

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 12

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“What about giants?” Kaya said, brightly. “The pair of them in the basement certainly gave me a workout. Can we scrape some of those together?”

“I’m certain that can be arranged,” said the Knight of Despair, a hollow-cheeked figure in dark armor.

“Guildmaster,” Teysa said, her patience fraying, “would you please *listen* to me for a moment?”

“I’m listening,” Kaya said. “I just disagree.”

“You cannot expose yourself to needless risks,” Teysa said.

“Can,” Kaya said, yawning. “And they’re not needless. What about gargoyles? Though those might not be much good underground—”

“Could I speak to you alone?” Teysa grated.

Kaya glanced at the Knight of Despair and his retinue, then shrugged. “I’ll expect a report on the field force you put together.”

“Very good, Guildmaster,” the knight said. He left the room with a clank of heavy armor, soldiers and priests shuffling after him.

Kaya was left alone with Teysa, in this small conference chamber high atop Orzhova. Like everything else in the great cathedral, it was opulently furnished, with gilt-framed portraits of bankers past staring down from the walls and heavy purple carpet softening the stone floor. The intricately inlaid table was polished to a mirror sheen. Kaya couldn’t help but wonder how many of the bonds of debt that weighed down her soul had been forged here, in this room, lives ruined by the stroke of some bureaucrat’s pen.

“We need to have a discussion,” Teysa said tightly. “You know—”

“What is there to discuss?” Kaya said, staring back at the other woman defiantly. “You made me the guildmaster, so my decision is final.”

“I made you the guildmaster because it was the only way to save your life,” Teysa said. “The others were ready to kill you before you woke up, and take the risk that Grandfather’s personal debts would transfer to whoever slit your throat. I convinced them that this way was safer.” She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palms, as though she were beginning to regret that decision, and Kaya softened a little.

“I get it,” she said. “Really. And I’m grateful. I know you didn’t have to stick your neck out for me.”

“You helped *me* when I needed it,” Teysa said. “I can’t forget that.”

"I was getting paid," Kaya said. *Or so I thought.* Bolas, the slimy snake, had known following his instructions would get her trapped here.

"And I need to think about what's best for the guild," Teysa said. "If you get yourself killed fighting Vraska or anyone else, it could be catastrophic for the Orzhov."

"I understand that," Kaya said. "But I'm pretty good at not getting myself killed, you know."

"I can imagine," Teysa said, with a slight smile. "But as I said. It's an unnecessary risk."

"It's a necessary one," Kaya said. "I owe Ral."

"Orzhov forces are going to support him—"

"I owe him. Not the Orzhov. So I have to be there. You understand?"

Teysa stared at Kaya for a long moment, then shook her head.

"No," she said. "But I can see I'm not going to change your mind."

Kaya grinned. "Fair enough. I promise I'll be careful."

"You'd better be," Teysa said. She looked down at the force reports, scrolls scattered like seeds across the vast table, and sighed.

"Do you need my help with those?" Kaya said.

"No." Teysa waved a hand. "Go get some rest. I'll make sure Ral has the troops he needs."

Kaya stifled a relieved groan, gave Teysa a nod, and slipped out of the conference chamber, passing through the door in a wash of purple light. Not strictly necessary, of course, but she liked to walk through walls from time to time, just to prove to herself that she still could. The entire vast cathedral was starting to feel more and more like a cage, gilded and decadent but just as confining.

She could feel the obligations she'd assumed from Karlov's ghost, when her blades had cut him down. They wrapped around her like a thousand spiritual chains, each one tying her to some poor debtor who'd made a bargain with the Church of Deals. Releasing them cost her strength, and it cost the Orzhov money. Break too many at once, and one or the other of them would collapse.

Would that be so terrible? Kaya daydreamed, idly, as she ghosted down the corridors toward her own chambers, avoiding the guards out of habit. She could do it, tear all the chains free, declare a jubilee and cancel all the debts with a wave of her hand. The Orzhov would come crashing down, all the sumptuous gold and marble revealed to be rotten at the core. *Maybe I'd be doing Ravnica a favor.*

Of course, she'd die in the process. *Which is sort of the sticking point.* It wasn't that she was afraid, exactly, but there wasn't anyone else. When Kaya had left her home, she'd vowed to sacrifice anything to fix the broken world she'd left behind. *If I die here, everyone back home dies with me, if not now then in ten years or twenty as the sky rips itself apart.*

Plus, all right, I'm a little afraid.

