
Episode 6: The Bloodless Revolution

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From set *Aetherdrift*

20. 01. 2025

Tumbling through the sky above Amonkhet, where the ground below is sand and water and vegetation, is one thing. The sand might absorb a bit of your impact. Tumbling through the sky above Ghirapur?

Chandra's going to have to have a word with Loot after this.

"Back to your stations!" shouts Daretti. And the good thing about having fallen out of the sky yesterday, too, is that they all know what to do. Pia starts angling the car's makeshift wings; Chandra leans over and starts charging up a fireball; Daretti seizes the controls. Loot clings to Chandra's shoulders as she looks over the bustling city.

She expects to feel relief, joy, or a certain nostalgia. And some of that is certainly blooming within her. But as she realizes that the masses below are not celebrating but panicking, a different feeling takes hold.

Worry.

"Mom, do you see—"

"Yes. From the colors, those are Consulate thugs," Pia says. She has to shout to be heard over the roar of the wind. "I should have known I'd be seeing them again. Fascism is a fungus."

"Whatever they're up to, we've got to stop it," Chandra says. "I don't even know what they're doing so close to the finish line."

"Nothing good," Daretti says. "But can we focus on landing first?"

She must admit: he has a point. They're closing in on the ground fast. *Where should she aim her fire?* As much as torching the gathered Consulate guards at the gleaming gold wall tempts her, there's too much risk of splash damage. She aims for a sturdy-looking roof instead, then scorches the side of the same building all the way down to try and slow them down.

It works. But there's only so much you can do to slow down a half-ton vehicle of pure goblin ingenuity—the crash is coming.



Art by: Michal Ivan

This time, she's smart enough to throw herself off the car *before* impact and slow herself down with a gout of fire. She lands in a cart of plush toys themed after each of the racing teams. Who knew she'd find comfort in the embrace of fleece sharks? Or that chordatan plush toys sold so well?

In the haze of fans scrambling away, smoke rising from the wreck, and guards barking at one another, Chandra has a second to feel proud for remembering. Loot squeezes around her, as if to say thank you.

But that's before she hears the voice.

"You're always showing up at the last-possible second, aren't you?"

It's a voice that she hasn't heard in a few years, maybe more. A voice she never thought she'd hear again.

Chandra pulls herself to her feet. "Jace?" she says.

Her eyes find him where she least expected him: flanked on either side by the Consulate's powerfully muscled goons. Vraska is at his side. Ral had told her they were alive, but whatever hope she had that they might be helping or undercover or carrying out some weird scheme of Jace's is dashed the second Vraska hits an oncoming marshal with the pommel of her cutlass. The man crumples to the ground, and Vraska makes no move to help him.

Questions swarm her mind. *Jace, what's going on? What are you doing? Where have you been?*

Loot chirps with a strange combination of feelings. Chandra feels both a fondness and fear of Jace in that exclamation.

Just as she looks back to her new friend, Jace raises a hand, and the little guy's eyes go blank. Loot, limp as can be, falls from her shoulders. She barely manages to catch him.

"I don't have time to explain this to you," says Jace. "Chandra, let's not make this difficult. Can you please just get out of the way for once?"

Chandra's heart sinks. This can't *really* be Jace, can it? He'd never do something like that. Loot's just a little guy! When Chandra glances at Vraska, she sees the same hesitation. This can't really be happening.

A bolt of lightning overhead; thunder like the footsteps of giants shakes the ground beneath their feet. The sky goes as dark as Chandra's hopes for the near future. Worse is the horrible, screeching roar of what can only be a dragon. In the distance, she spots another column of flame consuming a building—but this one didn't come from her.

That storm ... they'd seen something like it on Amonkhet. *But what is it doing here?*

What is going on?

Before she can process the chaos—and there is so much of that—the city's automated defenses rumble to life. Bolts of aether fire at the massive silhouette soaring above the skies of Ghirapur. Burning and screams fill the air, but so too does the hissing of sprinklers. A fine mist pours over the streets; some of it is ash, some is water. Airships and pilots take flight. First the smaller, maneuverable jets. It'll take some time to launch the flagships. But they'll launch them, Chandra's sure. It's just a matter of whether they can handle something like this. A dragon is quick and nimble, a difficult target.

