

# The Gathering Storm: Chapter 20

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*Vraska and Lavinia.* Ral looked at the pair of them and narrowed his eyes. *But it's not, is it?*

"Lavinia would never work for Bolas," he said aloud. "Not voluntarily."

"He has a sort of . . . emissary," Kaya said. "A fragment of his spirit, I think. It can control people."

Ral, remembering Glademaster Garo and his attempted coup at Selesnya, nodded slowly. "I've met the thing."

"So . . ." Hekara said. "Is she on our side, or their side, or what?"

"She's on their side," Ral said. "But try not to kill her."

"Ah, Ral," Lavinia said, stepping forward. The voice was hers, but the tone, the manner, was all wrong. It was Bolas, or at least the fragment of Bolas that had been flitting around Ravnica. "In the old days, such concerns would never have troubled you. When did you get so soft-hearted?"

"When I got away from you," Ral said.

"So quick to anger, too." Lavinia put on a self-satisfied smirk. "Almost like you have something to be ashamed of."

"I've done a great many things I'm ashamed of," Ral said. He looked at Vraska. "That doesn't mean I have to add to my sins by helping *him*."

"Don't pretend you understand me, Zarek," Vraska said, loosening her saber in its scabbard. "And don't try to claim the moral high ground here. There's a ruined city full of my people you have to account for."

"We had no choice," Ral said. "If *you* hadn't betrayed us in the first place—"

His eyes went back to Lavinia, who was still smiling. Ral stopped abruptly.

"They want to drag this out," he said quietly. "If Bolas gets away from Niv-Mizzet, he can smash this place to fragments. We have to end this as quickly as we can."

Kaya gave a grim nod. "So what's the plan?"

"I'll handle Lavinia." Power crackled in his hands. "I can probably stun her. You and Hekara keep Vraska busy. Don't get too close, she can—"

"I've fought gorgons before," Kaya said. "I can handle myself."

“And besides, turning to stone might be fun,” Hekara said. “I would try to make sort of a silly face, like *bleh* ! And then that’d be a statue forever.”

“Let’s try to avoid that,” Ral said.

He stepped to the left, toward Lavinia, while Kaya circled to the right and Hekara walked nonchalantly down the middle. Vraska and Lavinia both drew their swords, matching their opponents. Ral gave the gorgon a last glance, then shook his head and concentrated on his own opponent. *I hope Kaya’s high opinion of herself is justified.*

He’d never seen Lavinia fight. In her Azorius days, however, she’d been a famed duelist, and her crisp stance with the blade indicated she hadn’t let her skills go to rust. Ral raised one hand and launched an exploratory bolt of lightning, which crackled across the room and earthed itself on her chest. Lavinia didn’t flinch, and magic glowed from her armor.

*Lightning ward.* Like Glademaster Garo, she’d come prepared. *So this isn’t going to be easy.*

Another step forward, and Lavinia moved, as suddenly as if he’d crossed a tripwire. Her footwork was so smooth she seemed to flow over the ground, sword flicking out in a casual thrust that would have run Ral through the throat. He sidestepped, caught her next swing on the steel bracer extending back from his mizzium gauntlet, and let loose a burst of lightning at close range. This time Lavinia *did* flinch, but only slightly, and the lightning ward buzzed as it consumed most of the power. Lavinia reversed her swing, and Ral retreated to put a steel support pillar between them. He thought furiously as she circled around.

*I could overload the ward.* That’s what he’d done to Garo, but it had its risks. It would use up much of the power left in his accumulator, and probably kill Lavinia if he didn’t gauge the discharge just right. *Damn, damn, damn. I should have insisted on sending someone with her. She said she was tracking down Bolas’s lead agent—that has to be Tezzeret. He must have gotten the drop on her.*

“What’s the matter, Ral?” Lavinia said, in Bolas’s mocking tone. “You don’t seem to be throwing yourself into violence with your usual verve.”

“Why Lavinia?” Ral said, circling cautiously. “If you wanted someone here to stop me, why not send Tezzeret?”

“Because you’d love the chance to settle the score with Tezzeret,” Bolas said. He made Lavinia’s face pout, the expression looking utterly unnatural on her. “But hurting poor Lavinia will break your heart.”

“Break my *heart* ?” Ral said, incredulously. “This is to hurt *me* ?”