She walked through the door to her quarters and shook her head to banish the dark thoughts. As guildmaster, she naturally had a disgustingly opulent suite at the heart of the Orzhova. It had come with a staff of a dozen servants, who were expected to live in it with her to wait on her hand and foot. Kaya had sent them away—having people in such proximity all the time made her nervous—and so her rooms felt oddly empty, too large for their occupant. She rattled around in them like a dried pea in a pod, and mostly stuck to the colossal bedroom and its adjacent bathroom.

Today, as she materialized on the other side of the door in the grand entrance hall, she startled an old woman in the robes of a palace servant, who'd been standing awkwardly against a grand mirror with

two small children by her side. The woman blinked at Kaya in shock, and one of the children, a boy of ten or eleven, squirmed free and gaped.

"How do you *do* that?" he said. "Walk through walls?"

"It's a knack," Kaya said modestly.

"Svet!" the old woman said, yanking him back. A slightly younger girl peeked at Kaya from under her arm. "Both of you, show respect. This is your guildmaster." She bowed deep, forcing the children to bend along with her."

"Thanks," Kaya said, feeling awkward. "Get up, please. What are you doing here?" There were guards outside her quarters, though she herself had circumvented them as usual.

"My name is Olgaia," the old woman said. "I don't mean to disturb you, Guildmaster. But we heard . . . that is . . ."

"Grandma says you'll forgive the debts of anyone who asks you in person," Svet said.

Kaya winced. Word was starting to spread, then. *I really shouldn't*. If Teysa found out, she'd throw a fit. But there were so *many* debtors, and each one contributed only fractionally to the burden on Kaya's soul. *Why not help them, if I have the chance?*

"It's not . . . quite like that." Kaya cocked her head. "How did you end up in debt to the Orzhov?"

"I bought a necklace." Olgaia hung her head. "I was young and foolish, and I thought it would turn a young man's head. It did, but . . ." She shrugged. "I have spent the last twenty years working in the laundries here. But the interest on what I owe is more than my wages, and so the debt only increases." She pulled her two grandchildren to her. "Since their parents died, I have cared for these two, but when they come of age they will inherit the debt too. Please, Guildmaster. I want only a chance for a better life for them."

A necklace. A mistake, maybe, but this woman had spent her entire life paying for it. How many children work for me, paying for their grandparents' mistakes?

Kaya found the thread of debt that connected her to these three, like tracing a single fine thread from a thick bundle. With an effort of will, she snapped it, feeling a tiny pain in her chest. Olgaia gasped, and straightened up slightly.

"You are forgiven," Kaya said. "Just . . . don't tell everyone about it, all right?"

"Of course, Guildmaster." Olgaia bowed frantically. "Thank you. Thank you."

Kaya waved her away, and the old woman hustled her grandchildren out the door. When they were gone, Kaya sighed heavily and wandered into the bedroom, flopping face-first into the thick feather mattress on the ornate four-poster.

She weighed the chain of obligations in her mind, the golden fetters that bound her. With one jerk, so many lives would be freed. *All except mine*. If Bolas was to be believed, only he could manage that—

Kaya sat up abruptly and shook her head. She clomped across to the bathroom, where there was an enormous marble bath, complete with hot and cold running water—an unthinkable luxury on many of the worlds she'd visited. The Orzhov might be a bunch of heartless banker-priests, Kaya reflected, but they certainly knew how to make a good bath.

linebreak There was no true wilderness left on Ravnica. After ten thousand years or more of civilization, no patch of land had not been built on, burned down, plowed under, and built again a dozen times.

The rubblebelts that fringed the Tenth District were not natural in any sense— they were the *absence* of civilization, its negation and destruction.

Probably, Ral thought, the Gruul clans liked it that way. Or else they didn't know the difference— as a Planeswalker, he had seen true wilderness on other worlds, but no Ravnican could understand what that truly meant. In either case, while the Gruul ranted endlessly about nature and its power, they lived among ruins, parasites scavenging from what the other guilds created. They had never been the primary enemies of the Izzet League, but of all the guilds Ral found them perhaps the most incomprehensible.

It was a cold day, but at least the rain had briefly abated, with only occasional spitting squalls under a gray, sunless sky. A few days of reasonable sleep hadn't restored Ral completely, but it had gone quite a ways, as had an unfortunately brief visit from Tomik. Now he wore his long coat and the latest version of his accumulator, fully charged and ready. The mizzium bracer son his arms crackled in anticipation.