A tingle rises at the back of Chandra's neck. She wasn't here during the invasion, but so many of her friends and family were. They've been preparing, all this time, for it to happen again.

She looks for Pia in the crush of the crowd. When she spots her mother helping onlookers evacuate, she lets out a breath.

But the reprieve is short lived. Another roar from the dragon, another flash of impossible light. Its blazing breath melts one of the roof-mounted defense cannons to little more than slag.

"Shouldn't you be helping them stop that dragon? Please. I need you to be anywhere but here," says Jace.

She can't look at him. Can't bring herself to. Not when she's not sure how much damage this is going to cause, how afraid everyone must be.

"That kid is my responsibility," Jace says. "Let me look after him. Go save the day somewhere else."

He's right. She does want to help. She wants to help more than she wants to stand around settling whatever this is, with whoever that is—if it's really Jace.

But he's wrong about one thing.

"I told Loot I would look after him," Chandra says. "So how about you back off instead?"

She sees frustration and anger behind those glowing blue eyes now, instead of that normal, cool shade of Jace. "I won't fight you, Chandra. But they will," says Jace. A wave of his hands sends the armored toughs charging straight at her.

Fights are messy at the best of times. In a cramped Ghirapur street, with the crowds running for their lives from a massive dragon attack? Chandra's in a bind. Her blasts are going to have to be tight and controlled if she wants to get out of this.

One of them comes at her; she ducks the swing of a punch and socks him in the gut with a fierce hook. He staggers back, the air knocked out of him, while his companions descend on her from all around. Kicks and punches become all Chandra knows in the crush of the fight. Tucking Loot into her shirt is the only way she can guarantee he won't come to any harm; she needs both hands for the fight.

Yet as she blasts the guards back and gets them a little breathing room, she keeps trying to find Jace. *Where has he gone? Is he veiling himself as one of the guards? And where's Vraska?*

There, behind her! In the commotion, they'd managed to get around her. Chandra ducks to avoid a swipe from Vraska and backs up, fire billowing in her hands.

"Why's he so important? If this is something to help the Multiverse, you know you can count on me. Why are you doing this?"

Vraska frowns. "It's complicated, Chandra."

"Don't give me that!" Chandra shouts. She shoots a ball of fire at her only for it to fizzle right through and splash against the wall. *An illusion. Of course.*

"She's right. There's no place for you in this plan. You wouldn't understand it," Jace says, behind her again.

Chandra whirls around to find him, only to spot him at the raised gate the guards had been patrolling. Wait. There are wrecks in front of that thing, aren't there? Her chest goes tight. Spitfire's car is a twisted pile of scrap metal. Is she okay?

The Aether Rangers aren't the only ones who got caught in the trap, either. A Keelhauler ship has been cracked down the center; a Quickbeast is lashed to the earth with chains.

"What did you *do*?" Chandra roars.

"I have bigger things to worry about, Chandra," says Jace. "One last time: are you going to hand over Loot, or are you going to make this difficult?"

It's grim math that she's forced to do in that instance: her new friend Loot's safety, the lives in danger from the dragon attack, the other racers, Jace himself.

What's the right thing to do?

She touches the pin Nissa gave her. "If you're willing to hurt people to get him, then you don't deserve him," she says. "Do your worst."

A terrible, arrogant laugh. One that sounds more like the Jace she'd first met than the Jace she's come to call a friend. "You're not ready for my worst. But if you want me to force your hand ..."

Spirals of magic flash around Jace; a net of misty white surrounds the racers still pulling themselves from the wrecks. One by one, their eyes begin to go white. Far Fortune stands from the wreck of her car, her wicked hook glowing with magic. A war howl spreads through the gathered racers.



Art by: Borja Pindado

As one, they charge.

“Jace, you’re losing it!” Chandra shouts.

“You’re the one who pushed me to this. You only have yourself to thank,” Jace says.

Captain Howler splinters the scaffold she’s standing next to. Redshift’s rockets land by her feet. It’s only by running and diving around the streets of Ghirapur that she’s able to keep safe.

