

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 7

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The extensive catacombs of Orzhova were sealed off from the rest of the Undercity, well-isolated by both magic and masonry. The same could not be said for the rest of the building, however. Where there was plumbing, there were sewers. And where there were sewers, there was a way in for the Swarm.

They walked in single file down a narrow corridor of ancient, crumbling brick. Thankfully, the sewage itself was contained in a corroded metal pipe at the bottom of the passage, so there was no need to wade through noxious waste. These tunnels had been built for maintenance of the pipes, then closed off by the surface dwellers and just as quickly broken into by the Swarm, which was in the habit of making use of things that others discarded.

"This way," Vraska said. She kept ahead of Ral and the lantern he carried, her yellow eyes perfectly comfortable in the total darkness. "One more bend." She paused at a corner, seeing tightly packed bodies ahead. "This is it."

"Ugh," Hekara said. "What stinks?"

"Our reinforcements," Vraska said, with a tight smile.

There was a small room here, linked to several other tunnels, where a tangle of piping came together. All those tunnels were packed with walking corpses, decaying bodies already blossoming with new life in the form of fungal blooms and wild, multi-colored growths. Even standing still, they rustled, small scavengers nesting inside them restlessly chewing on their hosts. Now and then a limb detached with a wet *pop* and fell to the ground.

Vraska had promised to help with this scheme, but she had no intention of spending Golgari lives if she didn't have to. Golgari dead, on the other hand, were another matter. Rot zombies were fleeting creatures anyway, constantly being consumed by decay and replaced by the next crop of corpses. It would do the underworld no harm if a few hundred of them fell here, dirtying the Orzhov's pretty marble floors.

Among the crowd of zombies were a few larger beasts. The kraul had driven some of their unintelligent insect brethren to join the assault, spiders and beetles the size of horses. And they'd picked up a few trolls as they moved through the sewers; the dull-witted creatures followed along of their own accord, hoping for either a meal or a chance to wreak havoc.

In all honestly, the plan seemed to promise a one-way trip for all of them. Ral insisted he had a way out, but Vraska instinctively distrusted the overelaborate contraptions the Izzet mage relied on. As a Planeswalker, of course, she always had a way out in an emergency, and she wondered how many of

her companions were relying on the same thing. Kaya, for certain; she was openly unfamiliar with Ravnica. Vraska had her suspicions about Ral and Hekara, but nothing certain.

Trust works both ways. Ral had asked her to prove her dedication to the cause of stopping Bolas. *He can prove to me if he's worth putting my faith in.*

The four of them shuffled forward, pushing past the zombies, until they came to a brick wall. Vraska patted quietly and spoke in a low voice.

"On the other side of this is the basement laundry," she said. "There should be a nice broad stairway up into the first-floor lobby, secured by a gate. If we break through that, it'll certainly get their attention."

"Perfect," Ral said. He glanced at Kaya. "Give us some time to start climbing the tower. We'll move upward as fast as we can, and that should convince the guards that whatever we're after is at the top. You'll have a clear shot at the catacombs."

Kaya nodded. "You're sure you'll be able to get out? They'll block everything off behind you."

"Don't worry about it," Ral said. "I've got it covered."

"If you say so."

"Everyone ready?" Ral said.

"Keen!" Hekara said. Vraska nodded, and Kaya gave a shrug.

Ral looked at Vraska. "You want to do the honors?"

Vraska gave a low whistle. One of the beetles shuffled forward, a huge, black thing with a monstrous multi-pronged horn on its forehead. She whistled another note, and it lumbered into a charge, gathering momentum until it struck the wall with unstoppable force.

The crumbling bricks exploded under the beetle's weight, and it barely slowed down, rushing out into the poorly lit space beyond. Once the spray of dust and mortar settled, there was broad hole in the wall. Vraska clambered up onto the rubble, drew her saber, and slashed forward. Recognizing the gesture, the zombies began to move, lurching toward the gap in a single mass. Ral, Hekara, and Kaya came through first, staying just ahead of the shambling horde of corpses.

Screams rang out almost immediately. Vraska blinked, her dark-adapted eyes adjusting, and saw a vast space full of wood-and-steel mangles, hand-cranked engines for wringing out laundry. A crowd of haggard-looking young women had been working them, and they were now fleeing for their lives toward a ramp at the other end of the room.

