

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 15

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From set *Ravnica Allegiance*

"It can't be done, Master Zarek." The foreman was stout and walrus-mustached, with a gleaming bald head and arms like tree trunks. "The workers are asleep on their feet already. You have no idea how difficult it is getting equipment down there. There aren't enough cranes or sledges, and our haulers hate the smell, so we have to carry parts by hand—"

"There's no such thing as 'can't be done'," Ral said. "There's only insufficient motivation. Tell Chemister Frexus downstairs that I said you could use her constructs to haul parts. They won't object to the smell."

"But her constructs explode if the boilers get too hot! I was just at a meeting about it last week."

"Incentive to get the things moved quickly, then!" Ral gave him a grin. "As for the workers, tell them I'll double their wages if they get the resonator installed on time."

"Er . . ." The foreman wiped his forehead. "I believe they were *already* promised double . . ."

"Then this would be quadruple the usual rate, wouldn't it?" *After all, if we lose, it's not like we'll have to pay.* Ral permitted himself a moment of amusement at the thought of aggrieved laborers applying to Bolas for their lost wages.

"Ah. I. Uh." The big man gave a shaky smile. "Does . . . does that apply to . . . supervisory personnel as well, master?"

"If the resonator is finished and in working order on schedule."

"It will be, Master Zarek." The foreman drew himself up. "Depend on it."

"I am." *We all are.*

He'd returned from the Undercity battered and shaken, but there'd only been time for a brief rest before the all-consuming project required his full attention again. A team of Azorius warders and lawmages had gone to work immediately, erecting magical barriers around the underground resonator site to hold off any Golgari counterattacks. Boros and Orzhov troops remained in place, too, working uneasily side by side. But it was his own people who had the task of building the resonator itself, and aligning it with the growing network.

Three more days. That's what they needed. *Three days, and Niv-Mizzet will be able to put his plan into action.* Whether that would be enough to stop Bolas for certain, only the Firemind knew, but at least Ral would have done everything he could. *If Bolas gives us three days . . .*

Lavinia had been his best link to the progress of Bolas's plans, but he hadn't seen her since the disastrous guild summit. That was probably bad, but he didn't have the time to send out a search. *She can take care of herself, that's for certain.* Except, against Bolas, nothing was certain—

“Master Zarek?” A goblin voice from the corridor. Ral looked up and found one of his personal secretaries peeking through the doorframe.

“What is it?” Ral snapped.

“There’s someone who insists on seeing you. He says it’s urgent.”

“Everything’s urgent,” Ral said.

“He says you’ll see him,” the goblin said. “His name’s Tomik?”

Tomik is here? They’d never met at the Nivix. He should know better than to—

“Let him in,” Ral said shortly, laying his pen aside.

A moment later, Tomik entered, shutting the door behind him. Ral’s lover looked weary, as he usually did of late. His eyes were sunken, and his hair was a mess. Ral balanced a wave of irritation that Tomik would intrude on him here with an urge to take the other man in his arms.

“I always thought your office would be a little . . . grander,” Tomik said, looking around the dingy little suite. “No offense.”

“I don’t spend much time in here, normally,” Ral said. “The last few weeks have been . . . an exception.”

“You didn’t come see me, after you got back from the Undercity.”

“I sent you a note,” Ral said, feeling a sting of guilt. “You know how critical time is.”

“I know,” Tomik said. “I just—I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Something that can’t wait until after the potential end of Ravnica?” Ral said.

Tomik rolled his eyes. “This isn’t *personal*. I know better than that. It’s . . . well. Guild business.”

“I see.” Ral leaned back in his chair. “All right. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Kaya. And Teysa. I think . . .” He took a deep breath. “I think Teysa is making . . . a mistake.”

“How so?”

“Kaya is changing things. For the better, I think. There are things the Orzhov does that . . . we all try to ignore, sometimes, but she refuses to ignore them.”

“And Teysa doesn’t approve?”

“She doesn’t. And neither do the other guild leaders.”

“Is there anything they can do about it?”

“I think they’re going to kill Kaya.”

