

Up in Flames

Doug Beyer

From set *Oath of the Gatewatch*

Chandra Nalaar arrived on Zendikar just as all hell was breaking loose. The demon Ob Nixilis had regained his Planeswalker spark, awakened a titan, and caused the destruction of Sea Gate. Now two Eldrazi titans roam free on Zendikar, and the Zendikari are scattered. Chandra is committed to reuniting with her compatriots, but in all the chaos, she has yet to locate them—or the vengeful demon.

Chandra scrambled up a rock outcropping, looking for two particular faces, but she saw only destruction and retreat. Kozilek and Ulamog were wandering the landscape now, cutting two ravines of blighted land behind them. They didn't flinch at her blasts of fire, but she got the sense that they would simply turn and devour her if she made a big enough nuisance of herself.

Swaths of corruption crisscrossed the battlefield, marking the travels of spawn. Eldrazi broodlings were running out of humanoids to chase. Many of the Zendikari had fled when Kozilek rose and the sea wall broke. Many had been consumed. There was no sign of the faces Chandra sought.

There was also no sign of the demon whose interference led to all of this.

"Gideon?" she shouted once, twice, three times. Louder each time, with a growing edge in her voice.

A chittering-crackling sound announced a fresh swarm of Eldrazi skittering over a hill toward her. They would be here soon. Too many to take on by herself.

She closed her eyes like fists and thought, "*Jace?*" as loudly as she could. She instantly felt ridiculous.

There was no reply, mental or otherwise.

Chandra narrowed her eyes at the oncoming swarm. They had too many knees and elbows, with unblinking eyes positioned at the joints. She glanced behind her, but the land dropped away into a glimmering valley of Eldrazi-ruined ground. She stood tall, feet spaced wide, in front of the swarm. She snapped her goggles down over her eyes and tilted her head to one side so that her neck cracked.

As she took her stance, her foot tapped something metal, and she glanced down. It was a large buckler shield, wedged in a depression of mud. She cast a glare at the line of Eldrazi, and deliberately bent down and picked up the shield without breaking eye contact. It was dented, but she recognized it.



Gideon's Phalanx | Art by James Ryman

She swallowed hard. She pressed the shield against her forehead for a moment, and something prickled in her throat. She squeezed the metal buckler in her fists until the edges crinkled.

For some reason the faces of her parents flashed in her head. She never understood why she would think of them at odd times—they just came to her. They never aged in her mind; they were still the same age as when she saw them last, when she was still a child on Kaladesh. She didn't think of their last moments; she didn't see her father falling to his knees with a knife in his gut, and she didn't see her mother's shawl in the mud, its edges burned as the village burned around it. She just saw them looking at her with parents' eyes, kindly and proud.

She gnashed her teeth. She had come to Zendikar entirely too late.

A woman's voice came from behind her, down in the ravine. "Hey, fire mage."

She turned.

"Is that the Commander-General's?" A tall, plate-armored woman crouched in the ditch of Kozilek's corruption. Pressed against the wall beside her were a small party of Zendikari—mostly scouts and foot soldiers, many of them wounded.



General Tazri | Art by Chris Rahn

Chandra eyed the encroaching swarm again, watching them skitter slowly toward her. She slipped down into the ravine and held up the shield. “It’s Gideon’s. Did you see what happened to him?”

“He was battling the demon,” the woman said. “He went down, hard.”

Chandra’s shoulders dropped.

“But he’s alive,” the woman added.

“General Tazri—” one of the scouts began.

“He’s alive,” she repeated.

“General Tazri,” Chandra said, “it’s urgent I find him.”

“We need him too,” Tazri said. She tore a strip of bandage with her teeth, and wrapped it around the leg of one kor scout, then tugged it taut. “The demon took him, and two others.”

“Took him? Where?”

