

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 13

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Vraska looked down at her map, inked lines on parchment covered in pencil cross-hatching. Just lines on paper, for now. But what they represented . . .

You are distressed, friend-Vraska , Xeddick projected into her mind.

Vraska leaned back in her throne of petrified bodies, now heavily cushioned and much more comfortable. She let her head rest on the thick pillow that covered the screaming face of a shadow elf, and looked up into the vaulted ceiling. Light-globes hung at intervals, glowing softly with bioluminescence, suspended in vast mats of cobweb. Vraska closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her forehead. Her skull ached, and the tendrils on her head hung limp and lifeless.

You must rest , Xeddick said, moving forward from the shadows beside the throne. Aside from a few Erstwhile guards, he was the only one in the throne room. She'd banished everyone else the night before. *You push yourself too hard.*

"It's all I can do," Vraska muttered, and shook her head. She sat up and looked across at the albino kraul. He was small for his race, his fluttering wings weak and useless, but his mind was extraordinary. *And he cares about me.* That, these days, was a rare commodity. "Sorry. You're right. I just . . ."

She gestured at the map.

You plan for the attack of the surface dwellers , Xeddick said. *You are certain they are coming?*

"They're coming," Vraska said grimly. "Ral Zarek won't give up. It's not in his nature." Her lip twisted. "One of his more charming qualities."

Then they will come , Xeddick said. *And you will defeat them.*

She could feel his total confidence, and it made her wince. "There'll be a cost, and your people will bear the brunt of it."

There is always a cost, friend-Vraska. And my people owe you more than we can possibly repay. We will take the burden, and gladly.

"Mazirek may not agree."

Mazirek has grown apart from the rest of the kraul , Xeddick said. He sounded uncertain—it wasn't in his nature to criticize. *He has become . . . proud. He has forgotten the purpose of all kraul is to serve the hive. It is the hive that endures, when the individual fails.*

Exactly , Vraska thought. She flung the words into the depths of her own mind, where she had a nasty feeling that she'd find Jace looking back at her. *I did what I had to do for the Golgari. These are my people,*

my responsibility. I have to protect them better than Jarad, so no one has to suffer what I did. Prison, torture, and nearly death, for no better reason than that she'd been born a gorgon.

And besides. Vraska forced a smile, showing pointed teeth. *I enjoyed it.* Watching the great sphinx Isperia—the judge who'd destroyed her life with a casual signature on a form—harden into lifeless stone. *I should have done that a long time ago.*

Xeddick shifted uneasily. *Friend-Vraska*, he said, *the guards have captured an intruder.*

"Another assassin?" Vraska looked down at the throne. "I don't need him for the throne. Have them toss him—"

Pardon, but it does not appear to be an assassin. She claims to be an emissary from the Rakdos.

"From Rakdos?" Vraska frowned. "Bring her in."

A few moments later, a pair of Erstwhile came in, escorting a bedraggled figure in a patchwork leather bodysuit, soaked to the skin. Water had washed the paste from her hair, leaving it lying flat and dripping.

"Hekara," Vraska said, with a sigh.

"Vrasky!" Hekara said, bouncing and spattering water everywhere.

"What happened to you?" Vraska said.

"Fell in the moat," Hekara said promptly.

"The moat is full of crocodiles," Vraska said.

"Found that out," Hekara said, still grinning. "Bitey!"

Vraska shook her head, tendrils curling in amusement. "Does Ral know you're here?"

"No," Hekara said. "I just wanted to talk." She bit her lip, then looked at the guards and Xeddick.

"Leave us," Vraska said. "You as well, Xeddick. I'll speak with you later."

The kraul bent his front legs in his species' version of a bow and withdrew, the shuffling Erstwhile following after. Hekara, still dripping, skipped up toward the throne.

"I like what you've done with the place," she said. "Very *you*, you know?" She bent to examine one of the twisted statues that made up the throne. "Nice chair, too. Must be tough to chisel out all the fiddly bits."