“Ah.” Ral tapped his fingers on the desk. “And if she dies, who becomes guildmaster?”

“Almost certainly Teysa.”

“And will she continue to support our project?”

Tomik’s eyes narrowed. “Is that all you care about?”

“It’s all I can *afford* to care about,” Ral said. “You know how important this is. What Niv-Mizzet has trusted me with.”

“Even if it means letting Kaya die?”

Ral shrugged. “I thought you worked for Teysa.”

"I do," Tomik said. "And Teysa has been working all her life to step out of her grandfather's shadow. If she does this . . . I think she may never escape from it."

"And what do you want from me?"

"I don't know." Tomik looked down. "I hadn't planned that far ahead. I just thought that Kaya was your friend."

"She's my ally," Ral said. "It's not the same."

"I see." Tomik's lip tightened. "What about me? Am I an ally, too?"

"Of course not." Ral stood up behind his desk. "Tomik, you know that—"

"Never mind." Tomik turned to the door. "I'll deal with this myself."

Everyone had made all the right noises when Kaya had returned to Orzhova, but as she accepted the congratulations of the priests and their attendants, her mind had painted murderous rage behind every false smile. She'd escaped from the press as soon as she could, retreating to her opulent suite of rooms high in the cathedral and refusing to see anyone. Teysa had sent several couriers, and Kaya had dismissed them out of hand.

This can't go on. For one thing, she was getting hungry. *But can I trust anything from the kitchens?* She'd have to leave the cathedral and find a restaurant somewhere, chosen at random. *And then what, do the same thing every night for the rest of my life?*

This isn't going to work. She'd spent her life avoiding her enemies—and she'd had many, in the course of her career—by keeping a low profile and moving around. *Now I'm stuck as head of a church, with a big stupid hat and a fancy bedroom anyone can find.* If the heads of the Orzhov were really determined to kill her, sooner or later they were going to succeed.

Which means I should get out of here. She could planeswalk, and risk the backlash from the debt-chains. *Maybe Teysa doesn't know as much about it as she lets on.* Another option would be to escape Orzhova and hide out somewhere. *Maybe find a lawmage of my own. Or ask Ral for help, or —*

There was a rustle at the front door. Kaya sat bolt upright in bed, heart hammering, but the only sound was a quiet set of retreating footsteps. She waited until they'd faded away, then grabbed her daggers from the bedside table and quietly padded across the thick carpet.

The outermost room in the suite was for welcoming guests, with a small table and several armchairs. The big door that opened into the hall was locked, just as she'd left it, but a small folded square of white paper lay in front of it, where someone had shoved it through the gap. Kaya wondered if this was an extremely subtle attack—*poison on the paper?*—before deciding even she wasn't *that* paranoid. She strapped on her daggers and retrieved the note.

Guildmaster, it read. *You are in danger.*

No surprise there, Kaya thought.

The hierophants have prevailed on Lady Teysa to have you arrested this evening. They have rotated the guard to have loyal men in place. They plan to capture you and hold you prisoner until they extract the Orzhov debt from you by magic.

Kaya paused to swear under her breath.

I can help you, if you can reach me. I will be waiting in the stables, in the first floor sub-basement.

Sincerely,

A Friend

A friend, Kaya thought, who isn't eager to stick their neck out. But she could hardly blame her unknown benefactor. *If they're willing to arrest the guildmaster, who knows what they'd do to anyone who wanted to help her.*

The question was, of course, did she trust this mysterious informant. *Or is this just an invitation to a trap?* For a moment she hesitated, note in hand. Then, as though sent to force her into motion, she heard the *clomp* of heavy boots from the hallway.

"Guildmaster?" The voice from outside was muffled, as if by a knight's enclosing helmet.

Well. That about settles it. When Teysa wanted to talk to her, she sent a servant, not an armored guard.

"Just a moment!" Kaya said. She checked her daggers in their sheaths, took a deep breath, and dropped through the floor.