“He was heading toward a cavern,” said another one of the scouts. His eyes and fangs marked him as a vampire. He pointed in the direction of some rocky bluffs in the distance. “The mouth is there, in the cleft between those two peaks. Only a handful of miles, by air.”

“Thank you,” Chandra said. She tucked the buckler onto her arm and grabbed hold of the shimmering minerals to climb out of the ravine.

“Wait,” Tazri said. She tilted her head toward her group. “I have wounded. We’re in no shape to lead a rescue party now.”

Chandra wondered what exactly that had to do with her. “I’m going to him. Stay here.”

“What about the swarm?” Tazri asked.

Chandra peeked her head out of the ravine. The Eldrazi were still making a direct line for them. “I’ll lead them away.”

Tazri looked Chandra up and down, frowning. Then she produced a heavy mace and nodded. “We’ll cover your exit. Thank you.”

“Just stay down, and stay safe.”

Chandra clambered up out of the ravine. She stood up, dusted herself off, and ignited all at once.

Her hair blazed to life, and her hands glowed hot. A muscle-tensing, punch-throwing anger warmed her limbs. The anger was familiar, comforting, and she leaned into it like a dependable friend. Chandra twirled her body, and in her spinning, the air around her caught fire. A roaring cyclone made of churning flame whirled across the field ahead of her, and she chased it as it tore through the swarm of Eldrazi. Eldrazi parts flew high into the air, and bits flopped down onto the ground, smoking.

The swarm of Eldrazi made a harsh fizzing sound, and refolded themselves to orient themselves toward her, rather than toward Tazri’s soldiers. Her pulse quickened. Her hair burned hotter.

“That’s right,” Chandra said. “I’m a glorious beacon of mana and light, you bastards.”

She turned toward the bluffs. As she ran, the flame of her hair streaked behind her like a banner.

She vaulted over crags and hopped small fissures, checking behind her without stopping. From here she could see that Kozilek’s spawn carried devastation along with their general unsettling grossness. A wake of ruin spread out behind the swarm, with abnormal quadrangular patterns where the living land of Zendikar used to be.



Warden of Geometries | Art by Jason Felix

She stayed hot and ran on, throwing blasts of fire behind her in furious jets. Occasionally she spun, hurling a barrage of fire, taking out one or two more of the Eldrazi and goading on the rest, drawing them away from Tazri’s wounded.

After several miles, the swarm was falling behind. She could barely see their hovering black plates in the distance, and she had advanced beyond their grotesque swath on the landscape. Chandra focused on the two peaks ahead.

She reached a crest, and the land fell away, sloping down to a huge cavity in the earth: a cavern's mouth, surrounded by spiky hedrons that all pointed inward, toward the depths of the cave.

As she approached, she saw that the way was blocked. The entrance was entirely covered over with a newly-forged crust, gleaming in square spiral patterns. This was the cavern where the demon had taken them, but the iridescent crust blocked her path.

Chandra's breath caught in her chest. In the twisted surface, she saw a broken reflection. It was not of her own face, though, but of her mother and father. Their eyes were tender. Their mouths moved and they nodded reassuringly, but their faces moved strangely along the planes of the surface, and she couldn't make out what they were saying. She reached toward them, but the image broke into a million angles. Without her permission, her brain turned to thoughts of her mother's burned shawl on the ground outside a Kaladesh village, and of her father's apologetic eyes as he sank to his knees, hands on his stomach to hold the blood in—

She gritted her teeth and pressed her fists into her eye sockets. When she unclenched and opened her eyes, the only thing she saw reflected in the spirals was herself, ringed in fire, her eyes two hot coals. She turned back to the barrier. She glanced at her hands. They were not child's hands, like they had been when her parents died, when her Planeswalker spark first ignited. They were the weapons of a pyromancer. She clutched her hands together, interweaving the fingers to form a single fist. She raised her arms, gathering a white-hot ball of fire around her hands. She said nothing as she faced the distorted spirals and smashed at her own reflection.

