

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 4

Unknown author

From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

Ral woke up to a loud knock at the door, heart still pounding from a rush of bad memories.

Tomik—a legendarily sound sleeper—said something like “Whfzl” and rolled over, taking most of the sheet with him. It was still well before dawn, with only a faint gray light seeping in past the window shadow, dappled by the endless rain. Ral stared at the shifting patterns it threw on the ceiling for a while, willing himself to calm, reminding himself that he wasn’t seventeen anymore and Elias, the count, and Tovrna were all a long way behind him.

But Bolas isn’t. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth. *Damn, damn, damn.*

The knocking repeated. Ral glanced at Tomik and swung out of bed, pulling on a shirt and padding quietly through the apartment to the hall. He opened the front door to find a young vedalken woman in a red messenger’s uniform, fatigue written all over her face.

“Ral Zarek?” she said, and yawned.

Ral nodded cautiously, and she handed him a folded slip of paper, sealed with wax.

“From the Aerie,” she said. “Have a good morning.”

He waited until he heard her footsteps descending the stairs to close the door and break the wax with his thumb. As he did, he felt the slight crackle of a ward discharging. If anyone else had opened the note, Ral suspected, it would have just burst into flame.

Inside, in exquisite penmanship, was a message from Niv-Mizzet.

Ral –

Congratulations on your success with Isperia. I have arranged a meeting for you this morning. Hellas Vitria is a lieutenant of Lazav’s, open to discussing the possibility of leadership change at Dimir. Meet half an hour before dawn in the alley behind the Broken Toybox. It could, of course, be a trap. Take all appropriate precautions.

-N

When he was done reading it, the note burst into flames after all, cool blue fire rapidly turning it to fine ash. Ral stared down at his hand for a moment, then shook his head, trying to clear the last remnants of his dream.

Half an hour before dawn. That didn’t give him more than an hour, but fortunately the Broken Toybox wasn’t far. *Time for a cup of coffee, at least.*

He had a spare accumulator—last year’s model, but still efficient and fully charged—and set of gauntlets in a trunk in the closet. Suiting up as quietly as he could, he bid Tomik a silent farewell and slipped out

the door. There was no point in leaving a note. Tomik knew that anything that called Ral away would be, by definition, guild business.

It was that weird, liminal hour where the earliest of the early risers cross paths with the latest of the late revelers. Ral pulled his coat tight, fighting the chill, his rain-bending spell leaving a circle of clear cobbles at his feet. The few others who were out didn't have the benefit of his magic, and carried umbrellas or simply got wet. Delivery drivers were making early morning visits to the shops and restaurants, stocking them for the day, while small handcarts delivered milk and bread to the generally comfortable inhabitants of Dogsrn. Ral bought a cup of coffee from a man with two heavy pots of the stuff dangling from a long board he carried across his shoulders. It was thick and inky black, and scorched his throat, but he could feel himself perking up almost immediately.

The Broken Toybox was a dozen blocks away in a slightly seedier neighborhood. It was a tavern and discreet brothel, which popular rumor said was partly owned by Rakdos interests. Rumor also hinted at some very unusual goings-on in the basement suites, which Ral had never felt inclined to investigate.

The place was never really closed, but this was certainly as dead as it got. A single red-tinged lamp burned above the entrance, highlighting the tavern sign with its image of a puppet collapsed in a mess of tangled strings. It was a big building, three stories with a slate roof, occupying an odd triangular lot formed by two converging streets. Ral headed for the alley that made the third side, a narrow space barely wide enough for a couple to walk abreast, wedged between the tavern and a neighboring printer's shop.

No lights burned here, and Ral stood at the entrance for a few moments, giving his eyes time to adjust. *If the Dimir were stupid enough to take on Niv-Mizzet directly, they're certainly bold enough to take a shot at me.* He reached out to the accumulator, and felt the reassuring buzz of its power. Ral wasn't *afraid* of much, but the thought of having a mind mage root around inside his skull had always made his skin crawl, especially since he'd seen first-hand the sort of things Beleren could do. *And I doubt Lazav will ask as politely as Jace always did.*

The back entrance to the Toybox was tightly shut, and a stack of empty barrels stood next to it. On the other side of the alley were a few crates, and atop them a huddled bundle of rags. Beyond the barrels, deep in shadow, Ral thought he could make out a figure pressed under the eaves of the building.