This was a trickier operation than it sometimes appeared, involving precise timing to prevent yourself from falling further than expected and winding up partially through the floor below as well. Because she was a paranoid sort, Kaya had taken a few strolls around Orzhova, and confirmed that the rooms directly below hers were the personal chambers of some hierophant, with plenty of empty space for her to land.

She was expecting a shocked old man, possibly in his bathrobe, but nothing she couldn't handle. What she was *not* expecting was at least a dozen armed soldiers, all waiting with weapons drawn, with three robed mages standing at the edges of the room.

Oh, damn. It had to be Teysa. *She's been watching me too close.*

No time to worry about it now. Kaya landed next to a guardsman who reached out to grab her. Letting his flailing arms pass through her in a burst of purple light, she dropped and kicked out his knee, and he hit the floor in a clatter of armor. Another man closed in, carrying a truncheon, and Kaya caught his arm by the wrist as she tried to swing it and twisted it painfully, driving him past her to the floor.

"Now!" someone called. "The binding!"

Energy thrummed through the room as the three mages raised their hands. Light crackled and spat around Kaya, a halo of twisted purple and blue. After a moment, it detonated in a soundless explosion, a burst of ghostly radiance that passed through everyone in the room and left them untouched.

Certainly past time to get out of here. Kaya willed herself to impermeability, but the purple light that accompanied her transition was weak and fitful, glimmering in patches along her body for a few moments before fading out entirely. The floor beneath her remained distressingly solid to the touch.

"She's caught!" A silver-haired woman in a lieutenant's uniform stood by the door. "Take her! Remember, Lady Teysa needs her alive."

Triple damn. Apparently Teysa had turned the Orzhov aptitude for binding spirits into something that would work on Kaya herself. It would probably wear off, given time, but for the moment that left her surrounded by soldiers with truncheons, closing in.

She needs me alive, lest some random guard inherit all of Grandfather Karlov's contracts. But I can't say the same about them. She felt a pang of guilt as she drew her daggers—the guards hadn't done anything but follow orders—but only a slight one. *No other way.*

They charged. Kaya dodged the first man, slashed his throat neatly as she spun, and turned the motion into a kick that sent a woman tumbling into the man behind her. A guard swung for her head from behind, and Kaya ducked and spun again, planting a dagger under his armpit where his armor was

weak. She yanked it free again and danced away in the direction of the door. The lieutenant scrambled with her own club, trying to bar Kaya's path, but Kaya dodged under the blow and came up with an elbow to the woman's jaw, slamming her teeth together with a clack. She staggered, spitting blood, and Kaya yanked open the door, twisted through, and slammed it behind her.

She had minutes, maybe less, before the alarm became general. She ran down the hallway, and as she moved concentrated on her arm. It shimmered briefly into intangibility, but the power faded quickly. *So no ducking through walls for a while.* That meant she was stuck inside Orzhova. *Which means there's really only one place to head for. Let's hope I can remember how to find the stables. This place is a maze* —

"There!" someone shouted. "Stop her!"

Up ahead, two guards accompanied an armored knight, blocking a T-junction. They lowered their spears, and the knight drew his sword—*Apparently not everyone got the memo about not killing me, wonderful*—and clearly expected Kaya to pull up short. Instead, she barreled into them, hunching over to avoid the spearpoints. The momentum of her run slammed one guardswoman against the wall, knocking the breath out of her. She slumped sideways, and Kaya dove away, dodging a downstroke of the knight's greatsword. He raised his weapon back to a guard, but she'd gotten past him, and turned away to keep running. *Let's see him keep up with me in that armor.*

The main stairs were ahead, a seemingly endless series of elliptical spirals leading up through the heart of Orzhova. The shaft was alive with noise, armor jingling and boots pounding as guards converged. Kaya hit the railing with the knight behind her in hot pursuit and the stairway down filled with a half-dozen soldiers.

This is so, so stupid. Instead of stopping, she leapt up onto the rail, perching for a moment on the wrought iron, balanced over hundreds of feet of empty space. The knight pulled up short in horror, watching her as she wobbled. Kaya gave him a little wave, then stepped over the edge.