“Oh, you have no idea what I’m going to do to you,” Bolas said. “I don’t like it when people don’t pay their debts, Ral Zarek. I made you what you are, and when I asked for a favor in return, you turned your back on me. For that, Lavinia’s going to die. Your friends here will die. But *you* I will keep, because you are going to watch everyone you care for die screaming. Starting with poor little Tomik. Such a *nice* boy.” Lavinia’s lips twisted unnaturally into the dragon’s awful grin.

Ral did his best to keep a lid on his anger. “Seems like a lot of work for someone busy taking over the Multiverse.”

“It’s worthwhile to pay my debts. It . . . creates a useful reputation. Besides, it amuses me.” Bolas shrugged. “On the other hand, maybe I’ll just kill you here and now. We’ll have to see—”

Lavinia shot forward again, fast enough that Ral nearly missed the move and got skewered. He threw himself to one side as her sword scraped against the support pillar, drawing sparks. Her leg hooked out and wrapped around his, sending him tumbling to the floor, and he rolled sideways just in time to

avoid a downward strike. Ral put his hands out, unleashing a powerful burst of energy, and the force of it picked Lavinia up and hurled her against a pillar. Her armor rang against it with a sound like a gong, and she dropped to one knee.

Ral grabbed a hanging cable and hauled himself to his feet. Lavinia straightened up as well, a line of red dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, I felt that.” Her lip quirked. “Or rather, Lavinia did. Careful with your toys, Ral, or you’ll end up breaking them.”

*Damn and double damn.* He glanced briefly over his shoulder and saw Vraska and Kaya dancing among the steel pillars. Kaya couldn’t seem to get close enough to use her daggers, but her ability to simply walk through the obstacles had kept her out of the way of Vraska’s serrated sword and away from her deadly gaze thus far. Hekara lurked at the edge of the fight, sending razor-edged projectiles at the gorgon whenever she had a clear shot.

*Holding their own, but not winning.* And Bolas had to be getting closer. *We need to get past them—*

Ral glanced at the security keyboard, but Lavinia followed his gaze and shook his head.

“Thinking of running out on me, Zarek? The dance is only half done.” She raised her blade. “Come on, then.”

*No choice.* Ral let power gather in his gauntlets as he closed the distance. He ducked under a slash, blocked another with his bracer, and reached for Lavinia. She spun away, laughing and cutting at him from another angle. Ral went after her, pent-up power in his gauntlets growing white-hot, but she was too fast. Her counterstrokes nearly caught him several times, and he had to desperately backpedal to avoid a quick sideways cut.

“Ral!” A pair of Hekara’s knives sailed past Lavinia, making her take a half-step back. The razorwitch summoned more, blades dropped into existence in her hands, and Lavinia ducked and dodged through the pillars, the knives caroming off the steel. Ral, catching his breath, went after her.

“Try and hold her attention!” Ral called.

“That’s what she said!” Hekara called back.

“I don’t—” Ral shook his head as the girl cackled, and kept his mind on the fight.

Having to watch Hekara restricted Lavinia’s movements, and Ral quickly closed in. Soon Lavinia was on the defensive, slashing to keep him away while she ducked and dodged the barrage of blades. Ral waited until one strike came a little too far forward, then bulled into it, scraping the sword away with one bracer as he brought his other hand around, crackling with deadly power—

“Ral!” Lavinia shouted, in her own voice. “Don’t!”

Ral hesitated. Not for long, but it was enough. Bolas’s smile coiled across Lavinia’s face, and she kicked him in the stomach, doubling him over. He sank to his knees, gasping for breath.

“Idiot,” Bolas said, as Lavinia’s sword came forward.

There was a moment of frantic motion, and then a moment of stillness.

The three of them were close, close enough to embrace. Ral, struggling to rise, and Lavinia, her blade extended. Between them was Hekara, taking Lavinia’s sword high in the chest. It passed cleanly through her leather-motley suit, the tip emerging a few inches from her back just inside the shoulder blade, far enough to dimple Ral’s skin without piercing it.

Ral's caught her before she could fall. "Hekara!"

She leaned back to look up at him, still grinning. "Mates, right?"

"Mates," Ral said, through gritted teeth.

"Sides," Hekara said, her hands coming up to touch the spot where Lavinia's sword entered her flesh, "never been stabbed all the way through before. Always wondered what it was like." She coughed, spraying blood across the steel, and stared at it in fascination. "S not so bad. Doesn't hurt as much as I thought."

Lavinia stepped away, pulling her sword free with a tooth-rattling scrape of blade on bone. Hekara's eyes went very wide, and a gout of blood pulsed from the wound.