The crust exploded. A cloud of fragments and clods of earth rained down. She had intended to punch a hole just large enough for her own ingress, but instead she had crumbled the entire barrier, leaving the cavern mouth open wide.

Inside, the cavern was etched with more of the patterns of ruin. The bowels of the earth here had been scoured, depleted, transformed.

Chandra remembered the demon calling the titan Kozilek to rise, laughing coldly at the armies below him, laughing at this entire world. She knew Kozilek wasn't here. This was the lair of a demon.



Chandra, Flamecaller | Art by Jason Rainville

Chandra kept anger close as she climbed and descended through meandering passages. The spiral-etched ruins around her shimmered weirdly in the light of her fire.

She could hear a deep, unhurried voice intoning in the chamber ahead. "...lifetimes of agony on this wretched world," the voice was saying. "I've far less time to share with you, but I assure you, no less pain."

When she emerged into the chamber, she saw the three of them hanging in midair, suspended by magic like limp marionettes: Gideon, his chin dropped onto his chest, with lines of agony creasing his forehead. Jace, his head lolled to one side, his hood shrouding his face. And an elf woman, her braid and arms hanging limp, her eyelids parted to reveal slitted, unseeing, green-on-green eyes, with a tear streaked down her cheek to her chin. Their bodies dangled there in air, surrounded by coils of enervating magic. Three or four Eldrazi drones of Kozilek's lineage chattered nearby, not even turning their bladelike projections to notice her.



Remorseless Punishment | Art by Ryan Barger

"I'm sorry, did you get the impression you were invited?" The demon, the source of the deep, echoing voice, emerged from a side passage. His body looked like raw black tendon had melded with fragments of armor, with a hellish internal heat showing through at the seams. His eyes were aglow with hate and amused interest somehow at once.

"I'm inviting myself," Chandra said. "Free them or die."

"I wasn't aware they had a sidekick," said the demon.

Chandra curled her fingers into a fist, and threw herself and her magic at her foe. The demon deflected her fiery blow with his forearm, raising tattered wings like a dragon. He smiled or grimaced, showing ranks of sharp teeth.

Chandra recovered from the deflection. She pivoted, whirled, and lobbed a volley of darts of fire at the demon's eye.

The demon shielded his face with a wing, shrugging off the worst of it, but he grunted with the effort. He swiveled on one foot and backhanded Chandra with his claw.

Chandra slammed against the wall, knocking her skull against stone. She coughed, doubled over and struggling for breath. Nearby, the Eldrazi drones flexed their pincers, but did not advance toward her.

She spat blood and regained her stance. She forced her fire to grow larger, letting the pain feed her magic. Her hands extended into long whips of fire. She drew back her arm, gathering up anger. The crackling heat of her fist distorted the cavern air.

She leaped, lashing out with two quick blasts of fire. Deflected.

She continued her leap into a physical attack, swinging down with Gideon's buckler as a blunt weapon. Clanged off of the demon's pauldron.

She recovered to one side and spun. Two more blasts from her knuckles, and a whoosh of flame shot forth from both palms. Caught in the demon's claw, and crushed to nothing.

He swung at her, and although she dodged her head out of the path of his claw, she still felt piercing pain raking across her face.

She gasped as the skin of her face stung like acid. Her fire flickered, and she shook her hands as if to shake more fire into them.

No! Stay lit. Burn him to cinders. Pain is fuel.

She brought her fists close to her chest, collecting all of her fire together at her core. She blasted everything she had at him, not a single flash but a sustained torrent of fire, all of her rage pressurized and forced into a cone of boiling air—

WHOOOOSH—

The demon walked through her spell toward her. The fire charred his chest, but he raised his arm and grabbed Chandra under the chin, raising her up by the throat.

—GLURK .

Chandra's spell broke. She struggled, grabbing at his claw, prying at the fingers. "Bastard," she choked out.

The demon was smiling, fangs bright. "Nothing so far has managed to stop me, little candle. And it's not going to be you."

