

Desperate Operatives

Greg Weisman

From set *War of the Spark*

I.

Finding a way to recruit the Azorius Senate—with its evil-dragon-collaborating guildmaster, Dovin Baan—and to contact House Dimir—with its mysterious shapeshifting guildmaster, Lazav—was assigned, I suppose, to other volunteers.

But Master Zarek and Mister Beleren tasked Mistress Kaya with bringing the other four wayward guilds—the Golgari Swarm, the Cult of Rakdos, the Gruul Clans, and the Selesnya Conclave—to the table for Operation Desperation.

Whatever that is

They claimed that as an outsider, she'd bring less baggage (and suspicion) to the endeavor than Master Zarek himself would. But as a guildmaster, she'd still bring enough authority and prestige to command—or at least be granted—the necessary audiences with each guild.

I could see Mistress Kaya was reluctant, dubious of her chances of success. I leaned over and whispered for her to accept. "I can help you with Gruul, Selesnya and—" I was about to add Rakdos, but stopped myself. With Hekara gone, I no longer had an in with the Cult. I finished awkwardly: "Yeah, with Gruul and Selesnya."

Our first stop would be Selesnya, which Mistress Kaya hoped would be the easiest of the four. Teyo and I were with her, of course.

I say, "Of course." But it's strange that it feels so automatic. We became her loyal entourage in a matter of hours.

And Miss Nissa Revane came along with us, too, as Mister Beleren hoped she'd get on well with Milady Emmara Tandris, elven champion and acting guildmaster of Selesnya.

Unfortunately, getting an audience with Milady Emmara was proving difficult. For starters, we had to avoid the substantial quantity of creepies being led by a God-Creepy named Rhonas that was just minutes shy of overrunning the packed Senate House and taking out all of Bolas's significant opposition in one fell swoop.

But I do come in handy sometimes. Like I told Mistress Kaya, I know most of the secret routes through Ravnica and was able to lead our little quartet down passages, alleyways, and shortcuts that the invaders from Amonkhet couldn't know.

Miss Revane, who generally said very little—or *next to nothing, really*—seemed impressed enough with the speed of our progress to actually speak a few words. "You know the city well," she said to Mistress Kaya, who was right behind me. I think Mistress Kaya thought Miss Revane was talking to me, so she didn't bother responding. For my own reasons, neither did I.

We did run into a single—and unavoidable—crop of Eternals, searching for more victims, I suppose. Teyo put up a shield, and from behind it, Miss Revane asked permission of an old birch tree, which promptly grew multiple branches that spiked through the brains of each and every lazotep skull before

retracting. The attack was so swift that two or three seconds passed before the creepies began dropping to the ground, well and truly dead.

We found the Conclave well and truly fortified. And unwelcoming. A long line of Ledev guardians and sagittar archers blocked our path. No one would let us pass, even on our diplomatic mission. Miss Revane, in particular, seemed to be public enemy number one for having awakened Vitu-Ghazi, resulting in the World-Tree's departure, dismemberment, and near-complete destruction.

So that's how Vitu-Ghazi got to Tenth District Plaza! Miss Revane's more impressive than she looks. And she looks pretty impressive to me already.

I figured I'd better start doing something impressive—or at least semi-impressive—if I was going to live up to my earlier boasting. I skirted the Ledev line and then scurried inside between two unwary guardians. I didn't have to scurry too far.

He was already on his way out: my godfather, Keeper of my Life Pledge, the Selesnyan spearmaster Boruvo. The centaur had been Gruul once—and my parents' best friend—but he'd found a calling with Selesnya and had switched guilds about ten years ago. This created a hopefully-not-permanent rift with my folks, but for me, it was a boon. Spearmaster Boruvo was always trying to get me to commit to joining Selesnya. He made it very clear he didn't believe Gruul was the right fit for me. (Which also didn't do much for his relationship with my Ari and Gan Shokta.) I remained Gateless, but he and I grew very close. (Which *specifically* didn't do much for his relationship with my dad.) Now, needing his help, I called out, "Godfather!"

He turned, and his stern (normally Gruul-like) expression just lit up! "Goddaughter," he said. "You should not be out and about. These are dangerous times."

"I suppose I'm as safe as anyone. Safer than most."

"Yes, I suppose you are."

"I need a favor, Godfather."

"Anything, child."

"Come with me and greet the new Orzhov guildmaster, please."

He groaned.

"She's my friend, godfather."

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Hmm. Climb up," he said.

"Really?"

He didn't answer but reached down and swung me up onto his back, like he used to do when I was a kid. I giggled gleefully like I was *still* a kid. And he trotted out to the line.

I heard Teyo call out, "Where's Araithia?"

Miss Revane asked, "Who?"

Before it got messy, I called out, "Over here!"

Teyo and Mistress Kaya turned to see me riding on the centaur *behind* the Ledev line. Mistress Kaya looked stunned. The Ledev guardians parted, bowing, to allow the centaur to pass.

I said, "Mistress Kaya, Teyo Verada and Miss Revane, allow me to introduce you to my godfather, Spearmaster Boruvo."

The centaur bowed his head to Mistress Kaya and Teyo in turn, but seemed to make a point of *not* bowing to the elf, who watched it all in silence, looking extremely uncomfortable the whole time.

I think I started babbling then: “Boruvo was Gruul Clan once, before joining Selesnya. He’s a good friend of my parents. And they made him my godfather. I mean, he was the obvious choice, the only practical choice, when you think about it. I think my father’s always been a little jealous of my relationship with Boruvo. Not that *that’s* why Boruvo left the Clan. He had a calling, you see. He thinks I have one, too, and really wants me to leave the Gruul and join Selesnya. And sometimes that does feel like the right path for me. But I guess I’m pretty indecisive when it comes to—”

Spearmaster Boruvo cleared his throat and said, “Goddughter.”