The zombies had been instructed only to attack anyone who fought back—though she had little love for Orzhov, Vraska didn't see the point in slaughtering helpless laundrywomen—but of course the women didn't know that. Vraska whistled for the beetle to follow her and took off for the steps at a jog, Ral and Hekara close behind. Kaya had already vanished. *Good luck. I hope this works.*

The ramp led up to the first floor of the cathedral. The washerwomen had easily outpaced the zombies, and had closed a steel gate behind themselves, which blocked off the arched doorway. With another whistle, Vraska sent the stag beetle into a run, and it slammed horn-first into the metal bars. With a *shriek* like a stooping demon, steel bent and gave way, and the monstrous insect skidded across a smooth marble floor in a shower of sparks.

The lobby of the cathedral was typical Orzhov, all polished and over-ornamented. One wall, where smaller passages led into the hall of worship, was covered with gilded icons of the Orzhov church.

Another was lined with small barred windows, where tellers listened to queues of supplicants begging for loans and mercy. A broad marble staircase led upward to the second floor.

The arrival of the beetle caused shouts of alarm. The zombies, a few moments behind it, started a general scramble for the exits among the parishioners and supplicants. There was a squad of guards at the main doors, and another in front of the stairs, along with a few scattered throughout the room. Vraska pointed to Ral, then to one squad, and he gave a quick nod and headed in that direction with Hekara. Vraska went for the others, zombies breaking into a loping run behind her.

She had to give them credit for courage, at least. It took guts to stand in decorative armor with a gilded spear and face down hundreds of charging rot zombies, though possibly not an excess of common sense. Vraska let the wave of zombies hit first. The guards jabbed with their spears, tearing the rotting corpses open in burst of foul-smelling decay, but the tide simply pressed on and over them. The golden-armored guards went down, screaming, rotting fingers and teeth ripping at whatever bits of soft flesh presented themselves.

In the center, a knight in heavier armor held his own, keeping a clear space in front of him two-handed swings of his greatsword. Vraska went straight for him, waiting until he'd finished one of his horizontal swipes before she closed. Her saber connected with his mailed gauntlets, not penetrating the armor but knocking him off balance. Before he could recover, she hooked her free hand into his visor and dragged his head down to meet the golden light pouring from her eyes. He went stiff, flesh hardening to stone inside his dark armor, and she spun past him and away.

On her left, a burst of actinic light and a rolling burst of thunder announced the demise of the second squad of guards. She saw Hekara leap atop a guardsman, cackling and shoving one of her razors sideways through his throat. More guards were trying to barricade the doors to the main hall, while the zombies threw themselves into the gap. Three big trolls had arrived, blinking stupidly in the glow of thousands of candles. Vraska gestured to them, and added a whistle for the insects.

"Upstairs!" She reunited with Ral and Hekara by the steps, and led her horde upward. Ral's hand's blazed with coruscating lightning, the strange cylinder on his back flashing bright light and emitting a rising whine. Another dozen guards had formed a defensive line on the next landing, and the Izzet mage gave Vraska a business-like nod. Hekara's razors sprouted from two of the guardsmen's eyes, and then Ral and Vraska barreled into them.

The battle quickly dissolved into fragments for Vraska. Orzhov guards arrived as quickly as they were cut down, and there was no time to do anything but focus on the next opponent, and the next, taking this one down with a quick combination of kicks and cuts, slipping inside that one's guard and petrifying him with a glare. Around her, groaning zombies fought and died, spear-wielding guards tried to bring down monstrous insects, and the sewer trolls rampaged, smashing everything that came within reach.

There was a thrill here, in the heat of battle. Vraska might have lost her taste for death for its own sake, but *this*, the clash of blades and the crackle of magic, still made her blood sing. It was strange, having Ral and Hekara at her side, companions who were nearly as capable as she was. It brought memories bubbling up, from her life on Ixalan, fighting vampires and dinosaurs beside the crew of the *Belligerent*. Striding across a shifting deck, saber in hand, instead of skulking in the dark.

"Next floor," Ral said, pointing at another stairway. "We have to keep moving up."

"We're running out of zombies," Vraska said. This floor was still packed with them, but the flow up the stairs had slowed to a trickle. "There should be more coming in through the breach—"

A low moan echoed down the marble hall. Something bounded up the steps from the first floor, a twisted creature running on four legs, but grotesquely human-like in appearance. An extra pair of arms protruded from its back, fingers edged with long claws. Its face was covered by a mask of linked coins. Behind it came another, tottering on two legs, hugely fat like a parody of an infant. And another, and another—

“Thrulls,” Ral said. “From the flesh-mage workshops.”