She can blast them. She knows she can. But if she does, Jace is going to be right, and people *are* going to suffer because of her. Chandra knows full well what fire can do to flesh. These are people she’s shared drinks with, people who have lent her ratchets and grease and teased her about her habit of getting up in the saddle ... okay, yes, maybe they tried to kill her out on the track. *But can she hurt them now? When they don’t even know what they’re doing?* Chandra ducks beneath the toppled half of a Keelhauler ship. If she huddles down, they can’t see her underneath. Time to think. Time to figure out what to do. Outside, the dragon roars, thunder cracks, and she hears the wordless howl of the racers intent on getting to Loot.

But just as she’s taken a breath, the wood next to her yawns and breaks. A plank whacks her in the ribs; a chest knocks into her from behind. In the sawdust, she spots Vraska.

Chandra’s never been one to hold back. She blurts out the first thing that hits her mind. “You can’t possibly be okay with this,” she says. “Jace can be an ass sometimes, but this isn’t your style. You have to talk some sense into him!”

The second she’s done she expects an attack.

It doesn't come.

Instead, there is a moment's silence in the chaos as Vraska searches for what it is she wants to say. Chandra, bruised, gets to her feet.

"You know I'm right." Vraska finds her voice. "The pyromancer's in there. Apprehend her."

And, sure enough, Chandra's cover is blown. Racers and guards flood into the ship sure as seawater. What good is the fire collecting in her palm against a group like this? She can't blow them up. She can't blow this place up. "Just give Loot back to us, and we can be done here," says Vraska.

Chandra grits her teeth.

There's another way out of this. There must be.

But for now? She's going to have to play along until she finds it.

There's *got* to be a way out of this.

Sure, it's not looking great for her right now. Swarmed by guards and forced to listen to her father lecture her about the state of Avishkar, Sita would seem to have no freedom over her life to anyone watching. They'd think she was trapped.

But she isn't. She knows she isn't. If she's still breathing, so is Spitfire. Their hopes and dreams aren't so easily extinguished. No matter what her father thinks.

"This buffoonery doesn't suit you," says Mohar. "You've never been the boor, Sita. From the first days you could read, you've tried to learn as much as you can. You're an academic! A good girl!"

An academic who has no interest in this ideological discussion. Sita isn't looking at him, but past him. While he's taken the time to lecture her, the others have fallen into the same traps she and Winter did. The least of anyone's problems, really, in comparison to the storm raging overhead.

Inside, the pieces start to fall into place: The race hasn't been called off. Whoever crosses the finish line still gets the Aetherspark. If she can just claim it for herself, then her father will never be able to stop her again.

She can do it.

The storm's darkness can give her cover. The other racers aren't going to make for the finish line when they're all tied up. Her father's guards have hauled her close to the platform to keep her away from any other racers. Something about minimizing their influence on her. All the better, really, because it puts her as close as she could be to the finish line without being there herself. She can see Vin trembling in his suit from here.

Most important of all, she still has one canister left. All she has to do is activate it, then she's home free. The Aetherspark is hers—they can't catch her—and there's no one else who can make it to the finish line.

Her father's men hadn't handcuffed her. Mohar was too concerned about the optics of his daughter being arrested to follow through. If she looks demure while she reaches behind her back for the aether, he might not even notice. He never does. He doesn't know anything about her.

"Think of all you've thrown away by doing this. All the years of study, all the careful crafting of your reputation."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Sita says. "I wasn't thinking."

It hurts her to lie to him. She wishes it didn't, but it does, and she has to. Aether crackles against the glass of the container. Sita bends her wrist to line it up with her suit's nearest port.

"I just ..." Mohar paces this way and that. "What would your mother think?"

Maybe it's the question, like a needle to the temple, that makes her eyes look beyond him. Maybe it's something else. But what she spots then changes the course of her life.

For in that moment, as Mohar paces, she catches sight of the guards hauling Chandra Nalaar away. Which doesn't make any sense. *Chandra Nalaar? On the track, she might be a careless amateur, but off it, she's a hero. Why isn't she blasting her way out of this?*

The answer: their fellow racers, eyes white, flanking her.