“I’m rambling again, aren’t I?”

“It’s understandable. But I believe we have business to attend to.” He turned to Mistress Kaya and Teyo, saying, “Anyone with the good taste to take notice of our Araithia deserves a chance to be heard.”

Again, Miss Revane leaned in to whisper, “Who is this Araithia?”



Nissa, Who Shakes the World | Art by: Chris Rallis

I could see that Mistress Kaya was about to tell her that “Araithia” was me, the Rat. But I just grinned and shook my head, and Mistress Kaya turned to study Miss Revane. She was looking directly at me and yet looking right through me, as if I wasn’t even there.

And then—*boom*—it finally hit Mistress Kaya. It suddenly occurred to her that I was basically invisible to Miss Revane. I could practically see Mistress Kaya remembering back to all our recent interactions. (Plus, I could more or less read the gist of her thoughts.) She thought back to Master Zarek’s reaction or *non-* reaction to me—and the way everyone had combined my name and Teyo’s name when Teyo had introduced us both. She was starting to figure out that I was kinda invisible to everyone except Teyo, Boruvo, and herself. Kinda invisible even to my own father.

I said, “It’s not invisibility exactly. I’ll explain later.”

That was sort of another tip off. Now, Mistress Kaya was beginning to suspect I was a little bit psychic, which I am. Not that she was sure yet. She was used to mind-mages like Mister Beleren and his loudly shouted psychic commands and realistic psychic illusions, and I could tell she was wondering if the latter was what I was using now on Miss Revane.

Which of course I wasn't. I never would!

"Send the elf away," Boruvo said, immediately commanding Mistress Kaya's full attention. He was glaring at Miss Revane with intense contempt. "Send her away, and I will escort the rest of you to speak with Emmara Tandris."

Mistress Kaya was about to protest. After all, Miss Revane was supposed to be our secret weapon to win Milady Emmara's favor.

But Miss Revane was already backing away, looking somewhat relieved. She said, "I've never been very good at talking. You two go with the centaur. I'll join Gideon."

Within seconds, she was gone.

I leaned forward and whispered, "That was very rude, Godfather."

"Child "

"Very rude."

He grumbled out, "Well I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven," I said with much satisfaction.

He grumbled something else unintelligible. But he also couldn't stop himself from smiling just a little.

I don't exactly hold that kind of power over a lot of folks, you know? So sure, maybe sometimes I abuse it just a little. Can you blame me?

II.

As we moved deeper into Selesnya, I watched Teyo's eyes get progressively wider and wider. I don't think he'd seen anything like this before on that desert world he came from. That Gobakhan. *Everything* about Ravnica seemed to amaze him, which was adorable.

I think we take our worlds for granted sometimes—until we see them through someone else's eyes. Might be why I'm still Gateless. When I see Selesnya through my godfather's eyes, or Gruul through my mother's, or when I see—saw—Rakdos through Hekara's eyes, it always seems—seemed—new and rich and wondrous.

Anyway, I was still riding on Spearmaster Boruvo's back as he led Mistress Kaya and Teyo to their audience with Milady Emmara. The corridors of almost-glowing marble were lined with archers and soldiers, all wearing armor decorated to look like leaves or blades of grass. Many were elves. All lowered their heads in slight bows to acknowledge their spearmaster. All of them eyed Mistress Kaya and Teyo with the slightest hint of a threat. None of them even glanced at me, of course. We passed through an arch guarded by two immense loxodons holding axes. Again, Teyo's eyes went wide.

No loxodons on Gobakhan, I guess.

The loxodons also nodded to their spearmaster, glared at Mistress Kaya and Teyo, and took no notice of the Rat.

I could tell that light was just beginning to dawn for Teyo when Mistress Kaya spotted the look on his face and leaned over to whisper: “Only the centaur, you, and I can see Rat. Somehow, she’s invisible to everyone else. Even her father.”

It wasn’t hard to read Teyo’s feelings: *It makes no sense, and yet it explains everything!*

He was staring at me now, so I grinned back at him and slipped off my godfather’s back to slip in between my two new friends. I figured they deserved as much of an explanation as I could offer: “I’m not invisible. I’m *insignificant*. A rat. A little rat. You see one, you look away. You try to pretend you didn’t notice it. You try to forget about it until you *do* forget about it. Your mind rejects its presence.”

“You’re not insignificant,” Mistress Kaya protested.

“You’re sweet to say so, Mistress Kaya, but I am.”

“It’s magic,” Teyo said.

“I suppose,” I replied with a shrug and a smile. Although maybe I wasn’t quite pulling off the smile. “Magic I was born with. Not many people can see me unless they know I’m there and concentrate. My father’s good at that, but he has to know I’m around to manage it. Before today, there were only three people who consistently have been able to notice me on their own: my mother, Boruvo, and Hekara.”

Mistress Kaya nodded. “That’s why you were so upset when I told you Hekara was dead.”

I shook my head emphatically. “No. Well, maybe that was part of it. But mostly I was upset because Hekara was wicked cool and wonderful. But yeah, I guess it hurts to know there’s one less person who’ll take notice. Of course, then I found the two of you.”

They each took one of my hands and gave me reassuring squeezes.