"That was . . . not a problem," Vraska said, grinning in spite of herself. "What are you doing here, Hekara? Have you come to speak on behalf of Rakdos?"

"Nope. His Flaminghood is right pissed at you for the whole . . . thing. Doesn't like being betrayed, he says, which is weird because he's always betraying everybody else, right? Demons!" She laughed, though it sounded a little forced. "I'm not here on anyone's behalf. Just mine."

"All right," Vraska said. "What is it you want to say?"

"I've thought about what happened," Hekara said. "An' I think you should come back."

"Come back," Vraska said, deadpan.

"Yeah." Hekara bounced on the balls of her feet. "'Cause we're mates. You and me and Ral. We shouldn't be fighting each other."

"Ral is probably . . . 'right pissed' at me as well."

“Eh. He’ll get over it.” Hekara waved a hand. “He’s got a new thing which I’m not supposed to talk about, which is okay because it doesn’t make much sense to me, and he gets on these long tangents when he hasn’t gotten enough sleep and starts drawing on the walls, and now I think I’m lost and I forgot what I was saying. But *anyway* you should come back because we’re mates and I’ve got no hard feelings and he’ll stop being mad eventually.”

“That’s quite an offer,” Vraska said, leaning back in her throne again.

“I thought so,” Hekara said. “So you’ll come?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s that simple.”

Hekara’s brow creased. “Why not?”

“I have . . . responsibilities.”

“Burn ’em!” Hekara said promptly.

“Burn—” Vraska shook her head.

“Burning solves most things, I find,” Hekara said.

“It’s not . . .” Vraska took a deep breath. “The Golgari need me. I have a duty to protect them.”

“My old teacher used to say, you’ve got three duties. Listen to your boss, look after your mates, and look after yourself.” Hekara cocked her head. “You *are* the boss, so that’s number one taken care of. You can bring your bug-friend with you if you want. I’ll keep him in my room. Nobody will find out.”

“I can’t, Hekara,” Vraska said, gently.

“But you can’t stay here.” Hekara’s lip quivered. “Or else you’ll end up fighting Ral. And you’re *mates*. I tried to tell him the same thing, but he wouldn’t listen. He’s got that dragon for a boss, though, and you don’t, so I thought . . .”

I have another dragon entirely. Vraska kept the thought to herself. *Even if I didn’t have Bolas, I’d still have the Golgari people to answer to.*

“I’m sorry,” Vraska said.

“You’re *stupid*,” Hekara said, stomping her foot. “And so is Ral. You don’t *understand*.”

She spun on her heel and stalked out, leaving a trail of damp footprints. A few moments later, Xeddick reappeared.

Your visitor has fallen in the moat again, he said.

“Fish her out,” Vraska said. “And make sure she gets back to the surface safely.”

It was the least she could. *The only thing I can do.*

And the defenses? the kraul said, gesturing at the map with a forelimb.

“Tell Mazirek and his people to start laying them out,” Vraska said. “As quickly as he can. We don’t have much time.”

Kaya followed Tomik Vrona to Teysa’s office, walking down the elegantly furnished hallways of the most privileged parts of Orzhova. Up here, it definitely looked more like a bank than a church, with frowning portraits of past Orzhov notables on every wall, gilt furnishings, and lots of marble. Tomik

paused in front of a set of double doors carved with an elaborate frieze, and Kaya came to an awkward halt beside him.

If I'm the guildmaster, she thought, *why do I feel like I'm the one getting called on the carpet?*

Tomik rapped lightly on the wood. Teysa's voice came from inside. "Yes?"

"I've brought the guildmaster, Lady Teysa, as you asked."

"Of course. Come in." There was a coldness in Teysa's words that Kaya didn't like the sound of.

