

Episode 4: Little-Guy Shortcuts

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Aetherdrift*

16. 01. 2025

“Mohar Varma. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you in a place like this. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’d hardly call it a pleasure, Rudra. You and I have always known better than to indulge,” Mohar says. He takes a seat across from his old friend. This place does not suit him. In Ghirapur’s underground, there is no room for anything like aesthetics. Rudra, who once owned a mansion not unlike Mohar’s, has been rendered “equal” to his men. The burly guard captain now sleeps in the barracks with his former subordinates.

A crying shame. This man is a hero of Kaladesh. *What is he doing sleeping on a simple mattress, with only a footlocker to his name?*

Rudra hums to himself. The other guards—for in the name of camaraderie there is no such thing as privacy—watch with careful eyes. Two lean against the back wall. One takes this opportunity to start inspecting his weapon.

“And look at where that temperance has found us,” says Rudra. He leans back. The buzzing aether lights cast deep shadows across his scars.

Mohar looks around as he next speaks. Sweat trails down the back of his neck. “Your new friends here. Can they be trusted?”

Quiet. Then: “If it’s Kaladesh you’re speaking of, there needn’t be any question of the matter.”

Mohar’s smile is only a little strained. He leans forward, setting a sizable bottle of whiskey on the table as he does. Rudra’s tastes have not changed. “When you were court-martialed, I defended you. I testified to your loyalty, your dedication. I told the other consuls that I would trust you with my daughter’s life, if the case need be. Do you remember?”

A glint in Rudra’s eye. His hand closes around the bottle of whiskey. “I remember. ‘A patriot’s heart should be passionate in service and defense of his country.’ Was that the line?”

It was. The other consuls had all liked that one, so Mohar took a small measure of pride in it. And it was true. What were the lives of a few rebels and renegades in comparison with Kaladesh’s safety?

Mohar nods. “I need that passion again, Rudra. Kaladesh needs it.”

The grizzled guard tilts his head. “What are you planning?”

“An end to the debauchery,” says Mohar. But Rudra is a careful man, one given to precision: Part of the reason no charges have ever managed to stick to him. For all his supposed cruelty, he has a stellar record of service. Rudra’s endorsements stack up almost as tall as he is. And he is not a small man.

So, Mohar knows he must give more to get more. “A powerful mind mage has agreed to lend us his assistance with ‘convincing’ a few of the others over to our side—but he has his price.”

Rudra leans forward. “I’m listening.”

“I need a force to put an end to the race. We’ll lay a trap for the racers at the finish line and retake Kaladesh with all eyes upon us. Gonti will be too focused on managing the race itself to notice. And he’s already hired you for security.”

Rudra narrows his eyes. “It might be bloody, Mohar.”

“Then it will be bloody,” he answers. “No revolution worth having has ever been bloodless. Let us remind these so-called rebels what valor really looks like—and what the cost of their ambition should be.”

“Another day at the races, another racer put through the paces! I’m Vin—that stands for vigorous interrogation network—and today’s guest is ...”

The very stylish eyeball on screen gives a showy bow toward stage left. Only then does the camera zoom out to reveal another figure next to him: a large ape. Protruding bones form a proud crown around his head. His ulna and radius are, likewise, visible above the skin. All along the bones are purple gems glowing softly. They’re inset into his arm and match the toothy necklace on his chest.
“Grennar, one of our sponsors for this section of the Ghirapur Grand Prix. Grennar, I gotta tell you: it’s such an honor to have you around. The whole Multiverse is so excited to meet you.”

Grennar fans himself with a large reed. “Yet it is only you two who came to greet us. Curious.”

Vin wiggles and winces, which his interpreter mimics by adding in a scratch to the head. “Well, the whole Multiverse is watching, see? That’s what the cameras are for.”

Grennar looks into the camera. “Are the others in the Multiverse in there?”