At which point we all turned a corner and came face-to-face with Milady Emmara Tandris, standing before the dryad Trostani, the dormant Selesnya guildmaster with her three symbiotic identities growing from a single trunk. Her central figure, Mistress Cim, was asleep. The other two faced away from each other. On the left, Mistress Oba was crying hot tears. On the right, Mistress Ses crossed her arms angrily.

Spearmaster Boruvo bowed low, which was always an interesting sight to behold in a centaur. He said, “Milady Tandris, you know Guildmaster Kaya of the Orzhov Syndicate. With her are her associate Teyo Verada and my goddaughter, Araithia Shokta, still Gateless.”

Milady Emmara was squinting, scanning the room for me. She said, “Araithia is here?”

I waved, grinning. “Here, milady!”

Milady Emmara blinked twice and said, “One more time, please.”

“I’m here, right between Teyo and Mistress Kaya.”

Boruvo offered some help, too. “She’s between the other two, milady.”

“Ah, yes,” Milady Emmara said, suddenly beaming with pleasure. “Oh, child, I wish this wasn’t so difficult. It’s such a joy to see your face and hear your voice.”

“Only because each time is like the first. Trust me, Milady, if you saw me every day, you’d grow quite tired of both.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

I shrugged again. “I could prove it with five minutes of conversation, Milady—but that’s not why we’re here.”

Sighing heavily, she grew serious and turned her eyes on Mistress Kaya. “I know why you are here.”

“Emmara, please,” Kaya said. “We need to unite the guilds. Ral has a plan passed down by Niv to save Ravnica, but it won’t work without all ten guilds cooperating.”

“And it may not work even *if* all ten guilds cooperate, correct?”

Mistress Kaya didn’t respond, but her silence spoke volumes.

“Guildmaster Kaya, we both know Ral Zarek and Niv-Mizzet loved their plans, their strategies, their blueprints. So far, every one has been an unmitigated disaster for the guilds, for Ravnica, and especially for Selesnya.”

“But this time—”

“The Izzet always have names for their projects. Nothing is real to them unless they name it, define it, give it limits. Which is why we have so little in common. What is Ral calling this one?”

Mistress Kaya hesitated, looking almost embarrassed. But then she straightened her back and said in a clear voice: “Operation Desperation.”

Milady Emmara almost chuckled. She certainly smiled as she shook her head, the way my mother used to shake her head at me when I was being particularly silly.



Emmara, Soul of the Accord | Art by: Mark Winters

But Mistress Kaya seemed ready for that. “I know what it sounds like, but desperate times do call for desperate measures. The Planeswalkers and the guilds must unite to defeat Bolas.”

“I don’t disagree, Kaya.”

“Well, then—”

Milady Emmara interrupted her again. I was accustomed to this. She had a way of interrupting that didn’t seem rude. She seemed to glide in, her voice growing up between Mistress Kaya’s words the way blades of grass grew up between paving stones. She said, “I’m sorry, but there’s little support

for anything resembling unification within Selesnya. Things were bad enough before the loss of Vitu-Ghazi. But now “

As she trailed off, I was already on the move, skittering up to my godfather. He leaned down for me, and I whispered into his ear.

Straightening, the spearmaster cleared his throat and said, “Milady, it was Bolas’s creatures that devastated Vitu-Ghazi.”

“Yes,” Mistress Kaya said, “exactly. And this wouldn’t be the first world where Bolas has wreaked havoc. Two Planeswalkers—Vivien Reid from Skalla, and Samut from Amonkhet—report that both their worlds were absolutely devastated by Bolas. Skalla is completely dead. And Amonkhet’s few survivors are struggling to, well, *survive*, while Bolas’s monsters continue to ravage what’s left of their home. In fact, I suspect the troubles on *my world* may be Bolas’s handiwork, as well. Make no mistake, Emmara. The dragon is turning all of Ravnica—if not the entire Multiverse—into a grave.”

Suddenly, Mistress Cim awoke, keening.

Her sister forms turned toward her, as did Milady Emmara with a gasp and Boruvo with a low bow.

Teyo was looking pretty confused, so I slid up next to him to explain: “She is the dryad Trostani, the true guildmaster of Selesnya, the voices of its parun um, you know, its founder, Mat’Selesnya. Mistress Cim, in the middle, is the dryad of Harmony. She has been asleep and unresponsive for months. Now she’s awake.”

“Yeah,” Teyo said without a hint of sarcasm, “I got that last bit.”

“The dryad on the left is Mistress Oba, the dryad of Life. On the right is Mistress Ses, the dryad of Order. Without Mistress Cim, they have been at odds, split and unable to reach a decision for their guild. Milady Tandris has been trying to keep Selesnya together during Trostani’s um, absence?”

The keening of Mistress Cim got louder, peaked, and fell away. Everyone waited with bated breath. Finally, she spoke—or it was almost like speaking—her words swirling through our minds, like a breeze playing through the leaves of a tree.

I have heard the song that plays in the wind, sisters. The dryad of Harmony turned to the dryad of Order: Ses, Bolas’s Order is the Order of the Grave. You have fought with your sister, but she is still your sister. Is it truly your wish to see her ended? To see all Life ended?

With that encouragement, Mistress Oba appealed to Mistress Ses, as well. *There is a great Order to Life. Is that not enough?*

Mistress Ses was silent for a time. She looked away from her sisters. She looked up at the sky. She looked every which way but pleased.

But ultimately, Mistress Ses acquiesced with a nod: *Trostani is once again in Harmony. It is the will of Mat’Selesnya that the Conclave join the other guilds to defeat Nicol Bolas.*

So. One down. Three to go.

III.

“Something’s changed,” Teyo said.

“Yes,” said Mistress Kaya, “I feel it, too. Ral must have succeeded in shutting down the Beacon.”