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "That's more like it." And she died, with a little shiver that jangled the bells in her hair.

"You see, Ral?" Bolas said. "You see what your mercy gets you—"

Ral surged to his feet with a roar, springing across Hekara's body. Lavinia pivoted and swung, and Ral blocked with his bracer, sword impacting with bone-shaking force. Before she could pull it away, his other hand shot out, grabbing the blade near the base. It cut into his palm, but he didn't care—power surged through him, flowing down the wires linking his accumulator to his gauntlets, torrenting into the steel. The blade began to smoke, and Lavinia let go of it reflexively as it grew too hot to touch. It sizzled as it hit the floor, glowing cherry-red, slowly losing its shape as it melted into a pool of slag.

Lavinia danced backward, but Ral stayed with her, grabbing her arm and yanking her off balance. She aimed a kick at his midsection, and he accepted it with a grunt, his other hand grabbing for her throat. There was something there, a bit of metal with a glowing crystal in it, that Ral had seen when she'd leaned in to stab Hekara. He didn't know what it was, but the look of the thing made its origin unmistakable. *Tezzeret*. He grabbed it and yanked it free.

"*Still* you persist in your attempt to—" Lavinia, backing away from him, stumbled and clutched at her head. "No. Stop it." And then, in a voice much more like Lavinia's own, she bellowed, "*Get out of my head!*"

She doubled over, clutching her skull, and something burst out of her. A misty, spectral shape took form above her as she collapsed to the floor. It was indistinct, but nevertheless Ral could see its outlines—vaguely humanoid, but the head was topped by long, curving horns.

*Poor fools.* The voice was Bolas through and through, now, scraping against Ral's thoughts. *All I have to do is find another body. You know you can't stop me.*

"He can't," said Kaya, emerging through a pillar in a burst of purple light, "but I sure as hell can." A pair of daggers, ablaze with energy, caught the Bolas-thing in the back. "I think we are all *very* sick of you."

The spirit made a sound that started as a dragon's roar and rose to a teakettle scream. Its incorporeal form writhed, then blew apart like a dandelion touched by the wind, bits of its essence scattered in all directions before fading away.

"Hated that bloody thing," Kaya muttered. Then, taking in the two women on the floor, her breath caught. "Hekara—"

“Kaya, down!” Ral shouted. His hand came up, and lightning crackled out, but his aim was off and it struck and earthed on the steel pillar beside Vraska. The gorgon swung around it, serrated sword whistling through the air.

Kaya got her daggers up in time to block the cut, but the force of the blow knocked her back. Before she could recover, Vraska brought the saber around in a vicious pommel strike that cracked the guard against Kaya’s temple. Kaya crumpled, laid out on the floor beside Hekara and Lavinia. Vraska stalked past the three unmoving bodies, tendrils spread and writhing, focused on Ral.

“Brave girl,” Vraska hissed. “But foolish, to take her eyes off the more dangerous opponent.”

Ral gave ground, backing toward the outside edge of the room. He sent a bolt of lightning at the gorgon, but she dodged behind a steel pillar, and his electricity wrapped uselessly around it.

“I, on the other hand, have been watching *you*,” Vraska said. “And what I know is that you spent entirely too much of your power. Melting Lavinia’s sword?” She clicked her tongue. “Surely that was unnecessary.”

“I have enough left to deal with you,” Ral said, still backing up. He didn’t dare let her close—at short range, there was no way to avoid the gorgon’s deadly gaze. Electricity still crackled over his gauntlets, but Vraska was right. He’d spent power recklessly, here and fighting the soldiers down below.

“Then do it.” Vraska stepped away from the pillar, matching Ral’s easy steps backward. They were well away from the core of the beacon now, approaching the exterior of the dome. “Blast me to pieces. Go on.” When he didn’t move, her grin widened, tongue darting over sharp teeth. “As I said.”

“Is this really what you want?” Ral said, letting a hint of desperation into his voice. “For Bolas to win? You think he’ll let you keep running your little empire?”

“Of course not,” Vraska said. “I’m sure he’ll kill me as soon as I’m no longer useful.”

“Then—”

“But you’re missing the point,” Vraska said. “He’s going to win *anyway*. Niv-Mizzet can’t stop him. Your beacon won’t stop him. And if the only chance for the Golgari to survive is to join the winning side . . .” She shrugged. “I have to take it. No matter what the cost.”