Hellas Vitria? Ral set his shoulders. *We'll find out.*

He walked down the alley, keeping his hands free. The bundle of rags shifted slightly, revealing a small body within it. A child, Ral guessed, tucked up against the rain. He watched it with a wary eye. When he was a few paces away, a girl of six or seven stuck her head out and blinked at him owlshly with bright green eyes.

"Whaddya you want?" she said.

"Just come to talk to someone." Ral nodded past the barrels, where he could see someone standing against the wall in a long coat. "Don't mind me."

She kept watching him as he edged past. The shadowed figure didn't move, coat flapping slightly as wind gusted down the alley. Ral frowned, and brought up his hand. Electricity strobed between his fingers for a moment, flashing a brilliant white and lighting up the scene, and he took an involuntary step backward.

There was a woman in the trench coat, small and compact, with short, graying hair. She was pressed tight against the wall because she had been literally nailed to it with big iron spikes, one through each of her shoulders, her palms, her thighs. Her mouth was wide open in a soundless scream, and

further spikes had been pounded into her eye sockets. Runnels of blood ran down her cheeks, still fresh enough that they dripped slowly onto the cobbles.

"You can talk," the little girl said. "But I'm not sure she can hear you."

Ral paused, then spoke without turning around. "Hello, Lazav."

"Hello, Zarek. It's been some time. Since the Implicit Maze affair, I believe."

"Not long enough for my taste."

Ral turned, slowly, away from the mutilated corpse and toward the shapeshifting guildmaster. Lazav sat cross-legged on the crate, rough sacking pulled across "her" shoulders like a cloak, dark hair plastered to her head by the rain. She smiled, a little too brightly.

"I apologize for poor Hellas's condition," the girl said. "She was a loyal subordinate, but just a bit too clever for her own good." She sighed, the adult affectation strange on the childish body. "So it goes."

"If you want loyalty from your minions, you shouldn't have turned against Ravnica," Ral said. He raised his hands, power crackling across them.

"Please." Lazav cocked her head. "I am not here to fight you, Zarek. I merely want to talk."

"I'm not sure there's much to say." Ral relaxed, but only slightly. "The Firemind is . . . displeased with your attempt to break into the Aerie."

"I'm sure he is," Lazav said. "And so am I, given that I didn't authorize it."

Ral snorted. "That seems unlikely."

"I agree." Lazav spread his hands. "Millena—she's the one who tried—didn't seem the type. Is she dead, by the way?"

"Last I saw, Niv-Mizzet had her in stasis for interrogation."

"If you get the chance, mention that I would like her back. For . . . discipline." The little girl licked her lips. "In any event, I assure you, I have nothing but goodwill toward your master."

"I'm supposed to believe that one of your mind mages went rogue?"

"Oh, no. It's worse than that." Lazav's eyes were very wide. "There has been *infiltration*. Someone has placed *agents* in my precious Dimir. Someone else has touched their thoughts." Her voice rose. "It cannot be permitted. It will not stand. You will see. There will be a reckoning."

Ral blinked, unsettled. Lazav paused, and seemed to get control of herself.

"In any event," she went on, "we have received Isperia's invitation to your little gathering. I am pleased to tell you that the Dimir will be attending, with myself as the representative."

"Why on Ravnica should we trust you?"

"You shouldn't." Lazav grinned. "But I recommend that you trust no one, so that at least puts us all on equal footing." Slowly, she got to her feet, tossing the rags aside and spreading her arms in the rain. "In the meantime, I shall be hard at work. Clearly my discipline has grown lax. A . . . cleansing is required. Dimir must become lean and hungry again."

"If you're telling the truth," Ral said, "which I doubt, then I hope you'd be willing to share any information you discover in the course of your efforts."

"Of course." Lazav grinned. "As you say, the security of Ravnica itself is at stake. My guild will not be found wanting." The little girl bowed. "Best of luck, Zarek."