Nalaar must not want to hurt them.

Wait, isn't that one of her friends from the revolt? Jace ... something? But it sure doesn't seem like a friendly talk they're having. And then, in slow motion, Sita spots Pia emerging from a wreck, a hunk of metal in hand, ready to bludgeon her daughter's way to freedom.

Her heart lifts. It's going to be okay. And with Chandra free, there's going to be fire everywhere, which will make her escape even easier—

Except. *Except.*

One of the guards spots Pia before she can make it all the way. When she raises her arms to swing, the guard hits her with a vicious blow to the gut. Pia doubles over.

"Mom!" screams Chandra.

Mom! Sita hears an echo of a memory she wishes was more distant.

Chandra rages against her handlers only to get struck across the face for her trouble. The rage in those bloodshot, burning eyes?

Sita knows that rage.

What would your mother think of you?

Sita's heart hangs between beats.

The guards grab Pia by the hair, put a blade to her throat ...

Sita knows what she has to do. No other daughters are going to lose their mothers. Not on her watch. Never, ever again.

Canister meets port; aether meets bloodstream. In the screaming chaos of the moment, only Sita Varma knows anything of peace. And the peace she knows is that of a storm before it hits the shore.

In that instant, it is an eon. Sita throws off the hands keeping her in place, rushes past her hapless father, and dives straight for Pia Nalaar. Sita drives her heel into the guard's instep, moves behind him, and makes use of her considerable reach to grab his wrist. Wrenching the blade away isn't enough. Sita's blood is too hot. She twists his arm as she dips under him and holds his joint in place. Torque's as effective here as it is in an engine: his shoulder pops out of its joint. Levering her shoulder against the bad side of his elbow, she pulls. A satisfying crunch heralds a broken arm. In slow motion, the man howls and doubles over.

Good.

Not much time left. Sita takes Pia's hand and closes it around the guard's knife. There's one more guard to take care of—and she'll have to be quick. Sita dips beneath him and punches him straight in the throat. As the aether wears off, he crumples to the ground, sputtering for breath.

Sound hits her all at once, a battering-ram cacophony, but when Sita stands, it's with certainty. Pia and Chandra alike both stare at her in shock.

You owe me, Nalaar. That's what Spitfire would say.

But it isn't Spitfire who saved them. "Team Avishkar?" she says.

"Team Avishkar!" says Chandra.



Art by: Benjamin Ee

Every part of a car—engines, steering wheel, axle, transmission, exhaust—has a job. For a racer to be able to soar down the track at lightning speed, everything has to work perfectly in tandem. The slightest misalignment is enough to spell certain death.

Engine, wheels, and transmission. Chandra, Pia, and Sita. After a race across three planes, Team Avishkar is finally in alignment.

Chandra's not willing to blast the other racers, but with Sita around, she doesn't have to. As her two protégées dart around the battlefield blowing things up and knocking out who they can, Pia Nalaar calls out their next target. Daretti, having gotten out while the getting was good, sends a flock of drones from an enclave that's beyond the reach of the guards. With all the pairs of eyes they've scavenged together, nothing is going to catch them unaware again. Even Loot's woken up—Jace must have lost focus on

keeping him under after all the mind-puppetry—and seems confused but generally enthusiastic about all of this.

In the symphony, the perfect harmony of their movements, one thing is clear to anyone watching: if they'd all raced together, they'd already be on the podium. And there are a lot of people watching—because no matter where you are in the Multiverse, the show must go on.

“Are you getting this?” Vin says to his camera operator. Huddled behind a statue of Gonti, it's all he can do to keep narrating.

The thopter following him around starts its countdown. “Live in three, two, one ...”

“Ladies, gentlemen, and fight fans Multiverse-wide! It's your in-*vin*-cible pal Vin, reporting live from the Ghirapur Grand Prix. I don't believe my eye! Today's events are completely unprecedented!”