“He lies. You should know that. Whatever he’s promised you, he has no reason to deliver.”

“I know.” Vraska’s eyes narrowed. “But it’s all I’ve got.”

Ral’s back came up against the copper dome. Vraska licked her lips.

“Nowhere to run, Zarek.” She levelled her sword. “We’ve done this before. And this time, there’s no angel to rescue you.”

“There isn’t,” Ral agreed. “But *this* time, we’re on my turf, not yours.”

He reached up, and found the edge of one of the gratings that let wires and conduits pierce the dome and reach the outside of the tower. It was made of thin copper wire, twisted together, and Ral sent all the power left in his backpack running through it. It sparked, then sagged, melting away. Cables flopped to the ground, leaving an opening in the dome a yard square.

Outside, the storm had finally broken. Rain drummed down on the city in torrents, ringing on the dome and sluicing off it in sheets. The dark clouds that had hovered all day had descended, and bright bolts leapt from one to the next, followed by distant peals of thunder. Ral could feel their power echoed inside him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. He smiled, very slowly.

“You beat me when we fought in the Undercity,” he said. “Now let me show you how powerful I am here, under the skies of Ravnica!”

Vraska snarled and lunged forward, eyes beginning to glow with their killing light. But it was far too late. Lightning arced out from the closest clouds, a dozen strokes at once, groping like searching fingers for the hole in the dome. They threaded through it like the eye of a needle and slammed into Ral, surrounding him with a crackling, scintillating aura of brilliant white. Every hair on his head stood on end. Pieces of his backpack whined and fused, but he didn’t need it, not now. He raised one hand, and let the power flow. The bolt was a monster, fed by the pent-up energy of the long-denied storm, and it crossed the space between him and Vraska in a fraction of a second.

When the light faded, she was gone, replaced by a long smoking streak on the steel floor.

Ral staggered as the power faded. Channeling that much was difficult, even for him, and combined with everything that had come before he suddenly felt as though he’d run laps around the Tenth District. *Nearly done*. He forced himself to keep moving, lurching across the room.

He knelt beside Hekara, on her back in a pool of crimson, and reached down to close her staring eyes. Beside her lay Lavinia, and Ral made sure she was breathing easily. He did the same for Kaya, a few paces further on; there was blood on her head where Vraska’s sword-hilt had cut her, but it didn’t look like the blow had cracked her skull. Satisfied she would be all right, he struggled to his feet and shuffled onward.

When he finally stood in front of the beacon, staring down at the security keyboard, his mind went suddenly blank. For a moment, his stomach churned, terrified.

*Elias*. A bit of music his lover had tapped on a keyboard, a lifetime ago. Before *everything*. Ral reached down, hand trembling, and pressed the keys.

With a hiss, the core of the beacon opened. Above the keyboard, a single large button emerged from a locked compartment. Only one control, in the end, because the beacon had only one function. Once it was turned on, its light would shine across the Multiverse.

The button was, of course, bright red. What Izzet engineer could resist?

*Well*. Ral stared at it for a moment, then took a deep breath. *It’s time to roll the dice*.

He brought his hand down hard.

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Deep under the city, the kraul death priest Mazirek scuttled through a damp tunnel. Storrev glided along beside him, resplendent in her rotten finery, and an escort of Erstwhile flanked the pair of them. Mazirek paid the zombies little heed; his mind was elsewhere.

Storrev had brought a message arranging a meeting. She didn’t know the source, but it was obvious to Mazirek, given the timing. *Bolas*. With Vraska gone to serve the dragon directly—and *hopefully to die painfully*—Bolas had promised Mazirek leadership of the Gulgari. *Finally, the power I deserve*. The time had come for the dragon to deliver on his pledges.

But he didn’t know *where* this messenger was supposed to be meeting him. These were passages he’d never entered before, veering close to the surface and interlaced in places with the basements of some parts of the upper city. It made sense—Bolas was a creature of the surface in the end, and like all surface dwellers he was uncomfortable venturing too far into the underground kingdom of the Swarm. Still, Mazirek looked around a little nervously as Storrev led him through an archway of natural stone and into a larger cavern, which looked like it had been enlarged by human hands.

"How much farther to this messenger?" Mazirek said, the words slurred and strewn with clicks.

"I believe we have arrived." Storrev looked around the broad, dark chamber. "We have only to wait."

"I do not like waiting." Mazirek's many eyes narrowed. "Have you lied to me, Storrev?"