She put all her concentration into her hand as she fell, flight after flight of stairway slipping past. There was a trick to this, becoming intangible in just the right ratio and moment to slow her descent by friction with the wall, without simultaneously ripping her hand off by stopping too abruptly. She hadn't practiced much, because honestly it wasn't the sort of thing you got to try too often. And the mage's binding, making every attempt to use her power feel like slogging through thick mud, made it worse.

But the alternative was ending up in a very little puddle on the parquet marble floor at the bottom of the stairs, so Kaya managed. Her arm jerked painfully as she gripped each flight to kill her momentum, pain shooting through her shoulder before she let her arm fade into intangibility and slip through the stone to catch the next one. The impact, when it came, was still harder than she would have liked, and something in her knee felt like it popped, followed by a surge of pain. She moved with a limp to the wood-paneled door that led into the lower levels of Orzhova.

Limp or no, though, she'd left the guards looking for her behind for the moment. The bottom of the staircase led into the public part of the building, where petitioners and penitents from the outside could come to pray, borrow money, or both. Kaya slipped into a high gallery, wrapped around the central nave of the cathedral, and threaded her way between well-dressed Orzhov priests and functionaries and their ragged supplicants. A few recognized her, in spite of her lack of a guild uniform, and a wave of confused murmuring spread in her wake.

Doesn't matter. She shoved her way onto another broad stairway, twisting between curious onlookers, heading for the main door. *I have to get out of here, and wait for this damn binding to wear off. Then . . .* Well, she could work that out later. *For now, away is the key.*

Two more flights down, and she was within sight of the main doors, massive things currently flung wide open. A crowd was forming on either side of them, though, and Kaya could see a couple of knights and a phalanx of guardsmen strung across the archway. *Three guesses who they're looking for.* She turned, abruptly, and headed in the other direction. *Okay. Stables, first sub-basement. That means down, right?*

There was a stairway down, a narrow one, on her right. She took it, passing a few uniformed staff, and emerged into an unfurnished servant's corridor. Wooden doors let off on either side, but Kaya kept moving, reasoning that the stables had to be adjacent to the street. *If I get close enough, I can just follow the smell.* She was just about to turn a corner when the tramp of booted feet made her freeze.

"Get to the main hall!" someone shouted, ahead of her. "On the double!"

Kaya threw herself against the nearest door, found it locked, and rebounded. She concentrated hard, griting her teeth, and slipped her hand through the wood, scrabbling on the other side for a latch. Her groping fingers encountered nothing, and she was about to extract herself and run for it when the door gave a click and opened of its own accord. Kaya darted into the darkened space, gratefully, and slammed it behind her just as the sounds of a troop of soldiers passing came from outside.

She was in some kind of storeroom. She could smell wax and lamp oil, and the soft fragrance of the incense penitents burned to beg forgiveness for their financial sins. Leaning against the door, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim glow seeping underneath it, Kaya struggled for breath.

Deep in the gloom, something shifted.

"Who's there?" Kaya raised her daggers and spoke in a harsh whisper. "Shout and I'll slit your throat."

"Some gratitude," a man's voice said. "After I opened my little hidey-hole to you."

"I'm not in a trusting mood."

"I imagine not." The shadow of a man shifted in the gloom. "You've had a hard day, Kaya."

How—of course. Kaya's lip curled. "Bolas."

"In the flesh. Or not, in this case. But here to check up on you nonetheless. You have not pleased me of late, you know."

"Pleasing you is not my first priority," Kaya said.

"But it should be." Bolas's pawn shifted closer. "I hold the keys to your chains, after all. You could be free of this place, these people."

"If I help you destroy Ravnica, you mean."

"And what is Ravnica to you? Just another city. Just another job." She could hear the grin in his voice.

"These are not *your* people. This guild, these banker-priests. You hate them, don't you? You can see in the little miseries they inflict a reflection of your own people. To seek power, in search of happiness, and to have the cost repaid with interest over generations."

"It is." Kaya hadn't realized it until that moment, but the old lizard was right.

"Then you should be glad of my coming. I will sweep them away like chaff, with all their lies and chains."