They entered. Teysa's office was almost entirely marble, with a fire roaring in a massive hearth that made it nearly stifling. Tall, narrow windows occupied the wall behind the great hardwood desk, lashed by rain. Lightning flashed from cloud to cloud outside, and Kaya heard a low roll of thunder.

Teysa, sitting between two stacks of large, leather-bound books, looked up from the ledger she'd been writing in and gave a humorless smile.

"Guildmaster," she said.

"Um . . . Teysa." Kaya wasn't sure of her official title. "How's it going?"

"I have been going over the numbers," Teysa said, gesturing at the books.

"I can see." Kaya glanced at Tomik, who'd taken an unobtrusive place in the corner. "I thought you had people for that?"

"The leader of the Orzhov—the *guildmaster*—should have a personal appreciation of the state of our accounts. We are, after all, a bank. The balance of our assets against outstanding obligations is a matter of grave concern."

"Right." Kaya shrugged. "Look, we both know that's not something *I'm* going to be able to do, so if that's what this is about—"

Teysa looked up, expression cold with suppressed anger. "I *am* aware of that. In fact, you agreed to stay well away from Orzhov policy as guildmaster, and leave those matters to me. But now . . ." She tapped her finger on the ledger. "The numbers don't add up."

Kaya feigned confusion. "I don't understand."

"Let me make it simple, then. You've been forgiving debts, without consulting me or any other Orzhov official."

"I . . ." *Hell with it.* Kaya shook her head. "All right, so what if I have? It hasn't been that many—"

"Sixty-seven people, to date. To a total value of two hundred forty-six thousand three hundred twelve zinos net present value, assuming . . . well, any number of things."

"I'm sure the Orzhov can afford it," Kaya said. "I can *feel* our contracts, remember. These are only a tiny fraction of them."

"Whether we can *afford* it is not the point," Teysa said, her voice rising. "You promised me you would keep out of Orzhov business."

"It doesn't matter if I *want* to stay out of it, or what we agreed to," Kaya said. "You told all these people that I'm the guildmaster. Can you blame them when they treat me like it?"

"I'm not blaming *them*. Just tell them no!"

Kaya felt her anger rising. "Why? So you can keep extracting debts from their great-grandchildren?"

Teysa's pale face colored. "Every contract the Orzhov enter into is in accordance with Ravnican law, and voluntary on both sides. We are only enforcing our rights."

"Sure. Some poor bastard wants to pay a doctor to help his wife, and that gives you the *right* to work his family like slaves for the next three generations."

"He was told the terms. He could always choose not to sign—"

"And let his loved ones die." Kaya shook her head. "Don't you understand that what you're doing to these people is wrong?"

"We aren't doing anything!" Teysa said. "Whatever happens to them, they bring on themselves. We only . . . facilitate."

They stared at one another for a long moment. Teysa had her hands flat on the ledger, breathing hard. Kaya grit her teeth.

"Regardless of your . . . scruples," Teysa said, in careful tones, "as a practical matter we cannot simply forgive our debtors. The Orzhov has obligations of our own, and we must have income to meet them. If we were to default, the consequences for Ravnica would be incalculable."

"Just because you've tied yourself in a knot doesn't mean you have to keep pulling it tighter," Kaya said. "It doesn't mean you can't try to work yourself loose, a little at a time."

"Kaya . . ." Teysa put her hand to her forehead. "If we did what you wanted, then it would mean the destruction of the guild."

"If the guild depends on enslaving children for the debts of their fathers, then maybe it deserves to be destroyed."

"I hope those words won't leave this room," Teysa said, with a sharp glance at Tomik. "Or I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"Very subtle," Kaya said.

"I am trying to *help* you. All you have to do is . . ." Teysa waved a hand vaguely. "Nothing. Sit on the throne and mouth a few empty platitudes. Wave at official functions. When our lawmages figure out how to extract you from our obligations, you will be free to go, with my blessing. Until then—"

"Until then, I just let everyone think I'm okay with being the head of this organization?" Kaya heard her own voice rising. She hadn't realized, until that moment, how strongly she felt. "However it happened, I have the power to change things for the better here. Don't tell me not to use it."