Behind him walked a company of scorchbringers, viashino soldiers equipped with flamethrowers. The reptilian humanoids barked and growled to one another in their guttural variant of the common tongue, flicking tongues indicating their high spirits. They spent most of their time on guard duty, restrained from using their weapons lest they burn down the labs and workshops they protected, so Ral imagined they were looking forward to a chance to cut loose in the open field.

The bulk of the force accompanying them, as Aurelia had promised, was provided by the Boros Legion. Two battalions of infantry marched in disciplined columns, shielded spearmen at the fore and archers behind. Sergeants in notched helmets prowled up and down the files, lambasting their soldiers for infractions of drill that were incomprehensible to Ral. At the head of each battalion, a battle flag with the Boros emblem flapped proudly, surrounded by an honor guard.

Boros soldiers were overhead, too. Several flights of skyknights, roc-riding lancers, flew cover over the expedition, scouting out the ground in front of them. They shared the air uneasily with their Azorius counterparts, riding on griffins. More Azorius cavalry held the flanks of the ground force, several squadrons of hussars in brightly polished armor on each side.

They rode over ancient roads and plazas, through buildings half-collapsed and tangled with vines and sprouting trees. Some patches of the rubblebelt had been ruined for a very long time, while others had fresh burn scars. This was the boundary of Gruul territory, where the Boros fought their endless war against the encroaching chaos. As they passed beyond it, the trees grew taller, the grass deeper, and the crumbling stone hulks of ancient structures were submerged in green, as though they were wrecked ships sinking below the waves.

Commander Ferzhin, accompanied by a half-dozen young aides-de-camp, walked at the center of the Boros formation, her dark eyes watchful. She glanced in Ral's direction as he fell in beside her, taking two strides for each of hers to keep pace.

"We're nearly there," Ral said. He glanced down at the gadget in his hand, a mizzium-and-crystal thing that the chemisters had hurriedly thrown together. A polished window on top grew brighter as they approached the node, and it hummed softly as he waved it in a circle. "Just past that wall, I think."

"Looks like an old square," the minotaur rumbled, shading her eyes with one hand. A broad open space up ahead was fronted by ruined buildings on three sides, including one that stood at least four stories high. "I don't like it. Good spot for an ambush."

"The Gruul haven't come after us so far. Maybe they won't attack at all."

"They'll attack," Ferzhin said. Her lip curled. "They always do. Be ready."

At the edge of the square, the minotaur growled a command, and the column came to a halt. Skyknights flew in lazy circles overhead, while the cavalry waited, horses giving the occasional soft snort. Ral and Ferzhin slipped forward through the ranks, to the front of the formation. Ahead of them, in the center of the square, a single figure was waiting.

"Do you recognize him?" Ferzhin said.

Ral shook his head, wishing for a moment Lavinia was there. *She's the one who knows everything about everyone.* "He pretty clearly wants to talk. So let's talk."

The minotaur rolled her eyes, but said nothing as Ral strode out to meet the lone stranger. He was a young man, clearly of the Gruul clans—heavily tattooed, with scraps of hide armor and a stiffened ridge of dark hair. He carried a pair of hand-axes at his belt, and rested his palms on them while he waited for his visitors to approach, giving them an insolent smile.

"Lot of nerve, you lot have," he shouted, as they came up. "Lot of nerve, comin' here."

"You have some nerve yourself, meeting us on your own," Ral said. He looked the youth up and down. "I'm Ral Zarek, of the Izzet League."

"I'm Domri Rade, yeah? Of the Gruul clans." His lips split in a cruel smile. "Head man of *all* the Gruul clans."

Ferzhin chuckled. "Borborygmors might want a word with you if you go around saying things like that."

Domri grinned wider. "Already had it. Duel of the century, they're calling it."

"And you won?" Ral said, doubtfully.

"I'm here, ain't I?" Domri spread his hands. "And he's not. So here's what. Take your shiny-assed toys and get yourselves out of here while you still can, understand? Else we're going to have trouble."

"We're not here to stay," Ral said. "It's only for the duration of the emergency."

"Don't give a *damn*," Domri said, leaning forward until he was only inches from Ral's face. "About you, or your emergency. If this big bad dragon comes to mess with us, we'll fight him too. Fight everyone. That's Gruul, see? Old Bor-Bor, he tried talking, and look where that got him. I ain't makin' that mistake."

"Big words for a man alone," Ferzhin said.