“Lady Vraska,” Storrev said, gliding into the throne room in her noiseless way. Her veil rippled as she moved, like a curtain of ink. “We have captured another assassin.”

“*Finally.*”

Vraska glared at the throne. It had seemed like such a good idea when she’d started, properly imperial and terrifying, but she hadn’t anticipated completing it would be so annoying.

She had moved the court back to Svogthos, the old Golgari guildhall, a massive stone cathedral so ancient that even the Erstwhile no longer recalled its origins. Jarad and his Devkarin had preferred the psychotropic delights of the rot gardens, but Vraska liked the Svogthos, with its huge amphitheater and towering columns. She’d cleared aside the rotting wreckage of the previous throne and set about building her own. One by one, screaming prisoners—the worst of Jarad’s court, and those who’d chosen to resist the new order—had been forced into position, and then Vraska had washed them in the golden light from her eyes. Now she sat on the bowed back of a shadow elf, in a monstrous chair woven of petrified elves, humans, and even a few traitorous kraul.

The problem was getting the damned thing properly symmetrical. It was no good have an intimidating throne if it looked lopsided, and after the first few days, surprisingly few, even among the shadow elves, had tried to challenge her leadership of the Golgari. For most of the guild members, the rot farmers and refuse collectors spread throughout Ravnica’s vast underworld, assassinations and coups were just ordinary guild business. In the Golgari, life and death were equally part of the great cycle.

Two Erstwhile bore in the would-be assassin, a spindly wretch in a black cloak. One of the zombies carried a blackened dagger, which made the gorgon let out an irritated sigh. The throne room was ringed by kraul and Erstwhile, and Jarga, her rot troll, slept in one corner on a bed of bones. *All that, and they send a stripling with a knife?*

The zombies forced the boy to his knees in front of her. Vraska took the knife, sneered at it, and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Well?” she said. “Are you going to tell me who sent you?”

“You will never break us,” the elf wheezed. He dribbled blood from a split lip. “This is *our* guild, gorgon.”

“Not anymore,” Vraska said. “Most of your cousins seem to have understood that. Now. Was it Izeni?”

Izeni was perhaps the most powerful among the remaining Devkarin, the high-priestess who rarely left the seclusion of her temple. Vraska’s agents had reported plenty of comings and goings there among the shadow elves, which could conceivably represent some kind of attempt at resistance. For the moment, Vraska was content to let them conspire. *Better to let all the pus drain into the boil before lancing it.* She glanced over her shoulder. *Although they would make it easier to finish the damned throne.*

The elf looked at her defiantly. He was trembling slightly, clearly anticipating torture. Vraska sighed.

“You know, I honestly don’t care.” She waved at the Erstwhile. “Get him in position.”

He started screaming as the zombies dragged him to the throne. With undead strength, they shoved him into the gap on the left side, between a spread-eagled priestess who’d tried to poison Vraska at her victory feast and the hunched form of an old rot farmer who’d tried to raise his neighbors against the kraul. The Erstwhile shoved the would-be assassin’s legs into the gaps, then pressed his hands against the stone. It looked just about right, Vraska decided, as she leaned forward. Her eyes blazed.

Of course the boy spoiled it at the last moment, yanking one of his arms free just as the wave of petrification swept over him. He solidified into stone in a very undignified pose, as though he were waving hello. Vraska ground her sharp teeth together and growled.

“Unfortunate,” Storrev said. “Should I send for a mason?”

Vraska kicked the offending limb, and it snapped off at the shoulder, skittering across the room.

“Good enough,” she muttered, slumping into the seat. She shifted uncomfortably, feeling the bumps of the elf’s spine beneath her. “Just get me a damned cushion, would you?”

“At once.”

Vraska was certain she heard a slight smile in the lich’s emotionless monotone. The two zombies followed her as she glided out, leaving their guildmaster alone in the huge, echoing throne room. Vraska put her head in her hands, feeling the agitated writhing of her hair-tendrils under her fingers.

What is wrong with me?