Vraska slashed her saber, and the zombies turned about. The first thrull slammed into the horde, rending several rot zombies asunder before the press of them brought it down, tearing its pallid flesh. The zombies shuffled forward, and the thrulls bounded to meet them, two mindless armies shredding one another in a welter of gore.

“That won’t buy us long,” Vraska said, gauging the rate at which the zombie horde was thinning. A giant spider waded into the thrulls, its bite injecting enough venom to bring one down in a hissing cloud of acid. The coin-masked creatures threw themselves at it fearlessly, bearing it to the ground even as they burned and died.

“We have to keep moving,” Ral said. “Kaya’s got her distraction. Now all we have to do is get out of here, and my ticket for that is only going to work if we’re at least a few more floors up.”

“Then move it, mates,” Hekara said. She was grinning madly, her face spattered with blood. “What’re we hanging around here for? The fight’s that-a-way!”

linebreak Kaya stood to one side as the zombies flooded past and the screams and clash of blades erupted from the lobby. There seemed to be no end to the shuffling, rotting things. They poured out of the sewer tunnels and through the breach in a steady stream, following Ral and the others up the stairs or piling up in a crowd at the barricade doors to the sanctuary.

As distractions went, Kaya had to admit, it was a pretty good one, though she had no idea how Ral planned to escape. *Leave that to him. I have my own problems.* She phased through the crowd of zombies, emerging cautiously into the lobby, and found the locked door that led to the catacomb stairs. Sure enough, the guards on the outside were gone. *So far, so good.*

There was no one living to see her step through the door. Beyond it was a narrow back stair, running further up into the tower as well as down into the depths. Magic lights burned at regular intervals along the walls, providing a dim but steady illumination. Kaya descended, watching the shadows. A tromp of booted feet and a shift in the light alerted her to the approach of more guards, and she took a deep breath and stepped almost entirely into the wall. There was a whole platoon of them, hurrying up the stairs in jingling armor, and by the time they were past Kaya’s lungs were burning. She gasped for breath when she emerged, and gave them time to get a few more turns up the spiral before she started downward again.

The stair went on and on, winding its way downward, with landings leading off every few turns. These were the vaults of the great banker-priests, and Kaya’s palms itched at the thought of what might be waiting behind those doors. *Gold, magic, and secrets, no doubt, the same things the powerful always hoard.* Locked gates block the stairs at each landing, ringed with magical wards that would incinerate anyone who didn’t have the right key, but when Kaya stepped through the bars they didn’t even twitch.

On the seventh landing down, there were no lights, and a glowing blue shape loomed in front of her, its humanoid features twisting and distorted like melting wax. No doubt it would have been a terrifying display to anyone who didn’t dispatch ghosts for a living, but Kaya merely drew her blades and

slammed them into the thing, shredding its ectoplasmic substance with a terrible screech. She kept descending, occasionally spotting other spirits peeking out of the walls in her wake. *The ghosts are running scared.* She grinned to herself. *That seems appropriate.*

The tenth landing was the bottom. A single iron-bound door led onward, ringed by fearful runes. Any living creature passing over the threshold would have its soul rent asunder by death magic, if not protected by the proper ward.

Kaya rolled her eyes. *These Orzhov are not very imaginative.* She walked straight into the wall *next* to the door, holding her breath, and took one or two blind steps forward before moving sideways to put herself in the corridor beyond it. *Nooo problem.* She grinned, cracked her knuckles, and walked forward.

Something under her foot *clicked*. A moment later, a saw blade as wide as the corridor dropped with shocking suddenness through the space where she'd been standing, slipping into an almost invisible slot in the floor. Kaya rematerialized, heart hammering. A scattering of slashed hair floated slowly to the ground, marking where she'd phased out *just* in time.