“That’s where they’re watching from,” Vin signs. “Anyway, everyone’s dying to know about Mura-ganda! Tell us everything! What are you proud of? What do you hate? What are you excited to show off? I notice we’ve got big old stone loop-de-loops. Did you guys set those up? And how about all those floating islands—”

“They do not float,” Grennar says. He lopez over from his great throne shaped from fungus and approaches the camera. In the palm of his hand, it looks no bigger than a deck of cards.

“What do you mean they don’t float! I can see it right here, with my own little eye! That chunk of river is floating right over our heads! Ladies and gentlemen, friends and racers, you would not believe the preparations we had to make to be able to film on this spot. My gaffers are soaked, my grips are slippery, my best boy is a wet boy. Torrential downpours *just* out of frame—”

“They’re falling,” says Grennar. He points with his free hand toward the river Vin mentioned.



Art by: Samuele Bandini

Who knew an eyeball could go pale? Vin’s single sad sign hardly needs translation, but his translator’s not going to slack off now.

“W-what do you mean they’re falling?”

“It is falling, as all things are, as all things have been since the moon. When it tires of falling, it will land. I would suggest you not be here then,” says the druid. He turns the camera about this way and that, scratching at his cheek and tapping it right on the lens. “They’re all in here, you said?”

“Sort of. Hey, uh, how long do you think we have before the river gets tired of falling? Because I’m not a great swimmer, and *hey what are you doing* !”

Grennar—great Fang Druid, racing sponsor, ape who fears what yet more visitors might bring—hurls the camera as hard as he can toward the river up above. He must have enchanted it somehow. There’s no other way it could soar that hard, that fast—a scintillating meteor aimed straight at the impossible.

Trees are great.

Now, Chandra didn’t always think so. She used to think they were super boring things that blended into the background. Maybe potential fuel! Growing up in Ghirapur the way she did, there weren’t a ton of them, and Regatha isn’t the sort of plane where you find much that’s taller than a shrub anymore. Not that she had anything to do with that.

Of course, then she met Nissa, and all of that started to change. And then she met Wrenn and lost one of her newest friends.

But those are slow thoughts for strolls. Right now, she's racing. The trees she sees are ones she's whipping by at impossible speeds.

The trees themselves are impossible, too. Towering oaks reach up to a sky glittering with stars, only to come crashing down right onto them. You can't even try to outrun them. The damn things are as big as any Ravnican spire. Chandra's seen Avishkari flagships with less mass to them than the trunks now barreling down onto what passes for a racecourse here.

The ground itself isn't any help either. The tracks in Amonkhet and Avishkar were, for the most part, smooth.

This?

This track is more of a suggestion—and not one the land is taking seriously.

Even with Cloudspire's carefully tuned suspension and an all-terrain fore-wheel meant for climbing obstacles, it's rough going. Chandra manages to dodge a low-hanging branch only for one of her Cloudspire companions to clothesline himself on it. The abandoned vehicle shoots ahead and hits a bramble, sending it soaring into the air in a fearsome whirl of death, turning wheel over wheel like an axe looking for a head to sever.

An axe that's right in Chandra's way.

Maybe the others would have some elegant solution to this, but Chandra doesn't. She keeps right on going. She's got two Voyagers on either side of her—one armed with a simple hook and the other with a glowing orb she just assumes is capable of somehow exploding or vaporizing her.

"No chance we can talk this out? Maybe detour together?" Chandra calls.

When all she gets in response is a beep, Chandra accelerates as fast as her bike can go. If she times this right, then ... the swirling broken vehicle up ahead catches flame.

Chandra shoots straight through an opening. The wanderers smack straight into the wheel hubs without any time to adjust—she hears their rides exploding, sees the flash of light, tastes gasoline. Chandra has no time to celebrate breaking away from the pack. The great building-trees of Muraganda are falling all around her, one lurching down, the arboreal leviathan bound to crash in front of her and form a wooden wall thirty feet high any second now. For one terrible instant, Chandra remembers Realmbreaker—the Phyrexian World Tree—digging roots down into every world, every plane. A trickle of fear runs down Chandra's spine. She can't let it get to her. Not here. *Fear is the last thing to leave*, she thinks. Elspeth's taken to saying it before battles.