“Planeswalkers can still come?” I asked.

“Yes, but they won’t be drawn here. There’s no summons to answer anymore.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“I think so. We’re enough to defeat the dragon. Or enough to die trying, at any rate.”

I punched Mistress Kaya on the shoulder, saying, “Well aren’t you a ray of sunshine?”

I don’t know what I was thinking! You don’t punch a guildmaster!!

“Ow.”

Mortally embarrassed, I scurried ahead, calling out, “This way.”

She shushed me.

I don’t know what was getting into me, but I actually stopped and rolled my eyes at her. “No one else hears me. No one else wants to. Besides, we’ve almost reached Skarrg. Now, when we get there, you guys should let me do the talking.”

“I thought they can’t hear you,” Teyo said. Then he looked stricken, afraid he’d hurt my feelings.

He’s so sweet!

Anyway, just the fact that I have people to talk to about my situation makes it easier. Makes me kinda giddy, I think, what with all the punching and eye rolling and such. I said, “Most can’t. But my mother, Ari Shokta, can. And my father can if he’s paying attention. Same with Borborygmus. He thinks I’m adorable, which I am. I’m an adorable Rat!” I laughed, and the sound echoed off the curving walls of the tunnel. I *was* giddy. I mean, look, I’m used to me. I have to be used to me ‘cuz nearly every hour of every day I’m all I’ve got, you know? But the fact that Teyo and Mistress Kaya could hear me laugh and hear it echo was a magic all its own. I don’t think I’d ever spent this much time with anyone who could see me since I was a very little girl with my mother. Even Hekara never spent an entire day with me like this.

Teyo was staring at me. I think I must have blushed a little, ‘cuz he blushed, probably embarrassed for me, I guess.

I tried to pretend he hadn’t caught me and continued on. We were moving through sewer tunnels like, well, *like Rats! Hah!* It was dark and humid and close. Teyo, the desert baby, was dripping with sweat. I felt bad for him. Finally, we came to the end of the long brick tunnel. I approached the iron door and knelt before it to quickly pick the lock.

Quick enough to impress Mistress Kaya, who said, “You *are* good at that. Better than I am, and I’m something of an expert.”

I actually rolled my eyes *again!*

What is wrong with me?!

“Please,” I said—with way too much attitude. “I learned to do that when I was six. When no one knows you exist, they don’t unlock *anything* for you.” I swung the door open and instantly heard the familiar, familial sounds of angry voices and weapons clashing.

I scurried up yet another tunnel, and Teyo and Mistress Kaya struggled to keep up.

This final tunnel soon opened up onto Skarrg, the Reunion Turf, an immense underground playground, the cratered remains of a massive ancient palace. Immediately, I sized up the situation and knew I’d need help. Gan Shokta was fighting with the cyclops Borborygmus, with thirty or forty other Gruul warriors gathering to watch. Multiple axes came flying toward our heads. One sailed just above my scalp.

Good thing I'm short. I don't even need to duck.

Teyo instinctively raised a triangular shield, and another axe ricocheted off it. Mistress Kaya went incorporeal, and a third axe sailed right through her, sticking a good two inches deep into the wall behind. Seeing that my new friends could take care of themselves for at least a little while, I took off for home.

IV.

"Ari!" I yelled.

"Please, Araithia, no need to shout!"

"I thought Gruul warriors were supposed to shout!"

"In battle. Not at their mothers," she said and cuffed me hard. Then she pulled me in and hugged me tight. My mother has a real bear of a bear hug, but I love it. "You stay away too long, girl. I miss you, believe it or not."

"Not!" I barked out and laughed.

She cuffed me again.

"We have to go," I said. "Gan Shokta and Borborygmus are killing each other."

She faked a yawn. "Again?"

"Yes, but today, I need them to listen to my new friends."

"You have new friends, child?" she said with some giddy hope of her own.

"I—Yes. Two. But Ari Hekara's dead."

"I know, Araithia. I heard. I'm so very sorry. She could kill with the best of them. And she was a good friend to you. A worthy friend."

We said nothing for a bit.

Then I grabbed her hand and pulled her after me. "C'mon, mother!"

V.

I could hear my father's angry bark echoing through the tunnels as we approached Skarrg: "Borborygmus is half inclined to kill you right here and now, Ghost-Assassin. He holds you and the storm mage responsible for his fall."

"I understand," Mistress Kaya was saying carefully. And then more pointedly: "On the other hand, Teyo and I helped save your life. And besides, we're friends of your—"

Before Mistress Kaya could even mention my name, Gan Shokta barked out: "I need no reminders of my *momentary failing*. I owe you. I acknowledge that. But don't think for a moment I'm any happier to see you than the cyclops. Believe me, you couldn't have come at a worse time."

"We don't want to be here any more than you want us here. But there's no choice, Gan Shokta. There's no choice, Borborygmus. We need the Gruul to—"

By that time, we were in the chamber, and Ari called out to my father with a mixture of elation and urgency: "She's here, Gan!"

Gan Shokta turned: “*Here? Where?*”

Ari stepped forward with her arms wrapped around me. My mom’s considerably taller and considerably more muscular than I am. So her presence generally overwhelms mine, bear hug or no bear hug. She was also armed to the teeth, with a sword and an axe, two long daggers, and an iron chain around her waist like a belt, digging into my spine. But we have the same dark hair, and I’m told the same smile. She responded to my dad by saying, “Right here!”

All eyes around the bonfire turned toward Ari Shokta.