"All right," she muttered. "Maybe they've got a *little* imagination." The saw trap was just past the door, where a clever thief might stop to congratulate herself. *Stay focused, Kaya.*

She evaded another four pressure plates before she reached the next door, this one just as stout but with no sorcerous protections. Suspicious, Kaya prodded the handle, and found that it wasn't even locked. She pulled it ajar, slowly, and stepped through into a dimly lit room. On the other side, a more elaborate door promised entry to *something* important. *That has to be it.*

Shadows stirred, beside the door. Kaya drew her blades, then craned her neck as a shape unfolded up and up and *up*, all milk-pale skin and long gangly limbs. Its head was encased in a black and gold mask, abstract and featureless. On the other side of the door, a second giant unfolded itself. Its hands were encased in heavy steel gauntlets, covered with spikes, which honestly seemed like overkill.

"Uh, hi," Kaya said, twirling her blades. "I don't suppose I can convince you two I'm the cleaning service?"

The first giant swiped at her with an enormous paw. Kaya ducked and retreated a step.

"Yeah, I thought not," she said. "Well. Here we go, then."

Ral, Hekara, and Vraska moved up through the tower, Orzhov guards ahead of them and a rapidly disintegrating pack of zombies behind. The troops opposing them were more than simple sword-fodder, now. Whoever was directing the defense had finally started taking them seriously, which Ral found at least a little bit gratifying. Unfortunately, it also seemed likely to get them killed.

The last of the trolls charged, bearing an armored Orzhov knight down the corridor with a clatter and bowling over spear-wielding guards. Ral and the others followed in its wake to the next intersection, where more guards assailed them from either side. Ral and Vraska fell into a now-familiar pattern, fighting back to back for the brief, brutal seconds it took to dispatch the soldiers, while Hekara hurled her razors over their heads at more distant targets.

The troll gave a despairing bellow, and Ral looked up to see a black arrow protruding from its shoulder. The creatures normally regenerated any damage almost immediately, but instead this wound seemed to spread, a rapid withering decay that raced through the troll's body. When it tried to grab the arrow

with its other hand, its fingers sloughed away, the whole arm rapidly decaying to bleached bone. The creature collapsed, whimpering, and rapidly melted into a pool of viscous goo.

“Down!” Ral shouted, when he spotted the archer, a woman in chain armor with a shortbow. She leaned out from behind an open door further along the corridor and fired. Ral threw himself sideways, and the arrow slammed into the wall behind him, shattering in a spray of death magic. Hekara and Vraska ducked behind the opposite corner, just before another arrow skittered off the ground at their feet.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” Vraska said, her tone calm as always, “but we’re running out of time.”

Ral glanced back. There were still zombies behind them, but he could hear thrashing of the thrulls as they tore their way closer. Another black arrow caught the remaining giant beetle, and it decayed to empty exoskeleton in seconds. Ral leaned out around the corner and blasted lighting down the corridor, but it earthed harmlessly in the iron braziers that lined the walls.

Damn. “Hekara? Next time that mage sticks her head out, can you hit her?”

“Sure-sure!”

Hekara beamed and conjured a pair of razors between her forefingers, leaning out and waiting. When the archer reappeared, her hand moved, as fast as a conjuror’s trick. Ral saw the woman at the other end of the corridor go down, just as he heard a grunt. Hekara stared down, bemused, at the black arrow embedded in her thigh, worms of dark magic already spreading around it.

“Don’t touch it!” Ral said, hurrying across the intersection. Thrulls were approaching from behind, but for the moment he ignored them.

“M not *stupid*,” Hekara said. She sounded giddy. More razors appeared in her hands, and she deftly sliced into her own flesh, cutting out a grisly wound the size of a fist to remove the arrowhead. Blood welled in a torrent, washing over her stitched leather. “Oooh, that *smarts*.”

“She’s not going to be able to walk,” Vraska said.

“Be fine,” Hekara gasped, her eyes closed. “Or maybe bleed to death. Give it fifty-fifty.”

“This is going to hurt,” Ral said. He put his hands on her leg and let his power crackle across her flesh, searing the wound closed. Hekara gave a little squeak somewhere between agony and delight. “Here. I’ll help you stand.”

“Zarek—” Vraska said.

“We’re not leaving her.” Ral put Hekara’s arm around his shoulder. She hopped upright, tried putting weight on her bad leg, and shivered.

“No,” Vraska said, as though she were surprised at her own answer. “We’re not. How much further?”

“Next floor,” Ral said. “Nearly there.”

“I’ll clear a path.” The gorgon strode ahead, blood dripping from her saber.