"And the people who come begging?" Kaya said. "You'll help them, will you?"

"I will." The human voice of Bolas's pawn acquired just a touch of the dragon's bass rumble. "So long as they *kneel*."

Kaya shook her head. "It's not worth it."

"Then what? You are a guildmaster on the run from her own guild. You will not survive long, and even if you do, you will perish with the rest when I arrive."

"Then I'll die fighting," Kaya said, straightening up. "But I can do good here, for these people, in the meantime."

"And your own people, with their sky broken?"

"I'll find another way," Kaya said. "I never should have made a bargain with you, dragon. I should have known nothing you could offer would be worth the price."

"You're a fool."

"Maybe." Kaya sheathed her daggers and eased open the door, the corridor outside now silent. "But I'm my own fool."

The stables were dark, lit by a single guttering lantern, and smelled of a multispecies mélange of dung. Kaya slipped through the doorway, moving cautiously, and spotted a single hooded figure waiting near the lamp. She padded over, hands on her daggers.

"Are you the one who sent the note?" she said, when she was close enough.

The man jumped, his hood falling back. Kaya recognized him—Tomik Vrona, Teysa's own assistant. *Not who I was expecting. Though in truth, I don't know what I was expecting.*

"Guildmaster," he said, inclining his head. "I wasn't sure you were going to make it."

"It was touch and go a few times," Kaya admitted. "Teysa's mages hit me with . . . something."

"A binding," Tomik said. "I listened to them plan their attack."

"And you tried to warn me," Kaya said. "Not that I'm complaining, but why?"

"You are my guildmaster," he said. "It is my duty."

"Teysa has been your master for a long time," Kaya said. "I've seen the respect you have for her. Even I couldn't have blamed you for taking her side over a guildmaster you hardly know."

"I—" Tomik hesitated. "I believe that Teysa is making a mistake. She is in a very difficult position, and—I would like to protect her."

"From who? Me?"

"The hierarchs have been pressing her with demands. They fear you will forgive debts on a large scale, and that their wealth will suffer in consequence. They want you out of the Orzhov. If she tries to stand against them, they will crush her, Karlov or no. The system, first of all, defends itself."

"I believe it," Kaya said. "Your note said you could help. How?"

"If you confront the hierarchs—" Tomik began.

Something crunched in the darkness.

Kaya whirled, drawing her daggers. Tomik snatched up the lantern and raised it over his head, and she heard his breath catch. The light gleamed on masks made of mangled coins, rank on rank of thrulls, crammed into the stalls and around the outside of the long, empty stables. *There have to be hundreds of them.* Kaya felt sweat trickle down her forehead, and she shifted her grip on her weapons.

"I swear," Tomik said under his voice. "I didn't have anything to do with this."

"I believe you," Kaya said grimly. "I'm sure that'll be a consolation when they're tearing us both to pieces."

"I could . . ." Tomik shook his head. "I have no idea. Do you have a spare weapon?"

Silently, Kaya drew a long stiletto from its hidden sheath at the small of her back and handed it over. Tomik looked down at it and adjusted his spectacles with a sad smile.

"Better than nothing, I suppose."

The thralls closed in. Kaya swallowed hard.

Something flashed a brilliant white. One of the stable doors exploded, pieces of burning wood scattering in every direction, accompanied by an ear-splitting boom that rattled dust from the rafters. The blast left a flaming hole leading to the street outside, and outlined against the lights of the city was a tall man in a long coat, with a wild frizz of hair and lightning crawling up and down his arms.

"Ral!" Tomik shouted.

"Stay put," Ral roared. "Scorchbringers!"

Viashino in singed leather poured through the gap, long, clumsy weapons in their hands. As the thralls turned to face them, goutts of fire jetted out in blinding arcs of orange and red, liquid flame clinging to every surface it touched. Thrull flesh sizzled and charred, and the creatures charged the phalanx of scorchbringers, only to fall in blackened heaps that piled higher and higher. Ral stalked forward, bolts of lightning slashing from his hands to incinerate any thrulls that made it past the curtain of flames.