He risks a peek around the corner. “Break-ups, shake-ups, and make-ups! After some tomfoolery at the finish line, most of our racers have been knocked out of contention and press-ganged into battle. But, as you can see, that won't stop Avishkar's favorite daughters from fighting for justice, no matter the odds. Look at that teamwork! I tell you, with all the bones Spitfire's breaking, you might want to keep your kids from watching!”

It's hard to keep his voice level when there's so much danger afoot, but, truth be told, this is what he lives for. And this footage!

“Far Fortune coming in with a nasty overhead swing from her hook but—yowch! She's going to feel that kidney punch in the morning, ladies and gentlemen. Forget Spitfire, we need to name her Gutshot!”

Yes, the rest of the city may be in the throes of chaos. But there are heroes here, and there are heroics to film, and Vin's pretty sure they're all going to be fine. Except when the dragon roars overhead and a belch of flame heads straight for the statue they're sheltering under. Vin and the thopter bolt with all the speed they can manage; fire singes Vin's nice suit. Still, he speaks straight into the mic.

“And while all this is going on, we've got a dragon to deal with, too! That's right: a real, fire-breathing dragon. Visham, show them what we're working with. Look at those scales! I bet those teeth are all as big as my eye! We're in *danger*!” Vin vaults over a Speedbrood wreck and huddles down again.

But when he turns the camera back on the fighting, Vin feels a shiver of bad news.

“Looks like we're heading into the final fight of the evening. All our other racers are down for the count! We've got Chandra Nalaar and crew advancing on our troublemakers here. Smoldering stares abound. You can hear the tension. Or maybe that's just the dragon's roaring? Thopter One, is that thing getting closer?”

“I think so,” says Thopter One, and Vin winces, because that really might be true, and he doesn't want to have to bolt for another hiding spot.

“Then let's hope this is taken care of quickly! Chandra Nalaar, heating up her signature move—”

He's close enough that he can hear Jace's response. “We've wasted too much time on this.”

Watching the others crumple to the ground is bad enough—but hearing Avishkar's favorite daughter howl in pain, seeing the blood drip like a font from her nose and the corners of her eyes? Whatever magic Jace is using against her is nasty stuff; the coils of his spell seem to drill right into her temples. When she hits the ground, Vin is relieved to see her still breathing—but he's also just as shocked. Even Jace looks surprised, for a moment, at the severity of his own attack.

“Thopter One,” he whispers. “Change focus.”

The thopter swings the camera around in search of something else to focus on, but Vin can't tear his eye away from the sight. Not quite yet. He watches as Jace picks up something from Chandra's crumpled form—a little creature of some kind.

Vin pivots. "Right, sorry about the dead air—"

He stops short. The dragon is bearing down on them, perched on the ruins of the building overhead. Its glowing eyes bore into Vin. Plumes of smoke curl from its nostrils.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's been an honor being your host," Vin says, staring up at it.

The dragon opens its mouth. Within its gullet, Vin witnesses a biological engine like no other: fire, birthed inside, blazing hot and eye-watering. The air goes hazy and bright ...

Only for a flash of gold to intercede. Two pairs of wings spread out before him, a blazing sword. Fire dissolves against a wave of radiant light.

Hovering before Vin is an angel.

No, an archangel.

Maybe he's going to make it out of this after all.

Ghirapur isn't a city that lends itself well to growth. For that, you need to visit the outskirts of the city. But with Chandra's well-being on the line? Nature—and Nissa—will find a way.

Calling what vines she can, weaving them together, Nissa surfs through the streets toward the Ghirapur Stadium. *Something always goes wrong for us*, she thinks, *but this time, we'll be together*.

Gouts of flame threaten the lives of the trees and plants that have been kind enough to help her. Nissa hardens bark and sways what she can out of the path. Heading straight into a dragon's den is more of Chandra's thing. Seeing the shadow of its wings, the heat against her skin, she can't help but wonder if she's in over her head. If she's really strong enough to help.

When she bursts out onto the remnants of the tracks, she realizes she won't have to.

Elspeth's got the dragon handled.

The sight of the angel's massive sword and the radiant glow of her magic makes Nissa feel sick. She hates that it does, but she can't help it. Her body remembers what fighting Elspeth was like. Stars of pain explode behind Nissa's eyes, but she tamps it down, she hardens herself like the bark underfoot. Discomfort is temporary. She has to endure, she has to spot—

There!