"Oh, don't worry." Domri took a step back and spread his arms. "I ain't alone."

A piercing cry rang through the air. Ral looked up to see a skyknight falling, his griffin's flank ripped open in a shower of blood by a monstrous eagle. More birds were descending, flocks of them, hawks and owls and crows by the thousands. They *glowed*, a dark, verdant green, and Ral could feel the pulse of magic around them.

He raised his hands and closed his gauntlets into fists. Lightning crackled, all around him, then spearing up into the sky, catching the largest of the avian attackers. The eagle gave a screech as it burst into flame, falling into the grass square a burning mess, and power arced onward, from one bird to the next. Crows exploded in bursts of black feathers.

"Back to the lines!" Ferzhin said, taking Ral by the shoulder.

"I can deal with a few birds—"

But more movement caught Ral's eye. From around the periphery of the square, a cloud of dust was rising, and at the head of it he could see a solid line of wild boar. They were huge, as big as a man, with the same intricate tattoos as Domri and the same dark green glow. Each sported a pair of massive

tusks, backed by a thousand pounds of porcine muscle. Domri drew an axe in each hand and laughed wildly as the boar surged past him.

“Back to the lines,” Ral agreed.

They made it just in time, scrambling behind the wall formed by the front rank of Boros troops, their worn metal shields interlocking with practiced ease. Their levelled spears formed an impenetrable thicket, but the boars continued their charge with a suicidal fury, throwing themselves onto the line of steel points. The sheer mass of their impact disordered the line, driving soldiers back or knocking them off their feet. Even impaled and bleeding, the boars kept thrashing, snapping the shafts that harried them. When they got close enough, their tusks tore shields away and ripped through armor, leaving broken bodies bleeding into the grass.

The Boros troops knew their business, however. Men and women in the front line dropped their spears when the boars shattered them and drew swords, closing in to slaughter the massive beasts. Behind them, the second line formed, and the archers nocked their arrows. Overhead, the sky had become a swirling melee of birds and griffins, a flock of harrying animals attacking each skyknight. The skyknights fired their bows with preternatural precision, sending a steady rain of eagles, hawks, and crows plummeting to the earth.

“Here they come,” Ferzhin bellow. “Archers, ready!”

Through the dust thrown up by the charge of the boars, Ral could make out a host of fleeting shapes, pouring out of the ruined buildings in a tide of muscle, leather, and steel. Here and there, heads were visible above the murk, giants with shaggy, multicolored hair and massive stone clubs. Ral had a sudden moment of doubt—*that’s a hell of a lot of them*—then bared his teeth in a savage grin and shouted to his viashino troops.

“Go! Get out front!”

The lizards bounded forward, threading around the knots of struggling Boros troopers and the few surviving boars to make a thin skirmish line in from of the Legion shield wall. Behind them, the archers loosed a flight of arrows with a sound like a flock of birds ascending, shafts *zipping* overhead and descending like dark rain. The well-trained soldiers had another volley aloft before the first had landed, and figures shrieked, stumbled, and fell as the horde came on.

Sudden, blinding light as the scorchbringers ignited their weapons. Tongues of flame licked out, touching the shrouded figures and leaving them ablaze, sweeping back and forth. Men and women danced like maddened puppets, engulfed in flames, shrieking as they burned. A wave of javelins and thrown axes came in response, and a few of the scorchbringers went down, one of them detonating in a spectacular explosion. The remainder fell back slowly, playing their fires over the advancing Gruul anarchs, then slipping back to safety behind the line of Boros spearmen.

The Gruul came on, full of berserk fury, leaping over their own charred dead with swords and axes in hand. Most were human, hair wild, wearing leather armor or none at all, skin thick with tattoos and eyes wild with rage. Ogres loomed among them, too, larger and thick-skinned, wielding huge clubs that Ral doubted he could even lift.

For a moment it seemed like they would smash the Boros line through sheer momentum, but the trained soldiers locked shields and grounded their spears, and the furious wave of anarchs broke against them like a wave against rock. They hacked at the protruding spears, tried to dodge between them, or simply hurled themselves forward and trusted to luck. The front line was suddenly thick with the dead and dying, and the Boros troops dropped their spears, drew their swords, and engaged the survivors. In moments, a wild melee developed, and it was difficult to see anything at all.