"Apparently, I can't tell you anything," Teysa said. "Except that you should watch your back."

"Fortunately for all of us," Kaya snapped, "I'm good at that."

She got to her feet and stalked away. Tomik hurried over, to open the double doors, but Kaya simply strode through them in a burst of purple light.

For Ral, the apartment in Dogsrun was supposed to have been a refuge. Unfortunately, at the moment, it felt like that refuge was under siege by the rest of Ravnica. He let himself in, a few drops of rain spattering around him, and slammed the door against the driving wind.

Thunderstorms usually made him feel a kind of euphoria. All that power, coursing freely through the air, brilliant streams of energy writing themselves across his skin in trails of fire. He could reach out and touch it, taste it, smell the ozone heat. Now, though . . .

It's not enough. Lightning bolts could crack stone and melt steel. But they couldn't make the wheels of bureaucracy grind faster, or triangulate resonators more accurately, or align mizzium coils. *They can't make a bunch of bloody idiots do what they're told.*

They were making progress. The resonators were going up, all across the Tenth District, humming, spinning contraptions of mizzium, crystal, and steel. Each had to be painstakingly sited, then adjusted so that its main coils rotated with just the correct frequency and direction with respect to its fellows. Done properly, they would form a network, amplifying and altering the magical field of the Guildpact just enough that Niv-Mizzet could get what he wanted.

One mistake, though, and all their efforts would be worse than useless. The resonators would fail, or worse. The potential power of a destructive resonance was devastating. Ral had neglected to mention that to the other guilds, when he'd been explaining the plan.

But if we fail, none of it matters. He could almost feel Bolas's hot breath on the back of his neck. The dragon was *coming*, closer and closer, and if the resonators weren't ready in time then the only thing that would stand between him and Ravnica would be the Beacon, Niv-Mizzet's desperate backup plan. *Shouting into the void, and hoping somebody answers.* Ral shuddered. *If we have to rely on that, then we're probably doomed.*

The lock clicked, and Ral realized he was still leaning against the door. He stepped out of the way before it opened again to reveal Tomik, huddled under a wet raincoat and clutching a paper sack. He raised an eyebrow at Ral and adjusted his glasses.

"Um. I brought curry?" he said. "The kind you like. Can I come in?"

Ral realized he was still standing in the doorway, and hurriedly stepped aside. "Sorry."

"It's all right," Tomik said, coming inside. "It's not like it's absolutely pouring. Not all of us have our own personal magical umbrella, you know?"

"Even I get wet on days like this," Ral groused. "Too much wind."

"You have my utmost sympathy." Tomik tossed the bag of curry on their little table. He took off his rain-spotted glasses, went to wipe them on his shirt, and stopped when he found it already soaked. "Have you got a—"

Ral came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder, turning him round. Before Tomik could finish the sentence, he kissed him, with all the pent-up frustration and worry of the past few days. Tomik stumbled back a step, against the wall, and Ral pressed hard against him.

"—towel?" Tomik finished weakly, when Ral finally pulled away for a moment. He took a deep breath.

"The curry . . ."

"Later," Ral growled.

"Later," Tomik agreed, laying his glasses carefully on the table.

Later arrived, as it tends to do, with depressing haste.

"I know what *I'm* worried about," Ral said. They were in the bedroom, and he was pacing in front of the broad window. Lightning flashed on the horizon, connecting some tower to the sky for a moment, and Ral raised his hands and let an answer crackling walk across his knuckles. He ran one hand through his sweat-damped hair and let a crackle of electricity restore its frizz. "What's eating *you*?"

"Who says anything's eating me?" Tomik muttered. He was still lying in bed, his lanky frame covered only by a thin bedsheet. Ral watched his reflection in the window with an appreciative eye when he rolled over and sighed.