He let power bleed into his voice. He was the one who had awoken the Erstwhile. None of them, even free-willed liches like Storrev, could disobey a direct order or refuse a question.

"No, my lord." The lich bowed. "I received a message requesting a meeting. I have brought you to the place it specified."

"A message from *whom*?"

"No one I know," Storrev said.

Not Vraska, then. Mazirek was still half-convinced this was some trap of the gorgon's. He looked around, irritably, and caught the glint of burning torches against the moisture-slick walls. A man was approaching, wrapped in a hooded cloak.

"You!" Mazirek clicked at him. "You are the messenger."

"Yeah," he grunted. "I'm Brutus, of Brutus's Improvised Comedy Fun-Time Show." His hood fell back, revealing a large, bald head, layered over with scars.

"*Comedy* show?" Mazirek said. "What nonsense is this?"

"You don't look very funny," Storrev said.

"Lotta people say that," Brutus rumbled. He reached under his cloak and came up with a huge butcher's cleaver, flecked with rust and dried blood. "But wait till you hear the punchline."

"What?" Mazirek chittered. "Are you *threatening* us?"

"Nope," Brutus said. "Just doing a favor for Hekara. She asked me to tell you that Vraska sends her regards."

"Insolent—"

Mazirek raised one claw to obliterate the fool, then paused as something moved in the dark. More figures in Rakdos red and black emerged into the light of the torch, all around them, broad-shouldered and well-armed. None of them looked particularly interested in comedy.

"Storrev!" the kraul screeched. "You knew."

"I did," the lich said. "Though, as I said, I have never met Brutus before."

"You will defend me," he said. "You and your Erstwhile. Defend me to the death!"

Storrev inclined her head. "I knew you would order that, as well."

The Rakdos thugs closed in.

"You will be destroyed!" Mazirek shouted.

"Sacrifices are necessary," Storrev said. "The rest of us will be free."

Mazirek turned away from her with a snarl, death magic leaping from his claws. There were a few moments of frantic violence, then silence, broken only by ugly chuckle of Brutus's laughter.

linebreak It was autumn in Ravnica, and so it rained. The torrent from the sky splashed over gutters full of shattered glass and broken bricks, and drummed on the ruins of shops and houses. It soaked the clothes of corpses, cut down in the streets or half-buried in their broken homes. It cleaned the smoke out of the air, and banished the smell of burning metal. In places, where the sewer lines had been broken, it gathered into vast, stagnant pools.

The rain soaked Tezzeret to the bone, weighing down his dreadlocks and soaking his robe. It beaded and ran down the surface of his metal arm, dripping from his clawed fingers. He shook his head, spraying water, as he turned the corner from a street that was half rubble and came into the presence of his master.

Nicol Bolas sat in the wreckage of a row of houses, a pile of smashed bricks and shattered rafters for his throne. He looked, to Tezzeret's surprise, very much the worse for wear. Scorch marks and broken scales were all over his enormous body, and one huge burn on his chest was crisscrossed with deep cuts that wept black blood. None of it seemed to bother the dragon unduly, though, and as Tezzeret watched the wounds began to close.

In one hand he held a huge white skull, which could only have belonged to another dragon nearly as large as Bolas himself. Scoured clean of flesh, it rested in the palm of Bolas's enormous hand, and Bolas regarded it with a mixture of pride and something like sadness.

*This world doesn't have a chance.* Tezzeret permitted himself a private grin. *It never did.* linebreak He crossed the street and knelt in front of the dragon. Bolas contemplated the skull for a moment longer, then set it carefully aside and looked down at Tezzeret.

"My faithful servant." Bolas's urbane tone, in person, was undercut by the deep bass of the dragon's rumble. "You have news?"

"Yes, master." Tezzeret got to his feet. "Matters are proceeding well, and we have encountered no significant resistance so far."

"*You* have not." Bolas glanced at the skull. "No matter. What else?"

"Ral Zarek has reached the Beacon Tower," Tezzeret said, cautiously. "Vraska and your . . . ah, spirit confronted him, but they were successful. The spirit was destroyed, and Vraska's fate is uncertain."

"And the beacon?"

Bolas had to know. Tezzeret had known, the moment it had happened. The beacon burned in his mind, a bright flame visible to any Planeswalker, an invitation to Ravnica. He cleared his throat.

"He has activated it, master."

"I see." A slow smile spread across the dragon's enormous face. "Then everything is going according to plan."

**The End**