She wrestled his fingers loose, and bit through the skin of his hand. He dropped her and she collapsed onto her hands and knees. She forced herself to lift her head. "It's going to be me," she muttered. She willed her legs to stand her back up, but one leg just trembled instead of complying.

The demon tilted his head in mock concern. "But you're burning so quickly, little candle. What happens when you sputter out?" He summoned a spell and shoved it forward with a claw.

Chandra's body twisted as the demon's magic tore at her. It felt like erosion, like years of time tearing at a mountainside, but accelerated into a horrid moment. She felt enervated, as if a lifelong, debilitating illness had gripped her all at once. Her limbs weighed a ton each.

Chandra's head wanted very desperately to dip down, to make contact with the stone floor. But she did not let it. Her arms shook, holding her body up like brittle columns. Her vision swam, and the cavern became vague shapes and shadows.

The cavern grew darker. She could feel herself flickering, dimming by degrees. She was going out.

NO. STAY LIT.

She concentrated on her hands, the palms ground into the cavern grit. If her hands didn't go out, she still had life in her. Weapons of a pyromancer.

She sensed the demon come quite close to her, a dark blob by her ear. "Are you supposed to be the rescuer?" There was a tscking sound. "But—I don't understand. What good would *you* be to anyone?"

Chandra demanded her eyes stay open, that her head stay upright. Her muscles shuddered with effort.

"And now I have to punish you, as well. I wouldn't have wanted this. But my hand is forced. Lie down."

Chandra slowly turned her face toward him. She could barely see through wet lashes, through her clouded vision.

His splotch of a face altered, became kindly. Became familiar.

"*Chandra, honey,*" said the vague face, in her father's voice. The voice had her father's kindness, his warmth, his steady patience.

She didn't want this. She didn't ask to see him. Not now.

"Give up , my Chandra ," he said. Chandra winced. "*You've done enough. Lie down. Lie down on the ground .*"

Chandra squinted at the shapes of her father's dim face. Gravity pressed down on every square inch of her, sapping her rebellion. Her eyes brimmed.

"*Chandra, my dear daughter ,*" said the face, now in her mother's voice, her mother's loving, iron-strong voice. "*You've done enough. You've failed them, Chandra. Give up now. Fall onto the ground.*" Chandra shuddered. Her elbows bowed. "*You've failed them, Chandra. Just like you failed us .*"

Chandra's body wanted to exhale, wanted to cough her life out of her chest, wanted to let go. She wanted to sneer at the face, to mutter a string of curse words at it, but she couldn't summon the strength. The world closed in.

The cavern, the face, everything went dark. Her mother's face disappeared, and she could only see streaks of the demon's disembodied, hellish eyes in the gloom.

Her fire was out. Her hands were extinguished. She could feel her hair hanging down around her face, clammy with sweat.

"*Chandra , the...dr...*" said the voice. It had a weird echo now, not like a whisper in her ear—it was, somehow, even closer than that. "*The dr...oans, Chhhandra .*"

"Don't take your defeat personally," said the demon, his voice now undistorted, with its usual callous edge. "I tend to bring out the weakest in people."

"*Chandra. Hizzz...his Eldr...azi drones ,*" said the echoing voice. It sounded like a headache. It also sounded distinctly not like her parents. "*Blassst the. Drones .*"

Jace. Jace was—conscious!

"*With ffff*," Jace slurred in her mind. "*Ffffi. Fiiiyer.*"

Jace was—somewhat conscious!

"*I can't*," Chandra thought dully.

"*You damned...*" Jace was struggling to form the words in her head as much as she struggled to absorb them. "*You damned well c-can. Get up.*"

"Don't," Chandra said aloud. Her actual voice sounded odd to her own ears. Blunted. She was probably drooling.

"What's that now?" the demon asked. "Please don't tell me you're about to plead for a stay of execution. It insults us both."