For years, she’d been a loyal servant of the Golgari, a pitiless assassin. She remembered the pleasure of the kill, the satisfaction of out-thinking a target, the joy of seeing the hope go out of their eyes in the moment before the petrification washed through them. She’d collected trophies, like all her kind. Her pride and joy had been her collection of Azorius soldiers, gathered in a hundred clandestine raids, each a tiny measure of revenge for what they’d done to her. *Tossed me in a prison camp, for no other reason than I was a gorgon and they were afraid.*

And then . . .

She’d had ambitions. She’d seen what Jarad and the Devkarin were doing to the guild, neglecting its defenses and leaving its territory open. Boros patrols had pushed the Golgari back from several outposts, and they’d suffered raids from Simic experimenters and Rakdos joyriders. She’d come to know the kraul, who the elves treated as little better than beasts of burden, and to appreciate the quiet intelligence of the huge insects. She’d decided, then, that she would take charge, for the good of the Golgari. But she’d known she needed allies.

And I found them. I found Bolas. The dragon had promised her mastery of the Golgari in exchange for her help. *And here I sit. He delivered on his end of the bargain. Did I?*

That was where it all broke down. She remembered agreeing to work for Bolas, his promise that he would put her on the Golgari throne. And then she’d left, and—

Left where? Left Ravnica? She remembered fighting in Bolas’s service, but if she thought about it too hard her head started to hurt. Her memories had a *thin* quality, disconnected from one another.

I’ve gotten everything I wanted. She looked at her corpse-throne, around the colossal guildhall. *So why do I feel . . . empty?* She hadn’t taken any pleasure in snuffing out the life of that pathetic assassin. Even Jarad had felt more like smashing an annoying roach than the culmination of all her plans. *What happened to me?*

Friend-Vraska? The tentative mental touch was Xeddick’s. Vraska looked up to find the albino kraul waiting at one of the side entrances, his forelimbs rubbing nervously together.

“Hello, Xeddick.” Vraska had gotten better at thinking clearly to the telepathic kraul, but she still found it easier to speak aloud. “Is something wrong?”

I face a difficult choice, and I do not know what to do. Xeddick shuffled closer. *I cannot see the right path.*

“Choice?” Vraska frowned. “What do you mean, choice? What’s the problem?”

I cannot explain, Xeddick said. *And yet I must. Oh, friend-Vraska, if there was another way—*

“Xeddick.” The kraul’s mental voice was anguished, and she kept her tone soothing. “It’s all right. Come here.”

He moved closer, and she put her hand on his mottled white carapace. It was rough under her fingers, like unpolished wood.

Before you, I had no one, Xeddick said. *You saved me from the enemy-kraul and enemy-elves. You showed me that I had value, weak and strange as I am. You know I would rather die than allow anyone to hurt you.*

"I know," Vraska murmured. "This is getting very dramatic. Just tell me what's bothering you."

I have felt your thoughts. I could feel them across the guildhall. They are . . . disturbed.

"Is *that* all?" She shook her head. "It's nothing, I promise. Just . . . worries. These are dangerous times—"

It is not nothing, Xeddick interrupted. *Friend-Vraska, I have seen the shape of your mind.*

"I warned you about rooting around in my head," Vraska said, tensing.

I know. It is one reason I was hesitant. I swear I have not pried into your thoughts, only swept the edges of them. It is the difference between seeing a book on the table and reading it.

Vraska relaxed. "All right. So what about my mind?"

There is a hole in it.

Vraska froze, her clawed fingers tightening on the arm of her throne. For a moment, she felt like she couldn't breathe.

"What?"

There is a hole in your mind, Xeddick said unhappily. *It is why your thoughts are disturbed. You can feel the hole is there, but you cannot reach it, and so you circle endlessly. I would not have spoken, but . . .*

"Someone *took* something from my mind?" Vraska felt her hair-tendrils standing on end, which they only did in moments of extreme agitation. Gorgon instinct brought golden light to the corners of her eyes, an automatic threat response, and she hurriedly blinked it away. "When? Who?"

It was not taken, precisely, Xeddick said, shrinking from her anger. *It was . . . sealed. Hidden. It has been so since before you and I met, though recently it has moved closer to the surface of your mind. As to who did it, I do not know, but they must have been a very skilled telepath. Much more so than I.*

Vraska blinked. "Since before we *met*?" *That would be before I returned to Ravnica from . . .* "Damn. You're right. I can *feel* it." She pressed the heels of her hands against her forehead, claws resting on her skin, as though ready to dig the secrets out of her brain. Then she looked up. "Can you undo it? Release the seal?"