Ral realized, as he helped the limping Hekara to the end of the hall, what was different about this fight. He’d fought beside allies many times, beside minions, beside subordinates and soldiers. But it had been a long time—most of his life—since he felt like he’d had an equal at his side. It was simultaneously thrilling and unsettling. *I can’t really trust either of them*, he reminded himself. *A Gulgari gorgon and a Rakdos razorwitch. We’re not friends, just allies of convenience.*

“Mates,” Hekara said, with a weak smile. “Right?”

“If you die after I’ve done all this work,” Ral growled, “I’m going to be very disappointed.”

"Can't have that," she said. "Hang on. Move your head."

He ducked, and she flicked a razor into a side passage, spearing a guard who'd been waiting in ambush. At the end of the corridor, the death mage's corpse lay sprawled with one of Hekara's daggers in either eye. Beyond was another flight of stairs, leading upward.

"Ral!" Vraska, halfway up the stairs, fell back a step, pressed by two heavily armored guards.

Ral raised his hand, and lightning leapt to the two men, connecting all three of them for a moment with strobing arcs. They toppled smoking, and the gorgon gave him a satisfied nod before leaping back into the fray. Ral half-carried Hekara up the steps, then laid her down against the wall. From behind them, the sound of the approaching thrulls grew louder.

"This'll do!" he shouted to Vraska, who was fencing with a black-robed priest wielding twin daggers with preternatural speed.

"I damn well hope so!" the gorgon said. She slashed, and the priest backed away. Her eyes were alight with a deadly golden glow. "Whatever you're doing, now's the time to do it!"

"Buy me sixty seconds," Ral said.

"Easier said than done," Vraska said, but she leaned back into her attack. Another knight came at her, and she slammed her forehead against his helm in a vicious headbutt, then looked into his eyes with a blast of power. As he solidified into stone, she turned back to the priest, parrying desperately.

Ral's mind was elsewhere. His accumulator was nearly exhausted, but there was power all around the cathedral, a storm that had been raging for hours. He could feel the bolts of lightning arcing from cloud to cloud, or earthing themselves on the buildings of the Tenth District's skyline. His mind reached out, drawing them inward, knitting them together.

"Ral?" Hekara asked. "Everything keen? Only these thrulls are gonna eat us."

"You may want to . . . stand back."

The lightning bolt was a monster, a half-dozen strokes rolled together into one, slamming down from the clouds like the hammer of an angry god. The stone wall of the cathedral shattered beneath its power, blowing apart into chunks of red-hot stone that rained down on the grounds below. The electricity flowed into Ral, a flood of power coursing through him like he'd drunk gallons of molten metal. Sparks strobed across his body, crackling through his hair and arcing to the walls every time he moved.

He raised one hand, and a bolt of white-hot plasma slammed into the agile priest, blasting him against the opposite wall with a *crunch*. Turning in the other direction, Ral waved a hand, and the crowd of charging thrulls collapsed into a twitching, shrieking mass with a crackle of power and a smell of roasting meat. The wave of power flowed past them, arcing from one body to the next, down the corridor and out of sight.

"Impressive," Vraska said. "But there'll be more."

"I know." The power coursing through Ral's body gave his voice a slight buzz. "But we're leaving."

"How?"

He indicated the hole the bolt had blown in the wall. Vraska looked dubious.

"That's a long drop."

There was a droning buzz, like a hundred million houseflies moving in perfect unison. Something large and black shifted against the whirling clouds outside.

Ral grinned, tiny sparks arcing across his teeth.

“Who said anything about a drop?”

The two Orzhov giants advanced, the squatter one taking the lead while the thinner one stayed a step behind. For a moment Kaya contemplated running past and simply phasing through the final door, but the runes inscribed around it indicated that would be unwise. She had no doubt she could breach the defenses, but it would require a few moments, which these two were unlikely to give her.

Instead, she backed up a step, drew her daggers, and squared off, feeling ridiculous against the giant’s nine-foot bulk. It swung one great hand at her, still in eerie silence. Kaya turned incorporeal in a wash of purple energy, letting the metal gauntlet pass through her, and dealt the thing a cut on the arm once it had passed. It wasn’t more than a papercut, given its size, but the giant seemed enraged. Its other arm came around, and again Kaya let it pass through harmlessly. Furious, the giant pulled forward, arms spread wide to catch her in a bear hug.

Kaya surged forward, planting both daggers in the giant’s chest. They weren’t long enough to do real damage there, unfortunately, and the creature wrapped its arms around her, trapping her against it with an *oof* of expelled breath. Kaya grit her teeth as it lifted her up to its cyclopean face-mask, tilting her as though to examine this strange prey.