Crumpled before the remnants of a great ship: Chandra, Pia, and that other girl she'd seen on the broadcast. Spitfire? The name doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that she's a friend. Nissa slides off the wave of roots she's formed and hurries over to the three of them.

Chandra groans. Something's left her reeling. Broken and battered as she is, her eyes unfocused, she still reaches for Nissa.

What a treasure this woman is. All the arguments and uncomfortable conversations are as distant memories in this moment as they are every morning, when Chandra sleeps in. She mutters to herself.

"I'm here," Nissa says. But just as she leans down to pick her up, there's a sound to her right: a mammalian yelp that sounds strangely like Chandra, but it isn't. She turns to see Jace scooping up a limp, small creature. Both of their eyes glow blue as Jace works his magic.

Elspeth's presence is one thing, a burning at the back of her throat, a bone-deep revulsion her mind can only fight against.

Jace's is another. Like two bells struck falling into harmony; a distant resonance that makes the back of her head tingle. Faint, almost not there at all. But it persists, and its persistence is something as odious as the holy light.

"Jace?" she says.

But he doesn't answer. Instead, he stands with the creature in hand and turns to ... is that Vraska? Yes, she can see them both now. Just as she last remembered them. *But why? Why are they here?*

The question forms on her lips. She opens her mouth to speak it.

"We're leaving, Vraska," Jace shouts. He keeps his eyes on Nissa's a moment too long as he backs away.

Vraska doesn't seem to hear her at first. She's too focused on the body of the teenager curled up near Pia Nalaar.

"Vraska. Now!"

"You don't have to go," Nissa says. She knows that look—that hesitation. When she was ... when she wasn't herself, she felt that way all the time. "You can stay. Chandra and I can help."

But by then, a haze of magical fog overtakes the clearing, and Nissa knows it's no use. They're gone. Both of them.

"Niss ... Nissa ..."

"I'm here," she says again. "I'm here."

Who cares about schemes or emotional reunions when victory is on the line? Certainly not Winter. With all eyes on the angel—the intolerable, convenient angel—warring with the dragon, no one has their eye on the finish line.

It's undefended. Ripe for the taking. And while the others might be concerned for petty things like "seeing the world" or "restoring their plane's glory," Winter doesn't have that luxury. Need is an arrowhead in his throat, a stake at his heart, a bolt aimed straight for his brain.

The House always wins. The House *needs* to win, because if it doesn't, then *he* loses.

Gouts of fire, bolts of radiant light, falling debris: none of this can impede him. Not when desperation's fire rages in his belly; not when the chill of dread has settled at the back of his neck.

The rules don't say anything about crossing the finish line on foot. If he can just straggle on ahead, haul himself up and across the platform ...

Winter broke his leg during the fight with the guards, but it doesn't matter. Pain is a reminder that you're alive, gloriously alive, and he intends to stay that way.

Vault a goblin rocket ship; land with a sickening crunch; keep pushing ahead. The distant rumble of the fight can't get to him. He's so close. Close to freedom, close to a world beyond, close to becoming ... he doesn't know what he's going to become. But he's so close to finding out.

Slide beneath a broken Keelhauler mast, run through a network of Speedbrood husks.

Closer and closer still.

But so too is the rumbling. He can feel it in his chest, knocking against his ribs. The dragon? Must be. He's not going to look behind him. The second he does, he's lost. The second he does, he's gone.

And he's so, so close.



Art by: Alexander Mokhov

In the years to come, when they recount this tale, the Champions of Amonkhet will not mention Winter at all.

They will speak of the long hours spent repairing their chariots, of the people who lent their aid unasked, the common folk who washed over the Champions like the floods of life itself. They will speak of the chariots formed by hundreds of hopeful hands, of the dreams that seeped into the wood, of the dead and undead who alike saw a future, verdant and bountiful.

They will speak, yes, of the dragon, and of Basri's sand clouds shielding them from its view. They will speak, yes, of the angel, and the reprieve granted by her light, but they will speak also of her ignorance, for she never once looked upon the Champions.