"Don't...tell me," she croaked. Her hands became fists, and her fists became fire, illuminating the chamber again. "Don't tell me," she repeated, stumbling to her feet, swaying.

The figure of the demon swam before her. She could see the amusement in the way he shook his head just slightly, and the malice in the way he summoned one final, dark knot of energy in one claw. "*Lie down , little candle,*" he said.

"Don't...tell me. What. TO DO."

Chandra lurched forward with her fists. The demon merely tilted his head to avoid the assault. But her hail of fiery missiles arced toward their intended targets, slamming into the Eldrazi drones that

lurked near her friends. The drones convulsed as they burned, their skin crackling as miniature suns consumed them.



Devour in Flames | Art by Svetlin Velinov

Gideon, Jace, and the elf collapsed to the floor in a heap. And then they disappeared.

The demon snarled at the disruption of the imprisonment spell, and the vanishing of his prey. He turned back to Chandra and reared back to loose his deathblow.

Chandra winced, unable to summon the strength to dodge, or even collapse. But when she was still alive a heartbeat later, she glanced at the demon. He was staring around, speaking dark words in a growing fit of fury.

“You’ve invisible, as far as he can see,” said Jace’s voice in her head. *“For now.”*

Chandra staggered away, leaning against the cavern wall as the demon searched for them.

“The others. Are they alive?” Chandra asked in her mind.

“Barely.”

“We’ll have to take him on. On my signal. Ready?”

“No! We are nowhere near ready. We don’t have much left in us.”

Chandra made fists. *“How long before he figures out we’re still here? We can do this.”*

“Chandra. We’ve been—tormented. For...I don’t know how long. Felt...long.”

Chandra didn’t like the uncertainty in Jace’s thoughts, the frank admission of pain. The demon was kicking and stomping over the cavern floor. He couldn’t see them, but there was no way he was fooled into thinking they had disappeared for good.

Chandra squared her shoulders. Fire flickered from her fingertips, growing into palm-sized spheres of heat. *“All the more reason to take him down.”*

Jace’s hesitating reply: *“They need rest.”*

“Jace. We came here to do a job. That job’s not done. Is it.”

“Chandra —” Jace thought at her.

Chandra’s fire grew. *“Is it?”*

“Chandra, I can’t—”

The others reappeared in a flash, the concealment spell broken. Jace and the elf woman had moved further back in the chamber from where Chandra had seen them last. They looked conscious but weak. Gideon had reappeared too. The demon already had him by the neck, raising him up off his feet.

“Gideon!”

The demon turned to face Chandra and grinned wide, a thudding laugh rising from deep within him. The sound held the built-up malice of being trapped on Zendikar for eons—and the satisfaction of finally being repaid for it.

“Your friends should thank you, little candle,” said the demon. *“Not for giving them hope—that was, in fact, quite cruel of you. But no, without you, they would have had no audience for their deaths.”* The demon squeezed on Gideon’s throat, and Chandra could hear bone cracking.

Chandra couldn’t budge. She knew any step she might take would just hasten Gideon’s demise.

But she saw that Gideon was struggling. His hands clamped onto the demon’s, trying to break free, and even in his weary state, sparks of light protected his flesh. She saw Jace’s eyes glow with azure smoke, conjuring some mind-piercing spell even as he fought to remain standing. And she saw the elf woman’s hair blow back as she summoned up desperate magic. Vines of mana twisted out of the ground and flowed into her.

I haven’t failed them. We haven’t failed each other.

Chandra stomped on the ground, and a streak of fire raced along from her foot to the demon, setting the cavern floor on fire beneath his feet. Gideon elbowed the demon’s arms and kicked at his chest, wresting himself free and rolling away just as fire engulfed the demon.

The demon emerged surrounded. Gideon now wielded his sural, Jace had a spell at the ready, and the elf’s eyes were glimmering with mana.

“All together!” Gideon shouted, and Chandra knew exactly what he meant.