One of the giants was down, pincushioned by a hundred arrows, but another waded gleefully into the press, its huge club sweeping back and forth, breaking friend and foe alike. The Boros line bent before it, and threatened to break. Ral reached over his head and yanked downward, and energy roared from the accumulator on his back and licked up into the sky. A moment later, the sky rumbled in answer, and a titanic bolt of lightning descended, striking the huge creature as it raised its club for another swing. The weapon slipped from its hand, falling heavily to the earth, as the giant was outlined in brilliant white for a moment. Then it toppled, smoking, and collapsed to a cheer from the Boros soldiers.

“There!” Ferzhin said. “It’s Domri!”

Something huge loomed out of the dust, taller and broader than the giants. It had a vaguely humanoid shape, squat-bodied and long-legged, but it was made of the stuff of the rubblebelt—vines, trees, chunks of rock, ancient columns and statues, all pressed together and grinding against one another to make a continual roar. Arrows slammed into it to little effect, and it swept one hand through a squad of Boros soldiers and left them scattered and broken on the turf. On the massive thing’s shoulder rode Domri, an axe in each hand, laughing gleefully at the carnage below.

“Scorchbringers!” Ral beckoned. “Kill that thing!”

He didn’t wait for the viashino to regroup, but charged himself, with Ferzhin at his side. Lightning exploded from his fingertips, playing across the huge ruin elemental, stone and wood exploding in its wake. The thing twisted, as though it could feel pain, and brought one huge hand down to crush Ral like an insect. He dodged backward, stumbling as the blow sent a shockwave through the earth, and sent a concentrated pulse of power into the elemental’s hand, blowing it apart in a shower of rocks and wooden splinters.

Fire licked out from a dozen directions, scorching the elemental, and it reared up and cast about for its attackers. Domri jumped down from its shoulder and charged Ferzhin, who drew her greatsword and stood to meet him. Steel rang against steel, the laughing youth pressing the attack, spinning and twisting away from the stolid minotaur’s attacks with distressing ease. Ral sent a blast of lightning at him, and Domri ducked aside. Before Ral could press the attack, he had to dance away from the elemental again, narrowly avoiding being crushed.

That’s about enough of that. Normally, the best way to deal with an elemental would be to kill whoever had summoned it, but in the chaos of battle they could be anywhere. *That leaves only the direct approach.* The thing was badly damaged, blazing in several places as flamethrowers continued to torment it. Ral pulled all the power he could from his accumulator, his gauntlets glowing white, and focused it to a lance of brilliant energy. When the elemental reared up again, he unleashed the blast, a beam of light that punched through the thing’s core and blew a huge spray of rocks and ancient masonry out of its back. The vast creature groaned, then started to come apart, rock and flaming trees thudding to the ground as it disintegrated.

Domri gave a shout of triumph, and Ral turned in time to see Ferzhin’s sword knocked from her hands. The young man spun, burying one of his hand-axes deep in the minotaur’s ribs. But it stuck fast, and his triumphant shout cut off when she grabbed him and brought her horned skull down hard in a vicious headbutt. Domri’s nose broke with a *crunch* Ral could hear across the battlefield, and he staggered backward into the billowing dust of the elemental’s collapse.

Ral raised a hand to send lightning chasing after him, but the accumulator on his back only gave an empty whine. He swore as Domri vanished, then hurried to Ferzhin’s side. The minotaur had fallen to one knee, gripping the axe Domri had left behind. She jerked it free with a gasp and tossed it away, blood soaking her uniform.

“Commander!” A Boros lieutenant jogged over and offered a crisp salute.

“Get a healer,” Ral snapped at him. “She needs—”

“Later,” Ferzhin said, pushing herself to her feet. “Report.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant said. “The enemy are in full retreat. The day is ours.”

“Deploy perimeter patrols,” Ferzhin said. “Gather our wounded, and make certain the bastards haven’t left any nasty surprises behind.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And then,” Ferzhin said, glancing at Ral. “Fetch me a healer. If there’s one to spare.”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant saluted and hurried off.

“You’re all right?” Ral said, eyeing her bleeding side.

“I’ve had worse,” Ferzhin said, breathing hard. “That was . . . more than I expected.”

Ral gave a slow nod. “Someone warned them we were coming.” *Bolas.* linebreak “Nevertheless.” The minotaur gestured around them, at the ancient square now liberally strewn with corpses. “You’ve got your bit of ground. I hope your mad engineers can do something worthwhile with it.”

“Don’t worry on that score,” Ral said, as a white-coated Boros medic hurried over. “We’ll take it from here.”