. He tumbled to the ground, spinning from the force of the blow.



Impeccable Timing | Art by Chris Rallis

No blood.

The other guard stumbled back, nervous fingers rattling his sword free of the scabbard. Whirling around, Ajani gave him a long, one-eyed glare, letting his axe's dark blade come to rest on the marble with a modest *clink*.

The man dropped his sword and scrambled for the door. He'd sound the alarm. There wasn't much time.

Ajani glanced at the controls for the container. Levers and dials, spinny bits and blinking lights. It made no sense to him. No matter.

He slammed the bright blade of his axe into the gap between the door and the container. With a grunt, he leaned into it, and *pressed*. Breath by breath, step by step, arms and legs rigid and quivering with effort, he peeled the screeching machine open.

The door fell off its hinges with a reverberating crash, a rush of green smoke rolling skyward.

An emerald-eyed elf sat cross-legged before him, cradling an unconscious red-haired girl across her lap. "Mrs. Pashiri?" he asked her.

The elf nodded over her shoulder, "There." She lifted the red-haired girl like she weighed nothing, and stood aside to let him enter. Her eyes slid away from his. "I...did what I could."

Grandmother lay eyes closed and barely breathing. But her expression was peaceful, her hands clasped at her stomach. Like any other afternoon he'd found her napping on the parlor couch. The rest of a life well-lived.

When he ducked out of the chamber with her, the red-haired girl was stirring in the elf's arms. She coughed weakly and blinked. "Nissa," she croaked. "Lemme down?"

He laid Mrs. Pashiri carefully on the marble floor, silver braids spilling around her. He laid one hand on her stomach, and closed his eyes. Brackish poison had settled in her lungs and veins, clotting the blood, drying it to ash. He sent brilliant threads of magic through her, burning away the black, filling her blood with clean air.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she coughed. He helped her sit up. "Are you well?" he said, quietly.

"Ajani," she smiled. Then she squinted and put on her best disapproving face. "You look thin." She patted his cheek. "Have you been eating properly?"

He rumbled in the back of his throat, in spite of himself. "Yes, Grandmother."

"Hell," the red-haired girl gasped, and coughed again, dry and hacking. He looked up to see her grab on to the elf's arm as her knees buckled, the coughs building in intensity until she was folded nearly in two. A drop of blood trembled on the edge of her lip.

Nissa inhaled sharply at the sight of it, and rubbed her back. "You should sit," she said, her strange eyes bent with worry. "Please, Chandra."

"Just a dry throat," the red-haired girl rasped. "Be fine in a—" She exploded into coughing again, spattering the floor with red. "Oh. *That's* not good..."

Ajani carefully lifted Mrs. Pashiri to her feet. "Excuse me," he told her, and turned to the two other women. "Hold her up." The elf nodded and pulled Chandra upright.

"Whoa, big kitty," Chandra wheezed. Her breath smelled of hot copper. "Got arms like Gids."

He wondered what gids were. He laid a hand on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

The thunder of her heart was deafening. Strong, urgent. No wonder the poison had burned through her blood so swiftly. Silver tendrils of healing magic raced through her, cleansing the impurities, soothing a thousand tiny burstings. Her breathing quieted and slowed.

He opened his eyes. "You'll need to take it easy for a time," he said. "I've cleaned out the poison, but your lungs—"

"...Will be fine," she said, ducking her shoulder out from under his hand. She forced a smile, and wiped the blood off her lips with the back of a hand. "Thanks. I mean it."

Nissa said nothing, but nodded to him with fragile gratitude. She hadn't taken her hand off Chandra's back.

There were shouts echoing from the hallway. The guards were assembling.

"You next," he told the elf, though she didn't seem much affected by the poison.

But she shook her head, glancing toward the thunder of oncoming boots. "I'm fine for now. You know a way out?"

The air in his ears vibrated with the stuttering pulse of oncoming thopter wings. In the far corner of the room, one of the windows smashed and fell in a wind-chime cascade of broken glass. The brass tailorbird fluttered across the room, *perp* ing urgently, and alighted on his shoulder. Nissa looked at the mechanical creature in perplexity, perhaps uncertain whether to judge it a miracle or a horror.



"We have a ride," Ajani told her as a coil of rope slid down from the window.

"Ajani, were you just going to leave these here?" Grandmother scolded from across the room, stooping to pick up his dropped gauntlets. "Gan Ghaheer spent weeks on them."

He'd... explain later.

The guard he'd struck groaned at his feet, and rolled on to his hands and knees. He froze at the sight of boots, and slowly, by reluctant fits and starts, looked up.

"Go home to your family," Ajani told him.

The man gazed up at him with terror and wonder. "You're not going to kill me?"

"I don't kill," Ajani said. "Not anymore."