Racing is kind of like a battle, isn't it? Might as well bring a weapon.

Chandra stands in the saddle of her bike. The air around her begins to shimmer, a faint haze as defiant of natural law as the trees around her. In the palms of her hands, she calls forth a blazing sun, one that's all her own: a manifestation of how badly she wants to win.

Needs to win.

A flash of blinding light from which every racer must turn. A boiling heat that combusts the flammable woods nearby all at once. Steam sizzling into vapor.

If there isn't a path, Chandra Nalaar is going to make one.

She hurls the fireball at the oncoming tree. In the wake of the smoke and burning leaves, there is a pitch-black tunnel seared all the way through.

A steadying breath. *Nothing to worry about, see?* She'd handled it.



Art by: Brian Valeza

Flicking the rearview mirror, she tries to get a look at who's behind her. The Aether Rangers. No surprise there. Spitfire's the only other person in this race with reflexes anywhere near as good as Chandra's. The Quickbeasts are behind the Aether Rangers—flying over the obstacles might be easier—but it's slower than Spitfire's near-insane driving. Coming up in fourth is Amonkhet, with Basri using a veil of sand as a massive saw to cut through whatever tree parts Chandra missed. Losing a wheel hadn't slowed them down for long.

First place. First place feels good.

But not for long.

When Chandra emerges from the burning tunnel she's created, she spots *him* on the other side. Winter is somehow right up ahead of her.

However this guy keeps *cheating*, Chandra's getting sick of it. Some people came here to win the right way! What does he even need an Aetherspark for?

Who cares? He's not going to get it.

Chandra's going to make sure of that.

What does Nalaar even need an Aetherspark for?

Spitfire can't help but ask herself that, over and over. Watching Cloudspire streak through the jungle, you'd think it was a matter of life or death. Nalaar's pin-sharp turns and reckless acceleration would intimidate all but the bravest imitators.

Not that Spitfire is intimidated, or an imitator.

Rather than take the tunnel Nalaar opened—a death trap if Spitfire ever saw one—she throws the ride into reverse and waits for the Amonkheti to slice through the tree. No point in expending effort if she needn't. The Amonkheti would never be able to catch up on the upcoming floodplain; their mounts are already tiring, and the unsteady terrain has been horrible for their already stressed axles. Spitfire can tailgate here and overtake Nalaar later.

But it's watching the Amonkheti that brings the question to mind. They're desperate for the Aetherspark. You can see it in everything they do. Their chants. Zahur's speeches. Following behind them as she is, she can hear the old champion clear as day.

"Life flowers here as it once did upon Amonkhet. Fear not that which we will claim once more for our people! What horror could nature hold for those who greet death with open arms?"

Basri's sand-slicer meets the hull of the tree. Sawdust makes its best impression of the sandstorm from earlier. Spitfire finds herself holding her breath, even though she knows it won't hurt her.

But she lets out the breath when she spots him: the man who died saving Zahur only yesterday. Though his brown flesh has gone a little gray, there is no mistaking him. His companions have adorned his braids with lotus petals, his beard with gold leaf. He rides alongside Basri and Zahur, sharing in their storied deeds.

Spitfire met him once. He had stopped by the Aether Rangers garage before the race with an offering of sugared dates.

"Plenty from our land to yours," he had said then. "Let no one say Amonkhet does not honor the hosts of the race."

The ground starts to shake. Spitfire holds tight to the wheel. The floodplains up ahead shouldn't pose any trouble but ... what was it that she'd read in the guidebook for this place?

During your visit to Muraganda, it's best to keep an eye on the sky. You never know when a moonfall is going to hit! If you see more than five pieces breaking off at once, you can bet you're going to be dealing with a quake once they hit. If you feel the quake before you see any signs, it's already too late!