"You're sulking," Ral said.

"I'm not sulking, I'm thinking," Tomik said. "You might try it sometime."

"Fine," Ral said. "So what are you thinking?"

"Guild business," Tomik said, and sighed.

Ral looked over his shoulder. Tomik's brow was creased, and for a moment Ral wanted to push him further. But they'd always kept their respective positions out of their relationship, and while Ral's circumstances had changed—*if I succeed, no one in Izzet would dare challenge me, and if I fail, it won't matter*—Tomik's had only gotten more confused, with his master Teysa now serving under the Planeswalker Kaya.

"You know you have my help, if you need it," Ral said, after a moment of silence.

"Thank you." Tomik sat up and fumbled for his glasses. "It's . . . complicated."

"I'm sure." Ral cocked his head. "Curry?"

"Curry," Tomik agreed.

linebreak "The Gruul have stepped up their attacks across the Tenth District," Aurelia said. Her glowing eyes were hard to read, but Ral thought there was a hint of concern on even the angel's beatific face. "Our garrisons along the rubblebelts are assailed almost daily. There are more of them than we imagined, and they're better organized. It is regrettable you did not capture this Domri; his leadership appears highly capable."

"Apologies," Ral said. "We were a little bit busy. How is Commander Ferzhin, by the way?"

"Injured, but she will recover." Aurelia inclined her head at the map on the war room table. "Unfortunately, I fear our contribution to your effort against the Golgari will be less than I initially anticipated."

"Understandable," said Dovin Baan. "The Senate will provide what it can, as I promised, but our numbers are limited."

"I've spoken with the Firemind about employing some of our more . . . effective assets for the attack," Ral said. "But with the need to build and protect the resonators, we're spread thin as well."

"I was under the impression that Rakdos would be contributing to the effort," Aurelia said.

"So was I," Ral muttered under his breath. He hadn't seen Hekara for days, and while it was nice not to have her constantly underfoot, he was starting to worry. *At least the resonator in Rakdos territory is still on schedule, even if we keep having to drag the workers out of the clubs.* "I'll see what I can do, but time is short. Kaya, do you think your people can make up the numbers?"

"They can," Kaya said firmly. "We can, I mean. Name the time and place, and we'll be there."

"The time is tomorrow," Ral said. He shuffled the maps until he found one that showed the Undercity, more a collection of fragmentary sketches than a solid depiction of that notoriously chaotic domain. But the chamber he wanted was marked clearly enough, a vast circular cavern with an underground waterway running through the heart of it. "And the place is here. Grek'ospen, the Golgari call it."

"This large space," Aurelia said, leaning closer to the map. Her folded wings nearly brushed the ceiling. "It is open ground?"

"I don't think so," Ral said. "As best our scouts can tell, it's some kind of hive belonging to the giant insects allied with the Golgari."

"The kraul," Dovin Baan said. "A fascinating species. Eusocial behavior is exceedingly rare among full sentients."

"It will not be good ground for battle," Aurelia said. "Cluttered and confused. Ideal for the Golgari."

"Unfortunately," Ral said, "we don't have a choice. The node we need is there. And Vraska probably knows we're coming." Far too many people had worked on the plan for there to be a real chance of concealing it from Golgari spies, even with Lazav doing his best to weed out Vraska's agents. "We should plan on a difficult fight."

"I understand," Aurelia said. "I will lead our forces personally." At Ral's look of surprise, the angel raised one delicate eyebrow. "I committed the Legion to your cause, and I take my promises seriously. This is the best way to assure success."

"While I regret I will not be able to join the expedition," Dovin Baan said, "our best soldiers will be with you."

"And I'll be there, of course," Kaya said, leaning forward. "Frankly, I could use the action."

"Right, then," Ral said. "Tomorrow."

And if Vraska shows herself, I'll get the chance to nail her traitorous head to the wall.