“Just a little closer, ugly,” she muttered under her breath. “Take a good look.”

The giant obliged. Kaya’s arms were pinned at her side, but she let them fade into incorporeality for a moment, slipping out through the giant’s gauntleted fingers. She plunged one dagger in on either side of its neck, pulling hard to open long cuts in the big arteries there. As blood gushed past her hands, she went entirely incorporeal, slipping out of the giant’s grasp and dancing away as it collapsed, clutching its ruined throat.

One. She turned, looking for the other giant. *Where’d you go, you big bastard?*

Something slammed her in the stomach, hard. Kaya felt something in her chest give way with a *pop*, and had a moment of vertigo to hope that it hadn’t been anything important. Then she hit the opposite wall of the chamber, hard enough that her vision went momentarily dark and sparkling. She groaned, pushing herself up from the floor as the second giant unfolded itself from its crouch.

Waited to catch me when I was done slitting your friend’s throat? Kaya grinned, teeth bloodied. “You’re smarter than you look.” She straightened up, pain shooting through her midsection. *Ow.*

The giant came at her, moving with caution. It swung lightly, expecting her to phase away. Instead, Kaya darted around the blow, ducking inside the giant’s reach and throwing herself into a roll. In a burst of purple light, she passed through the giant’s legs and skidded into a crouch on the other side, one dagger licking out to saw at the back of the creature’s foot. A hard cut severed the tendon, and the giant crash down to one knee.

It half-turned, flailing at her, and she ducked away again, darting in close to its lowered head. The giant swung its masked forehead at her in a headbutt, and Kaya stepped sideways, reaching out with one of her daggers. It took a nice bit of timing—leaving her hand and weapon incorporeal until *just* the right moment, just after they’d passed through the mask—

She didn’t get it quite right, and yanked her hand back, shaking off the sharp sting of materializing partially inside a solid object. But it had been close enough. The giant wobbled, then fell sideways, a

stream of blood leaking past its black and gold mask. Kaya cut the straps with her other dagger, and found her missing weapon embedded in the ugly creature's eye underneath the blank faceplate.

She retrieved it, wiping it clean on the giant's side, and took a deep breath. It hurt, but not too badly. *Maybe a cracked rib*, she decided, *but nothing too bad*. Still, her head swam as she crossed to the door. As she'd expected, it was both solidly locked and warded, backed up by protections for the room within. *No walking through this one*.

In spite of her power, she'd always believed in having a backup plan. She brought out a slim set of lockpicks, some mundane and some glowing in a rainbow of colors with magical energy, and set to work.

linebreak "You brought a skyship!" Hekara wheezed, and Ral hauled her aboard. He got her tucked against a bulkhead, then held out his hand for Vraska. After a moment of hesitation, the gorgon took it, and Ral swung her aboard.

The ship's sides were open to the wind and the driving rain, and for a moment it was too loud to talk as the drone rose in pitch and the tower fell away behind them. Ral could see gargoyles flocking around the gap he'd blasted in the wall. A few seemed inclined to follow, but a taste of his lightning convinced them otherwise.

"It's not precisely a skyship," Ral said, when the cathedral had faded behind curtains of rain. "It's Golbet Frezzle's patented *Cloud-Lifter*."

Hekara blinked. "What's the difference?"

"No sails!" came a goblin's squeaky voice from the cockpit at the front of the vessel. "It's powered by four ascending screws driven by mizzium turbines."

"Golbet designed the screws for pureeing cattle," Ral confided. "But after they kept breaking free of their mounts and shooting up into the air, I persuaded him to put them to better use. More important, this ship requires only Golbet to crew it, and I trust him. No chance of the plan leaking to the Orzhov."

"Very clever," Vraska said. "You might have warned us."

"You'll have to forgive my sense of drama," Ral said, smiling slightly.

"Boss? Where are we headed?" the goblin asked.

"Back to Nivix, as close as you can get us to the infirmary." Ral looked down at Hekara, whose eyes had closed. "My companion needs a healer."

"You got it!" The drone changed pitch, and the ship shot forward.

"I wish I knew if it had worked," Vraska said, looking back out the open door.

"That's up to Kaya," Ral said. "We did our part." Then, after a moment of hesitation, he added, "And you did yours. I am . . . glad that my decision to trust you was the correct one."