Sure enough, the gentle tremble beneath them intensifies into a hungry growl from the earth. The hippo pulling the Amonkheti lead chariot bolts right off the course. Shelter, from the look of it; Spitfire can see the glowing orb denoting an official GGP hideout. The Quickbeasts spiral through the sky toward the east, dodging meteors like a child trying to avoid getting hit by a ball.

Looking up at the Quickbeasts may have been a mistake.

In looking up at them, she has to confront the sight of the moonfall.



Art by: Nicholas Gregory

Two years ago, she'd woken up one morning to see a massive, porcelain-plated arm piercing the city she knew and loved. She hadn't bothered getting dressed. She'd run downstairs in just her pajamas. Her parents had to have been somewhere in the mansion.

It wasn't her parents whom she found. A cadre of her family's guards had already fallen to the enemy, their swords fused into their arms, their armor grafted onto their skin. Fighting them off had been the second-hardest thing Sita had ever done. Anything and everything she could get her hands on became an improvised weapon to beat away the people she'd come to love as friends.

The hardest thing? That had come later that day.

Her father had insisted they had time to wait, but he was wrong.

"Renegade Prime to Spitfire. Don't even think of trying to outrace this. We're pulling over into the valley with the others, and that's an order."

Pia Nalaar's voice overpowers the memory's distant scream.

Spitfire thinks of arguing the point. With everyone else heading for the valley as doom comes for the floodplain, they could gain an incredible advantage here. She could do it. If she can just clear her mind, she's sure that she can find some way ahead of the falling moon.

But Sita knows the fear that sees her hands shaking on the steering wheel well.

It's not worth risking it.

She turns toward the valley.

Whatever an Aetherspark may mean to Nalaar, it means one thing and one thing only to Spitfire.
Never again having to bow to her father's will.

Min isn't Far Fortune.

She'd like to be, though. Who wouldn't? All the Endriders owe their lives to Fortune's bravery and machinations. Where other people see endings, Fortune sees futures, manifests them, carves them from the ribcages of her enemies—if she must.

So, when Min sees the gigantic chunks of the moon tumbling down to the earth with blistering, eye-watering speed, she doesn't run. Fortune doesn't either, at the head of the Endriders' pack. Howling echoes cut through the roar of their engines; the bray of their chainsaws is a dare to the sky, the earth, the heavens themselves.

Mincemeat's heart swells. She steps out of the driver's seat of her ride. If she balances her foot *just* right, she can still steer. Wind whips through her hair, and a jagged chunk of rock slices her cheek. Behind her, someone beats a set of war drums.

"What do we have to gain?"

"A future!"

"What do we have to lose?"

"Nothing we haven't burned away!"

Of course, from where she is, there's no avoiding the trap. So focused is she on Fortune, on the coming apocalypse in the sky, that she has no eyes for the ground.

A yawning pit opens beneath her, one large enough to swallow Mincemeat and the five riders around her. Her ride shoots straight for the ground at top speed. Hitting the pit doesn't feel like a mercy at the time, but it sure ends up being one. After the initial shock of being sent soaring into the air by inertia's cruel and uncaring hand, Mincemeat finds herself having landed in Fortune's trunk.

It is the happiest moment of Mincemeat's life. It may also be one of the last.

Min scurries to her feet. Bruises already stain her side, and she's pretty sure she cracked a rib landing the way she did. Fortune's co-pilot is already scrambling over to help her.

But in standing, she spots what's coming for everyone trapped in the pit.

Raiders. Gotta be about a dozen of them. Bad enough to begin with, but when all of them are on dinosaurs, it's far, far worse.

A howl splits Min's eardrums. Exploding out from the undergrowth is a creature that shouldn't have possibly fit in foliage—a long-necked dinosaur the size of a Gastal beast, maybe bigger. No. Definitely bigger. There's a ramshackle fortress on its back comprised of three levels of wood and lizardmen.

Heavily armed lizardmen.