I believe I can. Xeddick hesitated. *But . . .*

"What?"

Friend-Vraska, the seal shows every sign of having been . . . benign. When a telepath alters another mind against its will, that mind will bear the scars of the struggle. There are no scars in yours. I believe whatever was done to you, you consented to.

"I *consented*?" To someone ripping out a chunk of . . . of *me*?" Vraska shook her head. "Never. I would never have agreed to that."

I am sorry, Xeddick said, backing away. *Of course. I am mistaken—*

"Wait." She took a long breath. "Why does that complicate things?"

There was a long pause.

Because if you wanted that part of your mind sealed, you might have had good reason , Xeddick said. If I unseal it, I do not have the skill to repeat the process. What is in there may change you, friend-Vraska. And I . . . do not wish you to change. His forelimbs rasped against one another. *But I do not wish you to be unhappy, either.*

Vraska leaned back in her throne, willing herself calm. She felt her hair tendrils flatten, one by one. She stared up at the ceiling, where stalactites hung among the ancient stone columns.

I did this to myself , she thought. Why? What would make me do such a thing? And where did I find someone to do it for me?

“I understand your dilemma,” she said, slowly. “And I appreciate how much you care for me.”

Thank you, friend-Vraska.

“But I need to know what’s in my head.” Vraska let out a deep breath. “It is disturbing my thoughts.”

But—

“If I did do this of my own accord, I must have known I’d find it someday.” She ventured a smile. “I’ll be all right, Xeddick.”

The kraul was silent for a while.

As you wish, friend-Vraska. Shall I proceed?

Now? Vraska thought. She was tempted to tell the kraul to wait, to gather her strength. *No. It had to be now. Whatever’s in there, I’m not afraid of it.*

“Yes,” she said. “Do it.”

She felt Xeddick’s touch on her mind, a cold spot on the inside of her skull, slipping around like slimy fingers. There was a moment of resistance, of *pressure* . Then something gave way. She gasped as memories exploded outward, a geyser of lost thoughts and moments and—

. . . she squeezed Jace’s hand . . .

“Let’s sabotage that bastard.”

They were going to save Ravnica.

“. . . when I see you next, I’ll definitely try to kill you.”

“I know.”

Ixalan. The *Belligerent* . Her crew, and the mission from Bolas. The chase, and its ending. Memory after memory, upside down, out of order, but falling back into place.

Her own voice. *“My magic may lie in death, but I take no joy in killing. Before, I did it because I didn’t have a choice otherwise. Now I have to do what is right for others like me.”*

“I think you were meant to be a great leader.” Jace. Her heart hammering faster in her chest. *“Your greatest vengeance is the fact that not only are you alive, but you reinvented yourself into someone stronger than your captors ever thought possible. Do you realize how incredible that is?”*

How much did I hide? Vraska felt buffeted in a maelstrom of thought. *Jace, why did you do this to me?*

And then—

Rank on rank of blue-armored soldiers, still in undeath, fire burning in their eyes.

“He made an army he could transport across the Multiverse. And the Immortal Sun will make sure no one could leave once they’ve arrived.”

Ravnica was writ large upon the ambition in Nicol Bolas's mind.

All the breath went out of Vraska's lungs.

Bolas is coming here. Not alone, but with an invincible army. Not to scheme, but to conquer. He means to take Ravnica for his own.

Friend-Vraska! Xeddick's urgent mental touch finally broke through. *Friend-Vraska, are you all right?*

"Fine." The words were a croak. "I'm . . . fine." She gulped air. "Xeddick . . . thank you. I can't explain everything now, but thank you."

The kraul sent a pleased feeling, though his mind was still all confusion. Vraska leapt up from her throne and started shouting.

"Storrev! Get in here!"

When the black-veiled lich glided in, Vraska whirled on her.

"What did we do with the emissary from the Azorius?"

Storrev bowed. "I believe you instructed us to place him in your statue garden."

"Fetch him."