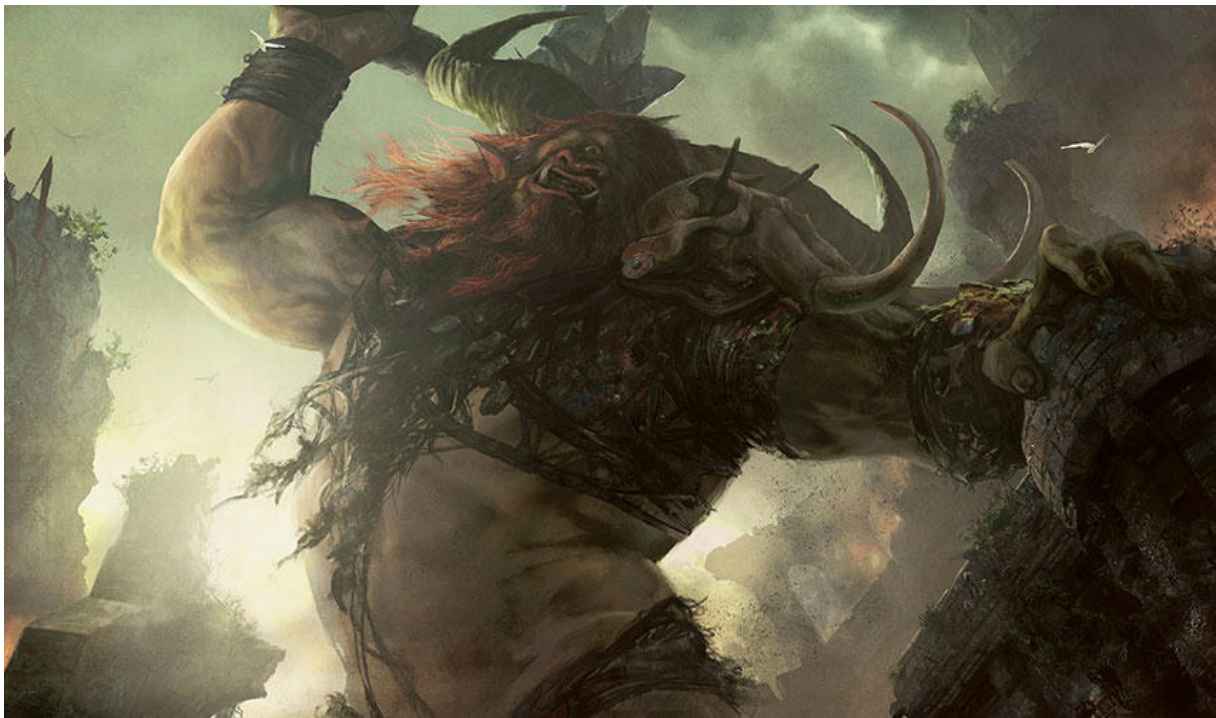
Gan Shokta squinted. He said, “Call out, girl!”

“I’m here, Father,” I said.

“She’s here in my arms, Gan,” his wife said.

Then Gan Shokta smiled: “I see her.”

Borborygmos grunted his own acknowledgement, and a few others in the crowd nodded too, though most were only pretending to see me to impress their betters.



Borborygmos Enraged | Art by: Aleksi Briclot

I addressed my father and the cyclops with all the formality the occasion required: “Great Borborygmos. Legendary Gan Shokta. You must unite the Clans and help the other guilds. Or it will be the end of us all.”

Gan Shokta growled his response, pointing at Borborygmos: “That’s what I’ve been telling him. But the stubborn fool won’t listen.”

Borborygmos lurched toward me and held out his huge hand. I slipped out of my mother’s arms and into his grip, which closed around me, practically eclipsing me.

I saw Teyo take an involuntary step forward, unnecessarily protective.

Is it strange that makes me happy? I mean I don’t need protection. Not from Borborygmos anyway. Really, not from much of anything. Still

Mistress Kaya put a hand on Teyo's shoulder and whispered something to stop him.

The cyclops lifted me up so that I could whisper right into his huge (kinda waxy) ear. I said, "This is really important. The Gruul—all of Ravnica—depend on you."

He shook his head violently.

I cupped my hands and whispered again. Then I kissed his cheek.

He blushed a bit, and I knew I had the old softy

Two down. Two to go.

VI.

"Please," Master Zarek said. "Enough." He had caught up to the three of us, and we had all entered Korozda together. "I've just spent a full sixty-six minutes draining the Beacon. I'm tired, and I don't have patience for your games. Or your imaginary friend."

"It's not a game," Mistress Kaya retorted. "Rat's not imaginary, and by the way, open your bloody mind, Ral. You'd think you'd never encountered an invisibility spell before."

"Well, if she's using an invisibility spell, tell her to stop using it."

"It's not that simple with her. It's innate. She can't turn it on and off."

I said, "It probably won't work, but point his head at exactly where I'm standing." I was watching Master Zarek, as Teyo and Mistress Kaya listened to me. He *still* thought they were teasing him, I guess, and he rolled his eyes at their pathetic "prank."

"Worth a try," Mistress Kaya said, then without warning she ghosted right through him, which I suppose felt mighty disconcerting.

"Damnit, Kaya, what the Krokt are you—"

From behind, Mistress Kaya literally grabbed his face in both of her once-again-solidified hands and aimed it at, well me.

I waved and said, "Hi."