All four of them attacked the demon simultaneously. Flashing whip-blades and elemental vines and punishing mind magic coincided with Chandra’s from-the-gut rush of fire.



Art by Svetlin Velinov

The demon grimaced, doubling his wings over himself for protection. He attempted to blast back with a spell, but Jace was too quick for him, and the demon's spell dissolved just as Gideon slashed at him from another direction. He lashed out toward the elf, but Chandra cut him off with a column of flame.

The demon clapped his wings together, buffeting Chandra back against a wall and giving him time to kick Jace in the gut. But Gideon tangled the demon's leg in sural blades and yanked, combining with Nissa's vines to topple him to the ground.

Chandra made eye contact with Gideon as she unstrapped his buckler from her arm, and he nodded. She tossed the shield into the air and Gideon slid it on in one motion, and he elbow-dropped the metal shield onto the prone demon's cranium, just as Chandra melted the metal of his helmet to putty. The crack was audible.

The demon roared and burst back up to his feet, throwing Gideon off of him, wobbling his head slightly. Chandra gathered a barrage of fire to knock him off his feet—but agony surged through her veins.

"Enough," the demon said through his fangs. Chandra's heartbeats were jagged pulses of pain, like her bloodstream had become needles.

Jace became a coterie of four Jaces, each one seemingly drilling into the demon's mind, while Gideon shoulder-rammed into the demon's chest. Chandra felt the elf woman's hand on her arm, and at her touch, Chandra's heart soothed, regaining its natural rhythms.

"Prepare something big," whispered the elf. "We'll tell you when." And she spun to lash at the demon with a swirl of living magic.

Between the multiple illusionary Jaces, the slashing physical prowess of Gideon, and the relentless wild magic of the elf, the demon was doing more dodging than attacking. He grimaced, claws holding his head, using his elbows and wings to minimize incoming attacks while Jace's magic pummeled his mind.

With the demon occupied, Chandra sculpted a tiny fire cyclone out of the air. She spun with it, letting it grow as she fed its fire, building up strength. She was immersed in it, consumed by it, dancing with the hot spiraling winds as part of it.

“*Ready?*” came Jace’s voice in her head.

“Ready!” Chandra shouted aloud.

The others simultaneously dodged out of the way, leaving Chandra a clear shot at the demon. She loosed her cyclone with a shout, and it tore across the chamber, slamming into him and blasting him against the wall.

Chandra’s spell dispersed. The demon was charred, smoking, propping his shoulder against the wall of the chamber. His hell-coal eyes looked to each of them, one by one. “Well done,” he said. “Well done. You’ve chosen to spend your efforts to defeat me, and you have. But every moment you’ve spent on me, you’ve allowed Zendikar to suffer. So you’ve still, of course, lost.”

Chandra and the others looked at each other.

“I promise you this,” the demon said in a low snarl. “I will walk every plane, scour every pathetic world, until I find a way to bring fitting punishment down upon your misguided lives.”

The air folded in on itself, swallowing the demon, and he was gone.

Chandra stood with the others. Jace’s hair was ruffled boyishly, belying his usual air of mystery. Gideon looked battered, but he had a grin on his face that made his facial hair crooked.

“Knew you’d come,” he said.

“But I told you no,” Chandra said with a raised eyebrow.

“I knew,” Gideon said.

“I’m Nissa,” said the elf.

“Chandra,” she said, offering her palm.

Nissa clasped Chandra’s hand in both of her own. Her fingers were soft, and her green-tinted eyes looked as deep as mossy wells. “Thank you.”

They all heard an echoing, scuffling, chittering sound. They turned to look at the passageway that led into the chamber. The Eldrazi swarm, the same horde that Chandra had lured away from Sea Gate, came skittering into the chamber, clambering on every surface.

Chandra looked to the spawn, and back to the others. Four nods. And like a chord played in harmony, four spells crackled to life.