And they will speak—they will sing!—of the moment Zahur called the hippos to pull this great miracle of a chariot across the finish line. Oh, it will be the stuff of sagas for many centuries to come; it will live in steles and monuments, in poetry and rhyme.

They will not mention Winter.

But they do mention, in some stories, and only in passing, that a door appeared on the tracks not long after Zahur's proclamation. And those stories may mention the screams that followed. Desperate howls, yowling pleas.

But these stories mention them only as the final excision of selfishness from the Amonkheti. For they, seeing the horrors abounding across the track, gathered what forces they could to help. Basri Ket conjured waves of sand to shield the fleeing civilians, shields that turned to glass when the dragon heated them, beautiful and shimmering. Zahur hauled whoever he could find onto his own chariot for safety. These are the virtues of the new Amonkhet: bravery, generosity, and compassion.

Yes, they will sing of this, of the moment Basri and Zahur belatedly realized they'd crossed the finish line first. In one hundred years, everyone will know Zahur's words when he laid his hands upon the Aetherspark, and they will become a prayer all on their own: "For life, for death, for Amonkhet."

But they will make no mention of the man so close to victory dragged with awful finality back to hell.

"It hurts."

"Keep still during treatment, and it will hurt less."

"I am keeping still!"

"Chandra, she means you need to keep very, very still," says Nissa. She finishes her adjustments to Chandra's bandages. "Focus on it. Come on, with me."

Chandra pouts. She always pouts, but that's part of what makes her Chandra. "Fine. All right. On three ..."

It's an old exercise for the two of them. If they focused on their breathing falling into time, they could calm one another. Whether it was Chandra's nightmares or Nissa's flashbacks, breath had become a touchstone for the two of them. In the quiet of their room, they find the familiar rhythm once more, Nissa's steadiness picking up a little of Chandra's eagerness, and Chandra finding true stability in turn.

The stillness makes Elspeth's job a lot easier. Concentrated light illuminates Chandra's forehead, her back, her ribs—all the places she'd let herself get hurt over the course of the race. Nissa doesn't want to hold it against her. That would be wrong. Still, part of her does worry about Chandra's recklessness.

"There. How is the pain?"

Chandra rolls her shoulders. "Pretty good," she says. "Don't you need some help, too, though? I know you have the whole angel thing going on, but didn't that dragon get you pretty good?"

Nissa and Chandra knew Elspeth before ... all of this. Not particularly well; they were never close friends, the three of them. But they knew her well enough to be unnerved by how little Elspeth's expression changes at the question.

"Protecting the innocent is my duty. Any harm I take in doing so is of little concern," she says.

"You're going to encourage her," says Nissa.

"I am not reckless," answers Elspeth. She looks around the small room, at how out of place she seems, radiant as the dawn, in the confines of Chandra's bedroom. The stiffness with which she holds herself doesn't help, either. "But ... you should prepare yourselves. These outbreaks are becoming routine across the Multiverse."

Nissa winces; so does Chandra, but for different reasons. Being included in discussions like this is ... strange. She's not a Planeswalker anymore, but everyone treats her as if she is. As if she can jump to wherever Chandra goes with little effort. Part of her wants to say: *what am I supposed to do about that?*

But she has to hope that one day she'll be able to again.

Just ... not today.

"What do you mean?" Chandra asks. The way she squeezes Nissa's hand is a gentle reassurance. It means the world to Nissa.

"More than just people are moving through the Omenpaths," Elspeth says. "A raging storm of primordial magic has been flowing between worlds, leaving dragons in its wake. We're seeing dragons on planes that have never known them."

Chandra's brows knit. Before Nissa can ask about the effect this is having on the wildlife, there's a knock at the door.

"I know I'm old, but that doesn't mean I'll wait forever," Pia says. "We're going to be late to the ceremony at this rate."

Elspeth looks to the door the way that some might look on gates to the afterlife. "Ah. Your mother."

"We couldn't keep her waiting if we tried," Chandra says. "I'm sorry, but can we talk about this later?"