His mouth gaped open, and his mind said something along the lines of *Where did she come from?*

"I came from the Gruul Clans, initially. But I'm Gateless, in case you were wondering. My name's Araithia Shokta, but you can call me Rat. Everyone does. Well, not everyone. Not my parents or my godfather, but everyone else who knows about me. Hekara called me Rat. I miss her. I bet you miss her, too. I know you pretended not to care about her, but I also know you valued her friendship. She was *such* a loyal friend, right? And so funny. She made me laugh and laugh and laugh. Not many people do that with me. Not on purpose, anyway."

He had to focus to see and hear me, which meant he could lose sight of me any second, which might explain why I was running on the way I was.

Except we know better, don't we?

"Don't be offended. Hekara asked, and I'd have done anything for her. Absolutely anything. She knew you wouldn't notice me. I mean, I think initially she hoped you would, but it was pretty clear pretty quick that you didn't. And Guildmaster Rakdos had told her to stick with you, and you kept ditching her. So she *had* to ask for my help, really. That's kind of your fault. So I tracked you, pretty much everywhere you went."

I looked past him to Mistress Kaya and said, “That’s why I’m surprised *you* didn’t notice me.”

She let go of Master Zarek and crossed over to me, saying, “The first time I saw you today, I thought you seemed vaguely familiar, like I had seen you around town. But I’m a stranger here, so I see a lot of locals that don’t fully register, as long as they’re not a threat.”

“And there was no way you could know you weren’t *supposed* to be able to see me, so you never mentioned it. Or even said hello!”

“Yeah, well, I am sorry about that.”

“Yeah, well, I do forgive you,” I said, mimicking her cadence rather sassily and taking her hands.

Trying to catch up, Master Zarek interjected: “So you’ve been following me since I met Hekara?”

“On and off. She didn’t need my services when *she* was with you. But I did try to stay in the vicinity, so I could pick up your trail and report back if and when you sent her packing.”

Mistress Kaya smirked a bit, as Master Zarek ran through *all* the implications of what I was telling him. That caused him to lose focus and lose sight of me again.

Teyo noticed his confusion and offered, “She’s still right beside Kaya.”

Master Zarek focused—and there I was again! He said, “I guess I’m sorry I couldn’t see you.”

“I’m used to it. And really, I’m kinda impressed at what you’re doing now. My mother says it took my father three months after I was born to master focusing on me. You’ve picked it up pretty much instantaneously. You’re more open to new things than you think you are.”

“I think I’m *very* open to new things.”

“No, you don’t. You want to be. But you don’t believe you are. But you are. Isn’t that strange?”

Master Zarek seemed to notice then that his mouth was hanging open, so he closed it.

Mistress Kaya was *still* smirking as she said, “There’s no time to dwell. We need to get a move on.”

She led the three of us deeper into Korozda, the Maze of Decay, which meant by definition that we were walking in circles. Concentric circles leading deeper and deeper into Golgari Swarm territory. I let the two guildmasters lead, though I was ready to correct their path if they took a wrong turn. I’d been down to explore its decaying fungal hedgerows many, many times and had long ago solved its puzzle.

We—or rather the three of them, as no one noticed me, of course—had already been admitted into Korozda by passing beneath the fortress of Pevnar, the Hanging Keep, an upside-down castle with foundations fixed to the ceiling. Master Zarek had been prepared for opposition from the Krunstraz that garrisoned the keep. But the insect-like kraul warriors simply watched us (or, you know, the three of them) enter the maze.



Kraul Harpooner | Art by: Kev Walker

Now, as we approached the center, it was clear that not only had we met no opposition, we had met no one *at all*. Which meant we (they) were expected. Or perhaps that we (they) were walking into a trap. Or, you know, maybe both.

We all scanned back and forth for signs of an ambush. I watched Master Zarek check the Accumulator he wore on his back. I leaned in and looked at the gauge. It was a few degrees past maximum capacity. Draining the Beacon must have meant sucking in a *lot* of juice.

He sped up, passing Kaya to enter the great circular amphitheater, with its many rows of stone seats, all covered by a soft downy moss.

Vraska's Erstwhile lich, an undead Golgari sorceress, was waiting to welcome us (them): "Greetings, Guildmaster Zarek. Greetings, Guildmaster Kaya. The Golgari Swarm welcomes you to Svogthos." Her voice sounded like dead leaves being blown across a grave.

I could tell Master Zarek couldn't remember the lich's name, so I slid up to him and whispered, "Storrev."

He smiled a thin smile, and I distinctly heard him think, *Thank you, Rat*.

"Don't mention it."

With some formality, he said, "We appreciate the greeting, Storrev." The Erstwhile looked mildly surprised and maybe a little flattered that Master Zarek knew her by name. And again, he gave off the clear thought—and this time, maybe a little less begrudgingly—*Thank you, Rat*.

I giggled a little.

"This is a time of crisis," Mistress Kaya said. "We've come to meet with Mazirek." Mister Mazirek, leader of the kraul, had been Mistress Vraska's right-hand bug—and the most likely candidate to have replaced her as Golgari guildmaster.

Madame Storrev sighed, nodded, and said, "Follow me."

We crossed the amphitheater and followed the lich into Svogthos, the subterranean guildhall of the Golgari. Once a grand Orzhov cathedral, arched and magnificent, it had fallen through a sinkhole some centuries ago. The Orzhov abandoned it. The Golgari claimed its ruin as their own.

Madame Storrev led us into a cavernous chamber, known as the Statuary. A raised stone causeway ran through its center, with statues lining either side. Except the statues weren't truly statues. They were victims. Mistress Vraska's victims. Like Mistress Isperia, each was frozen in stone. But unlike Isperia, whose final expression was one of mild surprise, each of these trophies had been captured in a last look of terror, hands thrown up too late to protect them from the gorgon's deadly mystic stare.