"In . . . ah . . . the rockery." The lich inclined her head again. "You kicked him over the side of the bridge."

"Right." Her memory was still a jumble. She even felt a faint pang of *guilt* at having done that to the messenger, which she cast angrily aside. *He was still Azorius.* Whatever change had come over her on Ixalan—and it was still unfolding inside her mind—it didn't change the vengeance she owed the minions of the Senate. *Does it?* Her sharp teeth rasped together, and her hair-tendrils wriggled.

With an effort, Vraska mastered herself.

"I want a messenger sent to the surface. To"—not the Azorius, *never* the Azorius, who else had been working with them?"—"to Ral Zarek. At once."

"Of course, Lady Vraska." Storrev bowed. "And what do you wish the message to say?"

Vraska took a deep breath.

linebreak Ral had an office on the fourth floor of Nivix. In the ordinary course of business, he didn't use it much, preferring to spend his time one level down in his personal laboratory, riding herd on his attendants. As a result his office became a sort of storage space for the paperwork he preferred to avoid, delivered constantly by resident faeries through special tubes built into the walls. To try and keep ahead of it, he'd installed Chemister Gloomplug's Patent Shredder/Incinerator Mark V (formerly Chemister Gloomplug's Intelligent Auto-Filing System Mark IV), whose steel maw loomed in what had once been a fireplace.

For the moment, though, he'd shoveled his ordinary paperwork to the floor, and his unadorned steel-frame desk was covered with correspondence relating to the guild summit. Replies to Ispيريا's invitations had started to come back, and Ral stood with his hands on the table, taking stock.

Izzet was in, of course. Azorius and Boros had agreed to participate, and the Azorius had further offered to host the summit near New Prahv, which was reassuring. They'd promised everyone safe passage, and the Senate was nothing if not sticklers for their own rules.

That left seven guilds. The bio-mages of Simic had sent a cautiously positive response, and Ispيريا seemed hopeful they would participate. Emmara of Selesnya had requested a meeting with Ral per-

sonally, which he'd arranged for the next day. She'd sounded sympathetic, but she wasn't the Selesnya guildmaster, so he didn't count them as settled just yet. And Lazav of Dimir, of course, had promised to attend, though what his word was worth was anyone's guess.

Which leaves four. Isperia hadn't even tried sending a messenger to the chaotic clans of the Gruul. Niv-Mizzet himself had taken on the task of convincing them, apparently calling in old favors with Borborygmus, the massive cyclops who was the closest thing they had to a leader. Whether it would work Ral had no idea, but it was out of his hands.

From the Orzhov cathedral, they'd gotten a firm rebuff—unsurprising, since the Orzhov hated the over-reaching power of the Azorius. Not for the first time, Ral considered approaching Tomik for help, and then firmly rejected the notion. *He's not going to be able to sway them one way or the other, and it's not worth what it would do to . . . us.* Guild business and personal business had to stay separate.

That left the Golgari depths, from which Isperia's messenger hadn't even returned, and—

"Master Zarek?" A nervous young man leaned into the doorway. "There's . . . ah . . . someone here to see you. She says she's an emissary."

"An emissary?" Ral looked up and frowned. "From whom?"

"He this way?" a woman's voice called from the corridor. "Ah, 'course he is, that's his name on the door. Gangway!"

"She's, ah, from—" The attendant pushed on someone out of view, trying unsuccessfully to keep her back. "From Rakdos, I think."

"Think fast, copper!"

The attendant gave a screech and stumbled backward, recipient of a sharp knee to the crotch. His assailant bounced into the doorway with a flourish, as though she were presenting herself on stage. She was a pretty young woman, dressed in a parti-colored outfit made of a variety of dyed leather patches sewn together into a tight bodysuit. It put Ral in mind of a fool's motley, and she'd apparently decided to lean into the comparison, augmenting the effect with a dozen tiny silver bells hung from the tips of her hair, which was short and shaped into narrow spikes with what looked like paste.

That she was from Rakdos was beyond doubt, Ral thought, because no one else would wear something like that outside a circus. He got to his feet, and the woman grinned at him and sauntered over, flopping bonelessly into one of the chairs in front of him. She swung her boots—enormous black things that looked like they'd been partially burned—up onto his desk, scattering several important letters.