"If there is time, I shall find you," says Elspeth. "But if not ... may you and yours be safe. And many blessings on your relationship."

"Many ... okay, thank you, that's really nice of you," says Chandra. Nissa has to suppress a smile—Chandra must have found that strange, too. *Who said things like that?* Definitely not Elspeth. The human Elspeth, that is. This new one is different. "Thanks for the help, too."

Nissa helps Chandra get dressed as the two of them make for the door. Elspeth, for all her storied and holy elegance, is gone in a flash of light. In its wake, another wave of nausea hits Nissa. But there's something more important she needs to check on first.

"How's your head? Are you well enough for talking to so many people? I don't mind making up some sort of excuse if you need to get out of this."

Chandra waves a hand. "I'll be fine. A little headache won't stop me."

"You spent half the night crying in pain," Nissa says.

Chandra doesn't have any answer for that. The look they share is enough to speak the unspoken: she isn't well enough at all, but she needs to be.

Avishkar needs her to be.

Nissa sighs. She kisses Chandra and squeezes her hand, just as Chandra had done for her.

"Together, then?"

"Together."

Pia, waiting for them downstairs, took much better to sitting still for treatment. Were it not for the bruises on the backs of her hands and the slight sounds she makes as she moves, it would be hard to imagine she was hurt at all. Outside is a fleetwheel cruiser, ornate and beautiful, with seating for four. In the driver's seat is a familiar face.

"Renegade Prime, your taxi," says Sita. She vaults out of the seat and opens the door for Pia with a bow.

Pia scoffs. “Oh? You’re a chauffeur now, are you? I think that might upset your father more than the racing.”

A complicated expression on the girl’s face, one that settles somewhere in the realm of self-deprecation. “Considering he’s in jail, I think he has worse things to worry about,” she says. “Attempting a coup carries a hefty sentence.”

One of the things Nissa loves about Chandra—and there are many—is her incredible ability to cheer people up no matter how terrible she may be feeling at the time. When she catches sight of that look, Chandra marches right over to Sita and scoops her up into a great big hug.

“You’re Spitfire, right? Thanks so much! You really saved me and mom out there!”

Sita, caught unawares, is a little stiff in the embrace at first—but against such impossible warmth and cheer, how can she do anything but relent? “Thank you,” she says after a short pause. “Thanks for saving Avishkar.”

“Eh, that was Elspeth more than me, this time,” Chandra says. “This is my girlfriend, Nissa—I don’t think you guys have met! Nissa’s super cool, she’s incredible, so smart and—”

“It’s nice to actually meet you,” Nissa interrupts. “I don’t think you remember me from the clearing.”

Who would, in those circumstances? But Sita still bows in thanks. “So, you’re the one who hauled us out of there. Thank you, too.”

“Oh, yeah, you wouldn’t know it looking at her but she’s crazy strong—”

“Chandra likes to exaggerate,” Nissa says, taking Chandra’s hand.

“Ah, like with her racing skills,” says Sita. She flashes Chandra a wry grin. “You know, next time we meet on the track, I’m going to win.”

“Keep telling yourself that and you might have a shot,” says Chandra. She slides into the passenger seat as Pia walks around to claim shotgun. “In your dreams, anyway.”

“What’s the fastest you’ve ever made it from here to the track?” Sita asks.

“Ten minutes.”

The cruiser’s engine rumbles.

“Let’s make it five.”

In the heart of Ghirapur, thousands gather.

On the cliff overlooking the steppes of Tarkir, there are only three.

In Ghirapur the crowd is in ecstasy. Zahur, Basri, and the rest of the Amonkheti take to the stage bedecked in gold and bright linen. When they receive the Aetherspark, it is as a team—no one person’s hand touches it before any other. Overhead, they hold it so that all may see and all may marvel at its beauty.

“To Amonkhet, for now, and forever!” they cheer.

But on the cliffs of Tarkir it is far quieter. The wind whips through the man’s hair; the distant howls of hunting dogs meet his ears. A creature is asleep in his arms. He stirs, far from peaceful in that slumber.

He says something to the woman next to him.

And then the man in blue walks ahead.



Art by: Aaron Miller