A number of folks were gathered at the far end of the causeway around Mistress Vraska's—or I suppose I should say, Queen Vraska's—massive stone throne. It was interesting that none of these Golgari were actually seated on the throne. Was it because no one had yet taken Queen Vraska's place as guildmaster? Or was it because the throne was kinda scary, consisting as it did entirely of more of the queen's dead enemies, intertwined and posed before being permanently petrified in place.

As we got closer, I could see that Mister Mazirek was not among the gathered Golgari big shots.

Madame Storrev made a slight bow, and Master Zarek, Mistress Kaya, and Teyo (but not me, of course) were introduced to the kraul Krunstraz warrior Azdomas, the devkarin leader Matka Izeni, the troll Varolz, and the elf shaman Cevraya.

"Mazirek?" Master Zarek asked.

Mister Azdomas made a series of clicking noises in his throat before speaking. There was a dark anger in the clicking *and* in his voice: "Mazirek was another Bolas collaborator, revealed by Queen Vraska before her departure."

"Vraska revealed him?"

"Yes," said Madame Storrev, in her voice of leaves, "Vraska freed the Erstwhile and gave us our tormentor Mazirek."

"He has paid the ultimate price for betraying the Swarm," Mister Azdomas added with finality.

Mistress Kaya glanced from Mister Azdomas to Madame Storrev to Matka Izeni to Miss Cevraya and then up to meet the eyes of the huge fungal-hided troll, Mister Varolz. The ghost-assassin seemed to be taking each one's measure—and gauging just what it would take to bring each one down if necessary. "If I might ask who is your new guildmaster? That is who we've come to address."

They all exchanged dangerous glances that revealed the answer even before Madame Storrev said, "Each of these individuals—myself excepted—has a claim to Vraska's throne."

"Vraska comes to claim Vraska's throne."

We all turned in time to see a figure emerging, fading up—planeswalking in, I guess—out of a silhouette.

It was Queen Vraska, herself.

As she came into focus, Master Zarek remembered to throw a hand up before his own eyes. Mistress Kaya did the same. I pushed Teyo's hand up, myself. I liked Queen Vraska, but I liked Teyo more—and I didn't want him decorating the Statuary.

With one hand still raised, Master Zarek activated his Accumulator. Mistress Kaya drew one of her long knives. Both were as ready as they were going to get to face the gorgon who'd betrayed them.

Queen Vraska ignored them both and, addressing the Golgari, said, "Does anyone challenge my right to that throne?"

Madame Storrev, Mister Azdomas, Mister Varolz, and Miss Cevraya all bowed immediately, saying in unison, “No, my queen.” Matka Izeni didn’t look overly pleased, but she bowed and uttered the same assurance, only half a second later than the other Golgari folk.

Master Zarek risked a glance at Queen Vraska and saw what I saw. Her eyes weren’t glowing, which meant she hadn’t summoned the magic to turn anyone to stone. It was a small relief, but we both knew she could summon that power rapidly. And she had other skills, other weapons, as well. For example, the cutlass hanging from her belt.

“You look ridiculous,” Master Zarek said to her, trying to replace a certain tone of bitterness with something approximating contempt. “What are you supposed to be, a pirate?”

Wow, a pirate queen! That actually sounded pretty keen!

She continued to ignore him, moving right past him to take a seat on her horror show of a throne.

“I’m surprised you returned to Ravnica,” Mistress Kaya said evenly, “Shocked, really “

“Appalled,” Master Zarek corrected.

“Especially *after* the Beacon was turned off?” Queen Vraska asked, as if trying to get a rise out of her former friends, her former allies.

Master Zarek was charged up and ready for a fight. Static crackled through his spiky hair. “So which was it?” he growled. “Did you assume Bolas had already been *defeated* —or that he had already *triumphed*?”

VII.

Queen Vraska led us through the Golgari tunnels, clearly aware that her two former friends, Master Zarek and Mistress Kaya, were right behind her, one charged and ready to fry her, the other drawn and ready to skewer her.

Master Zarek practically hissed at the Golgari queen’s back: “Turn to look at me, and I won’t hesitate.”

It seemed like a fairly intolerable situation, so I skittered up to Mistress Kaya and whispered, “Hekara really liked Mistress Vraska deep down, you know? Maybe we should give her the benefit of the doubt? I mean, why do *you* think she came back?”

Missing the point a little, Mistress Kaya said, “I don’t know. I’ll ask.”

“Ask what?” Queen Vraska growled over her shoulder.

“My friend Rat wants to know why you came back. She’s inclined to trust you because Hekara considered you a friend. Then again, I was inclined to trust you once, too “

Phrasing it like that wasn’t likely to give us any useful answers, and sure enough, Queen Vraska ignored the question and the judgments. Or at least she tried to. I scurried forward to read her face—and maybe get a general sense of her thoughts. She was definitely conflicted, but I felt certain she was determined to help help us, help Ravnica, and certainly help the Golgari.

After her arrival, Mister Azdomas had quickly updated her on Ravnica’s current situation. I could tell then that she had neither advance knowledge of the crisis—nor much to be surprised about. Oh, except the part about Mister Beleren having lost the powers of the Living Guildpact. *That* seemed to catch her quite off guard and revealed, to me at least, that his complicated feelings for her were reciprocated.

Mister Azdomas also reported that Golgari, Gateless, and other guilded civilians were trapped in various pockets of the city, at the mercy of the dragon’s Eternals.

Queen Vraska had made an offer to help, which Master Zarek had instantly rejected. Mistress Kaya had started to reject it, too. But I kinda interjected, saying, “We need the Golgari; she rules the Golgari, so we don’t have a lot of options.”