Art by: Brian Valeza

“Holy—”

“Smoke! Smoke! Aw, crud, there’s so much smoke! What do we do!”

Daretti’s eyes are wide. *What the devil is that thing? And why are the people aboard it aiming at the racers?* They’d received *assurances* from the druids that no such thing would happen.

Yet here they are. Assurances aren’t worth much, in the end.

“Arm the cannons!” Daretti shouts. “See to it that all our slicers are slicing. It may be possible to hamstring the beast and prevent its advance!”

The Rocketeers scramble to action. Only half of them have slicers, but the ones that do don’t exactly need an excuse to use them. The whirl of blades soon wars with the whistle of the falling arrows.

“Good!” Daretti says. An arrow punches through his windshield. Sparks fly from the console as he tries to figure out their next move. If they can just get to its leg ... “Maintain your formation ... straight ahead! Top speed!”

“Top speed! Top speed!”

Goblin ears flap in the wind as they reach speeds previously unheard of. Daretti clings to the roll cage. His readouts are spiraling all over the place; smoke is filling the driver’s seat. All of that can be fixed if they get through this. The beast’s neck may be considerable, but its eyesight was probably rudimentary at best, and—



Art by: Anthony Devine

And he's upside down. The whole car is.

"What?" he shouts.

The answer to the impossible situation soon presents itself. Though he had accounted for the biggest creature, he'd failed to take into consideration the smaller ones hiding in wait. As the goblins had closed in, they'd run straight over a snare trap. He can see it now: the net holding them aloft and the glowing, reptilian eyes of their captors. Wicked-edged weapons, teeth each as big as one of Daretti's fingers, catch the gleam of the falling asteroids above.

They could fight this. Maybe. There are slicers, after all, but—

But the raiders tear those right off the front of the ride like tearing the wings from a butterfly.

"Boss ..." comes Redshift's voice, "This is big trouble."

Daretti swallows. "You might be right, Redshift. But not to worry, we can find some way to—"

"Bye, Boss! Real nice working with you! I promise I'll be a better boss than you ever were! Cooler, too!"

What the—? Daretti blinks. Redshift's sidecar goes up in a fiery explosion—one just big enough to scare the raiders off for an instant. Redshift and the other goblins take advantage of this to spill out of the vehicle like some sort of highly volatile and malevolent river.

"Hey! Hey, where are you going? Let me out of here!"

"Sorrriyyyyy!" shout the goblins.

But, as Daretti hears his captors start to rasp and wheeze in bony laughter, he has his doubts.

In the back of her mind, Chandra knows the others are splitting off. She even knows that it's the smart thing to do. To stay on track when those asteroids are about to make impact is just about the most foolish thing she could possibly do.

But Winter's not backing down, so she won't either.

Streaking across the floodplains, she blasts branches and rocks alike out of the way to keep up with him. On a straightaway, she can catch up with him. And once she does, she's going to make sure he doesn't cheat to get ahead. Not again.

The wind whistles in her ears. She's half a car's length away. Any second now, they're going to impact, and any second now, they're going to have to keep from getting blown away in a hundred directions.

Focus.

Breathe in, slowly. Count to four. Breathe out. The whole world might exist only a yard at a time right now, but she needs to be present for it; she needs to be aware. Whatever Winter is doing to get ahead might be dangerous. Nissa's never going to forgive Chandra if she gets hurt doing this.

It's that awareness that gives her a split-second warning before they hit the raiders. Chandra spots the spiny crown of a dinosaur hiding in a pit the instant before he leaps toward them.

Reflexes overtake conscious thought. She whips her ride around and slides out of the way of danger, her wheels digging deep ravines into the floodplains below. Clouds of dust threaten to block her vision. Her goggles help, thankfully, once she remembers to tug them on.

But what she sees doesn't make any sense. A colossal, mottled dinosaur unleashes an ear-piercing roar as it approaches the racers. *Where had it come from?* The thing's neck is as wide as the track itself, and at least half as long.