"Come on," he said, the two nearest scorchbringers standing aside to let them pass. "Let's get out of here."

Tomik ran to him, and Kaya followed. She raised an eyebrow as Ral caught the younger man in his arms and kissed him, while the ranks of scorchbringers closed behind them and began to retreat. Fire was spreading fast through the stables, racing across dry straw and old wood.

"If I can interrupt," Kaya said, as they backed out onto the street. "Tomik, you were going to tell me you had a way to fix all this."

"Oh." Tomik turned away from Ral, cleared his throat, and straightened his spectacles. "Yes. I had a look in the records, you see—"

Not quite six hours later, Kaya strode into the main hall of Orzhova, escorted by several ranks of guards and a pair of knights.

It was well after midnight, and all the ordinary worshipers were gone. Kaya walked past the empty pews, the silent niches where the bankers met with their penitents. At the head of the room, in front of the great altar, the hierarchs were waiting. Two dozen or so of the most powerful men and women in the Orzhov guild, with Teysa standing in front of them. They were in full regalia, voluminous silks and elaborate jeweled headpieces, staffs topped with crystals and hammered gold masks. Kaya gave them a cold stare, and smiled.

"Guildmaster," Teysa said. "I am, I admit, surprised to see you."

"It seemed a little impolite to run away from one's own guild," Kaya said airily.

"You are accused of serious crimes," Teysa said. "Are you willing to submit yourself to our authority?"

"No," Kaya said. "I don't think so."

"You don't have a choice," said a bearded man in the front row. "You will do as we command, or you will die, and we will have a *proper* guildmaster."

"You are . . . Benitov Gracca, aren't you?" Kaya said. She closed her eyes and reached for the mass of contracts that weighed her down, the chains wrapped around her soul. One of them led to Gracca, and it took only a moment to sort it out from the others. It was thick and heavy.

"I am," Gracca said. "And my family has served the Orzhov for thousands of years. An outsider like you—"

"Benitov Gracca," Kaya said, thoughtfully. "Son of Orsov Gracca. Who, in a moment of financial embarrassment, was forced to ask Patriarch Karlov for . . . assistance. Which he provided, of course, as a good friend would. Except the understanding was that the Gracca family would support the Karlovs, whenever required."

"You are not a Karlov," Gracca said. He'd gone several shades paler.

"I am the *heir* to Patriarch Karlov. The inheritor of all his contracts and obligations." Kaya smiled wider and gave the chain that connected them a short, sharp tug. "And you are in *breach*."

Gracca gasped and sank to his knees, his gilded staff hitting the floor with a ringing sound and rolling away across the marble.

"Patriarch Karlov collected obligations like other people might collect fine wine," Kaya said. "Brimini. Harta. Forgio." As she spoke, she stroked the chains, and each name brought a hitch of breath and a wince from someone in the crowd. "All the great families, in fact. Each bound to support the Karlovs, or their heirs. Each of you in violation of that agreement tonight." She looked around. "No wonder you were so glad to be rid of me."

"I am not in debt to my grandfather," Teysa said, stepping forward.

"No," Kaya said. "You are not." She glanced at the crowd of hierarchs, then at the guards all around, and raised her voice. "Place Teysa Karlov under arrest."

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, ever so subtly, one of the knights turned to face Gracca, who looked around at his colleagues and gave a shaken nod.

"You can't be serious," Teysa said, as the guards closed in around her.

"Treat her gently," Kaya said. That was the promise she'd made to Tomik.

Teysa glared daggers at her across the room, then turned and strode away, ahead of the guards, not suffering herself to be dragged. The rest of them stood in silence until her footsteps across the marble had faded.

"As for the rest of you," Kaya said, turning to the hierarchs again. "I think we should discuss the consequences of breaching your agreements with the Karlovs, and what guarantee I have that you won't turn on me again." She spread her hands. "After all, under the terms of the original contracts, I am entitled to call in your debts. And with interest, I'm afraid, the amounts are . . . substantial." She grinned like a shark. "So let's make a deal."