“We can’t trust her.”

“And yet we *still* need her.”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know. If she hadn’t—”

“I know. I do know. Believe me, I know.”

“Then how can I—”

“You test it, I guess. Give her the chance to prove she can be trusted. Or prove that she can’t.”

Then Mistress Kaya sighed heavily and turned to Queen Vraska to accept her help. And when Master Zarek objected again, Kaya forced him to begrudgingly accept, as well.

So now those three guildmasters, along with me, Teyo, Mister Azdomas, and Madame Storrev, were trudging through the subterranean waterways and sewers of Ravnica on a rescue mission.

Queen Vraska stopped beneath a massive iron grate. She gestured with one hand, careful not to look backward, since even her most harmless glance might trigger a preemptive strike from Master Zarek.

Mister Azdomas approached and pulled off the grate. The scraping of iron against stone echoed through the tunnels.

A voice from above roared, “Who’s there?”

Master Zarek, briefly forgetting his mistrust of the queen, stepped forward, saying, “Is that Goldmane?” in a fairly loud whisper.

Sure enough, Mister Goldmane stuck his head down into view. “Zarek?” The leonine immediately spotted the Izzet guildmaster and spoke with some urgency: “I’ve been leading some of the other Planeswalkers to help evacuate civilians. But the Eternals got the drop on us. Six or seven crops. We’ve been pinned down inside this old chapel for over an hour. The building’s completely surrounded. They’re attracted to our Sparks and won’t leave. We’ve kept the Dreadhorde at bay, but it’s a losing battle. Khazi was harvested when an Eternal punched its hand right through the wall and grabbed her by the wrist.”

Queen Vraska came up alongside Master Zarek and said, “This is the way out.”

Mister Goldmane squinted at her with his one good eye and said, “You must be Vraska. Jace was hoping you’d show up. He believes in you.”

Queen Vraska frowned but said, “Bring everyone down. The Golgari will keep them safe. You have my word.”



Vraska, Swarm's Eminence | Art by: Anna Steinbauer

Master Zarek scoffed loudly but managed to say nothing.

Without a sound, Mister Goldmane's face vanished from the opening. A minute passed. Then two. The queen and Master Zarek exchanged confused glances. I was just about to climb up and see if I could help, when Mister Goldmane dropped down. He approached the gorgon without fear and said, "We haven't been introduced. I am Ajani Goldmane of the Gatewatch." He reached out his hand.

She grasped his thick furry forearm, and he grasped her smooth one. She said, "Welcome to Golgari territory, Ajani Goldmane. You are safe here."

He nodded, smiling. Then he turned back up toward the tunnel's ceiling and said, "Start lowering them."

One by one, Ravnicans—children, mostly—were lowered into the arms of Mister Goldmane, of Mister Azdomas, of Mistress Kaya, of Teyo, and of Queen Vraska. I wanted to help, too, of course, but I could have stood there all day and no one would have handed a child to me. So I just tried to stay out of the way, you know?

A wary Master Zarek stood back, as well. Queen Vraska was handed a young elven girl—five or six years old—who buried herself in the gorgon's breast, heaving great sobs of fear and sorrow. The queen looked stricken. But she held the girl tight.

There was a noise from above. A voice yelled down, "They've breached the doors!"

The last of the Ravnicans descended, and they were followed by two of the Planeswalkers I had seen at the summit. Mister Goldmane quickly introduced them as Miss Mu Yanling and Mister Jiang Yanggu. The latter called back up, "Mowu, come!"

A small dog leapt down into Mister Jiang's arms. This was a much smaller dog than I had seen at the Senate House.

Did they bring two dogs?

Mister Jiang put the canine down on the tunnel floor, and it proceeded to grow, expanding into the three-tailed dog, as tall as its master, that I had seen before.

Krokt, I want a magic dog, too!

Mister Goldmane said, “Where’s Huatli?”

“Here!” Miss Huatli called out as she dropped down. “I’m the last, but they’re right behind me!” As if to prove her right, a lazotep-covered hand and arm reached down from above, sweeping the air and just missing Miss Huatli.

The hand vanished into the darkness above and was replaced by the heads of three Eternals. They started to climb down, delayed only because none of them waited for either of the other two.

That delay gave Queen Vraska the time she needed. She summoned her power—I watched it build up behind her eyes—which she kept focused on the ceiling to avoid triggering Master Zarek’s wrath. The gorgon pulled the crying elf child closer to her bosom and covered the girl’s eyes with one hand. Then as the three creepies filled the opening, Queen Vraska locked eyes with each of them in turn, transforming all three to stone. The sound of them calcifying was kinda satisfying, and the result was that she had not only stopped Miss Huatli’s pursuers from attacking, but had also effectively sealed the hole and the Eternals’ only way down from the chapel above.

Madame Storrev approached her queen and whispered in her ear. She listened and turned to Master Zarek, who took a step back—but didn’t try to electrocute her (which seemed like a good sign to me). Maybe it was because her eyes were no longer glowing, meaning she was no longer an immediate threat. Or maybe it was because she was still holding the small softly crying elf girl in her arms. Or maybe—just maybe—it was because she had begun to earn back a little of the lost trust they had once shared.

She said, “All across the city, the Golgari are opening up pathways to safety for every Ravnican they can find. We are fighting Bolas’s army and preserving life.” And then with some showy sarcasm, she added, “You’re welcome.”

Master Zarek said nothing.

I thought, *Three down. One to go.*

Mistress Kaya said, “Good. Now, there’s one more thing we need you to do “