The second she registers it is the second it registers her—it and all of its friends. The small dinosaur that attacked them carries a dozen raiders on its own. A giant, tusked lizard trumpets as it breaks out of the pit, and three club-tailed creatures with fearsome horns soon follow.

A blast of fire keeps them away from her. But Chandra spots the glow of the Speed Demon charging ahead without a worry in the world.

She has to get back on the road.

Chandra starts her engine. A second later, she's powering through the dust again, coughing up a storm. The second she clears the wall of fog, she sees them: Winter, the Speed Demon, the creature dangling from the cage, and the raider on a raptor riding alongside them.

The raider throws a hook at the Speed Demon, a hook that catches on the bars of the little creature's cage. Instead of getting his ghouls to fight back, Winter swerves. Momentum and angles combine to tear the hook free—and the cage along with it.

The little creature yelps as it falls into a waiting sack.

Winter pulls away.

If she stays on track, she can win. If she stays on track, she can bring home the Aetherspark and fix everything. Chandra swears and turns the wheel.

"Nalaar, whatever you're going to try—"

“You’re co-captain! It still counts if you win,” Chandra says. “Get ahead, and I’ll catch up later.”

“This is insanity,” Kolodin counters. “Why throw away a certain victory?”

“I’ll see you at the finish line!” Chandra says.

She pulls up next to the dinosaur—one easily as tall as a house.

Breathe in. One, two, three, four.

Chandra Nalaar jumps from her ride and hitches a ride on one that’s more old-fashioned.

Opportunity only comes once.

The others turn toward the valley. The dinosaur tears through them like a child flinging about toys. Arrows pierce the fleeing; nets capture the unlucky.

There is absolute chaos on and off the track—no one will try to edge her out if she’s able to get ahead now.

Spitfire knows what she has to do. *Fate only gives you one chance. You have to take it.*

Let the others struggle as they willed—she has a race to win.

She jams another canister of aether into the port on the suit’s shoulder and twists. Lighting arcs across her tongue; her blood sings a song only she can hear. All around her, arrows slow to a crawl, boulders hover mid-air, other racers drift to a gradual advance. The horror writ plain on their faces is now an unmoving mask.

Spitfire reaches out the driver-side window. Grabbing onto one of the raider’s lashes, she gives it a firm tug. Momentum tears him from his mount and sends him crashing into another, but Spitfire is ready for the thrash of the dinosaur that follows. In the half-second its tail is in the air, she shoots beneath it. Up ahead, the pikes and spears of the raiders pierce anything that would attempt going beneath the biggest of the dinosaurs.

They won’t stop Spitfire.

She charges straight through, turning a deadly slalom into a leisurely scenic drive. Behind her, she hears one of the Speedbrood’s wheels popping open, hears the car spin out.

But she doesn’t stop. Can’t. Not if she wants to win.

The flattened tail of the dinosaur provides her a makeshift ramp, one she can use to jump the pits they have set up ahead. Spitfire amps the engine. Beneath her ride, the solid muscle of the dinosaur is no different from the cobblestone streets of Ghirapur. She swerves out of the way of the raiders quick enough to try and stop her as she streaks along the dinosaur’s spine, heading straight for the head.

Just as she crests it, time snaps violently back into place. She’s aware that what she took to be the roar of the fight around her is actually Pia’s voice over the speaker.

“Have to stop. She might be in trouble!”

What?

Spitfire launches them. Airtime will give her a moment to think, to process, to—*ah*.

Her.

The younger Nalaar's ride is crushed underfoot by a rampaging dinosaur. Spitfire's heart drops into her stomach—but she spots her, then: a plume of flame clinging to the side of a massive raptor.

Nalaar's given up the race?

"Turn around! Can't you hear me? We need to help her!"

The fear in Pia's voice triggers another memory. *We need to help her!*

Sita and her father rushing to Ishani's house in a rented vehicle. Her mother's best friend. If she wasn't home, then she had to be there.