"Thanks." Vraska grinned, showing sharp teeth. "You're not bad to have around yourself."

The lock tripped with a sharp *click*. Kaya held her breath for a moment, but nothing catastrophic happened, which meant that she'd disarmed the wards as well. She straightened up, wincing with pain, and stowed her picks. *Here goes nothing*. linebreak The door opened smoothly on well-oiled hinges.

Inside was a single hexagonal chamber, lit by dim magical lights. The glow was reflected back in the buttery gleam of gold.

By all the gods . . . Riches filled the small chamber. There were drifts of coins, gold and silver stacked in piles or scattered carelessly on the floor. Suits of gilded armor, jewel-encrusted weapons, rings and necklaces and torcs, each more precious than the last. Tattered battle flags and forgotten scrolls stuck up out of the piles, trophies of ancient battles.

It was the wealth of millennia, gathered by the heads of the Orzhov and brought here, to their inner sanctum, to be protected against even their most trusted servants. *Enough gold to build a kingdom, locked away in a vault for the pleasure of a bunch of old ghosts.* Those ghosts sat around a plain wooden table, old men dressed in translucent versions of the finery they'd worn in life. They barely looked up with Kaya entered. Each was hard at work on some task—scribbling in a ghostly ledger, counting and recounting something on an intangible abacus, or simply muttering endless strings of figures to the dark.

Only at the end of the table, where a tall, throne-like chair stood, did one of the ghosts seem to notice her. In life, he had been a grossly overweight man, dressed in a heavy fur cape. Kaya fancied she caught a hint of family resemblance to Teysa, something in the bearing and the indomitable gaze.

"Who are you?" the ghost said, his voice soft and breathy. "We summoned no one."

"I'm not one of your servants," Kaya said, limping to the table.

"Then begone," one of the other ghosts muttered, the beads of its abacus clicking. "We have no need of you."

Kaya worked her way around the table, coins slithering and clicking underfoot. She unsheathed her daggers, let her hands fade into the ghost world, and slammed the weapons into the backs of two of the ancient spirits. They slumped forward without a cry, dissipating into whorls of ectoplasmic smoke. As they faded, a dull ache rose at the back of Kaya's neck, and her breath caught in her throat. *Damn giant must have hit me harder than I thought.* Now the council took notice of her, at least. They looked up from their obsessive tasks, startled fear spreading across their gaunt, wizened faces. The closest, a fat man with a shaggy beard, stumbled in his efforts to get away from her, babbling incoherently. She slashed his throat in a spray of ectoplasm. Behind him, a tall, austere man scrabbled desperately to gather coins from the table, his incorporeal fingers unable to touch the metal. Kaya cut him down and moved on.

"Please, wait!" another ghost shouted. "What do you want?"

"We can pay!" a man in bone-white fur screeched. "Name your price!"

She paid them no mind. Kaya didn't like ghosts, obviously. And, as a rule, she wasn't fond of priests, and definitely not of bankers. A room full of ancient ghouls who were all three at once was practically delicious, especially with the evidence of the broken lives sacrificed to their endless greed all around her.

Another pair of spirits died. The ache in Kaya's head grew stronger, and the air in the room felt close, as though she couldn't get a decent breath. *Something's wrong.* She blinked, trying to clear her eyes. Only a few ghosts remained. *Nearly there.* Kaya was breathing hard. She felt as though something were constricting inside her, pulling tighter with each ancient spirit she slaughtered. Only the one on the throne remained, Grandfather Karlov himself, glaring at her with urgent malevolence.

"My granddaughter put you to this, didn't she?" he said, as she approached.

Kaya nodded wearily, resting her arm on the side of the throne. Karlov shook his bald head.

“She is not to be trusted. I hope you know that.”

“Don’t need to,” Kaya said. “Once you’re gone, I’m out of here.”

Karlov raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. With an effort, Kaya raised her knife, and plunged it into his heart.

Something reached out of him, something black and heavy. It streamed through the blade, up Kaya’s arm, and into her chest, coiling inside her. As Karlov vanished, she fell to her knees, blade dropping from nerveless fingers.

What . . . Kaya’s hands curled into claws, clutching at her chest. *What are they doing to me?* She toppled against a pile of gold, coins sliding around her. Bit by bit, the world went dark, with the feeling of iron chains tightening around her soul.