Her father's terrible driving. The two of them caught in traffic. Sita begging her father to let her go, to let her drive. Anything. They couldn't just sit here. If they did, they'd never make it in time.

"Stay calm," he told her, then. "Everything has its method, Sita."

Twenty minutes later, they were only half a mile down the road, and Sita watched a limb of the Invasion Tree crash into Ishani's house.

Her throat threatens to close.

"Go," she says. "All family's ever done is slow me down."

With a flick of a switch, Spitfire switches off her radio.

His name is Loot, and he's been having a *hell* of a time. The race itself was bad enough, what with all the zooming about this way and that, the too-small cage, and Winter's awful goons. Loot's been face to face with the Quickbeasts and the Amonkheti undead chariot-pullers. The dinosaurs and their riders are just the newest in a long line of scary things.

All things considered, this might even be an improvement. The bone cage is bigger than the metal one. He can stretch and roll, and his tail isn't cramped anymore. *What's going to happen from here?* He has no idea. But at the very least, he can finally enjoy some time to take up space and—

"Unhand me! You have no idea the fury you're unleashing upon yourselves! The Rocketeers will not take kindly to my imprisonment, you have my word!"



Art by: Chris Seaman

Loot scoots over to the wall of the cage. Looks like he's got a new roommate. It figures. Loot can't have anything in this life without losing it moments later. So long, privacy. It was nice to have you for a second.

The newcomer is ... a goblin? Loot thinks that's the word for him. Green skin, big pointy ears, the smell of explosives and oil. Introductions are important—especially for prospective roommates. Loot walks up to him and holds out a paw.

"Polite little creature, aren't you?" the goblin says. He dusts off his shoulders. "The name's Daretti."

Loot nods and squeaks.

Daretti blinks. He's confused. "Your name is Loot. And somehow, I understand that. Some sort of rudimentary telepathy?"

Loot trills melodically. It's always a bit exhausting, getting past this part. He doesn't know why people can understand him. It's just one more question about his past without an answer.

"Well, at least I'll have good company. You seem ..." Daretti waves a hand around, his brow furrowing, like he's trying really hard to think of something. "Like you're good company. I don't suppose you know anything about explosives?"

Loot shakes his head.

"Engineering?"

Another shake.

“What about racing? Are you native to this place, or are you from ...”

Loot chirps.

“Not a fan of home? Well, I’m not too fond of my own,” Daretti says. From within his jacket, he pulls a small disk of something delicious smelling, along with two metal cups. These he puts down between the two of them. “Do you have any dietary restrictions, Loot? I’ve some Fioran chocolate I prepared for just this occasion.”

Oh, that smells like the stuff Vraska gave him sometimes! He sits up on his haunches politely.

“A taste of home,” says Daretti. He presses a button on his clockwork vambrace. Hot water pours into both cups. The disk melts away, and eventually, he stirs it with a spoon. “Here.”

Loot picks up the cup and tips it to his lips. The liquid is thick and dark. Not as sweet as the stuff Vraska used to give him, but still close to home.

“If we’re going to be sacrificed the way they say, at least we’ll go out like gentlemen,” Daretti says.

Oh. Sacrificed. Loot puts the cup down. “I’ll tell you something, Loot. This whole thing’s been weird for me,” says Daretti. He keeps going, but Loot starts tuning him out. For one thing, Loot’s tired of listening to other people’s rants.

And for another, Loot’s spotted a friend. Slinking among the foliage, he sees a slip of orange-red fire—and then the distinct white and red of the Cloudspire Racing uniform. *The flaming girl!*

She shoots Loot a thumbs-up and puts a finger over her lips.

From scrapped part to scrapped part she goes, hiding behind whatever the raiders have brought back from the race. All the while, Daretti keeps going on about wherever Fiora is. Loot pretends to listen intently. Daretti needs that as much as he needed the chocolate.

To their right is one of the Rocketeers’ biggest vehicles. Must have been Daretti’s, judging by the size of the thing. The flame-girl jumps into it to hide as a patrol goes by.

Loot’s little heart hammers. *She’s really going to make it!*

Over the side door. Closer, closer ...

Until she finds herself face to face with a raider who had just turned a corner.

Flame-girl readies a blast, and Loot feels the heat all the way from the cage. In the end, she doesn’t have to fire it, though, because the raider ends up crumbling to the ground like a stack of pebbles.

Standing behind him is another woman. Though she’s a little older and darker, there’s no mistaking it, she and the fire-girl have got to be related. They’ve got the same smirk.

“Ah, Chandra. Where would you be without your mother looking out for you, hm?”

Chandra’s grin is wide. “Probably in jail.”

“Make sure you get the family cell,” says her mother. “Now let’s get you out of here.”

“One sec. Gotta make sure my friends are all right,” says Chandra. She approaches the cage and kneels by the lock, only for her mother to tap her on the shoulder.

“Let me take a look at it,” she says.

And, sure enough, Chandra’s mom has the lock figured out all before Daretti has even realized there’s anything going on behind him. When the door swings open, he half-jumps in his chair. “What—”

“Three captains in one place. Is that ride still functional, Daretti? Mine isn’t meant to outrun death lizards.”

Daretti’s the one grinning, now. “Of *course* it can run. I built so many backups into—”

“Less talking, more escaping,” says Chandra. “We’re gonna have company soon. Little guy, you’re with me.”

Loot doesn’t need to be told twice. He scampers up onto Chandra’s shoulder. While the other two slip into the ride, Loot boops Chandra’s cheek with his nose.

He chirps once. *Thanks for coming back.* Chandra blinks in surprise.

“Hey, don’t mention it. I’ve been there,” Chandra says. “If you like, you can hang out with me and Team Cloudspire. If I get back there, anyway ... guys? Can we get going yet?”

“Almost!” answers Daretti.

A howl from the raiders. A horn echoing throughout the camp. They’ve been spotted.

Chandra hurls a fireball in their direction. As half of the camp explodes, she hops into the ride with the others. “Not fast enough! Let’s go!”

“Kids these days don’t have any patience,” Pia says with a sigh. Nevertheless, from the rumble of the engine coming back to life, they’re making progress. “Chandra, cover us. Daretti, does this thing have weapons?”

A spear whistles past them. “They didn’t find the cherry bombs. Deploying them now.”

Something under the ride rumbles; steam covers the now open driver’s seat. A second later, Loot’s grabbing onto Chandra for dear life. Whatever power this thing’s got left is all being used up at once. They’re knocked against the lip of the truck as they take off toward the track.



Art by: Caio Monteiro

Spears fly at them, and nets drop from above. Each is met with a blast of flame from Chandra or a slice of Daretti's expert weaponry. Between the steam and the explosions, they've earned a little breathing room. But only a little.

Hurtling toward them on teeth-gnashing raptors are the raiders, and they're not happy about their sacrifices taking off from the looks of things.

Loot yelps. Everyone in the car understands what he says.

"Left? There's nothing out there. Just that tree. We don't have any vertical capability in this thing," says Pia.

"Listen to him, I think he's onto something!" says Chandra. "The Speed Demons keep getting ahead, right? Maybe he's why! He might know some little-guy shortcuts or something!"

"Do you have any idea how nonsensical you just sounded?" says Daretti.

But Chandra doesn't have the time to ruminate on what she's doing.

She lunges for the steering wheel and turns left.

"Chandra, what are you doing?" shouts Pia.

"Trust him! You've got this, right, Loot?"

Loot leans forward. His tail is glowing brighter than ever. All he has to do is focus, and ...

"Chandra, we're going to die if we keep—"

Pia's warning is cut off by the outer bark of the tree falling away like a cicada shedding its skin. Beneath it, the spiraling light of an Omenpath.

"A little-guy shortcut," Pia says.

A second later, they crash over the border into a different world.



Art by: Izzy