They stared at one another for a few moments. The woman seemed content to wait, and ultimately it fell to Ral to clear his throat and break the silence.

"Can I ask," he said, striving for calm, "who you might be?"

"Oh!" the woman said, as though this question had not occurred to her. She shot to her feet, then executed a formal bow, the bells in her hair tinkling. "I have the extremely dubious honor of being the official emissary, mouthpiece, and plenipotentiary of His Magnificent Flaminess, on account of being the smartest an' best dressed an' also I cut everyone else's fingers off when they tried to stop me."

"I see," Ral said. "Do you have a name?"

"You can call me Hekara, everyone else does. 'Cause it's my name." She peered at him. "You're Ral Zarek, yeah?"

"I am." Ral was already finding this conversation a little hard to follow. Rakdos street slang—patois and accents cribbed from a half-dozen cultures, usually much to those cultures' chagrin—was the only

thing that changed faster than Rakdos fashion, and he wasn't well-studied in the latest. "Did you have a message, or . . ."

"In a manner of speaking, right?" She cocked her head. "His Incinerationness wants me to say that he's all about this guild summit. Like I said, I'm his rep, all signed and sealed official-like."

"Wonderful." Ral looked down at his scattered papers. "The summit won't begin for some time, so—"

"Buuuuuuut," Hekara said, "in the meantime, he wants me to stick close to you. Hang out, type of thing."

"What?" Ral looked at her dubiously. "Why?"

"Well, here's the thing. His Mighty Burningness is not happy about the idea of some dragon from elsewhere coming here to kick us all in the jewels. I mean, who would be? But on the other hand, he ain't sure you lot aren't putting this whole thing on as an excuse to get together and stomp on him. His Bossiness has a bit of a bee in his bonnet about that." She spread her arms. "So I get to hang around an' watch an' make sure everything's on the up and up! Keen? Keen."

"He wants you to observe me?" Ral found his head hurting already.

"Correct!"

All right, think. In spite of Hekara's odd personality, it wasn't *that* unreasonable of a request. The demon Rakdos had always been paranoid, and he was one of the few guild leaders as old as Niv-Mizzet himself, dating back to before the foundation of the Guildpact. *No doubt he's had his share of betrayals.* linebreak Ral glared at Hekara. *It can't hurt to have her on board.* The more guilds signed on to the summit in a visible way, the more authority they'd have with the rest. *And since we aren't plotting a trap for Rakdos, having her observe won't be a problem.* linebreak "It's unnecessary," he said slowly, "but if your presence would reassure Lord Rakdos . . ."

Hekara leaned forward, grinning.

I'm going to regret this, aren't I? linebreak ". . . then of course, you're welcome to observe me," Ral went on. "As long as I'm acting in my official capacity, at least."

"Keen!" Hekara grabbed his hand and shook enthusiastically. "Right! Now we're mates."

Ral raised an eyebrow. "Mates?"

"You know. Buddies. Comrades-in-arms. Boon companions. Mates." Hekara put her other hand to her mouth and contrived to blush. "Oh, dear. Did you think that was a pass?"

"I don't—"

"I mean, I'm not saying no." She looked him up and down. "Not a slam dunk, love the white streak though, get a few drinks in me an' we'll see what happens, yeah?"

"Mistress Hekara . . ."

"Just 'Hekara' is aces." She threw herself back down in the chair. "No need for a whole mouthful."

"As you like." Ral took a deep breath and started reorganizing his papers.

"Master Zarek!" The attendant, limping, reappeared in the doorway. "Another emissary!"

"Can you please," Ral snapped, "keep them from just walking into my office?"

"I . . . um . . ."

The attendant retreated past the doorway. An admonition died on Ral's lips as a noxious *thing* lurched into view. It had once been human, but was clearly long dead, mottled flesh hanging loosely on a partly visible yellowed skeleton. Fungus grew all over it, puffballs on its arms scattering spores as they scraped against the doorframe, a blue-green shelf of mushrooms growing directly out of the side of its head. One eye socket was crammed with fungal growth, but the other was a dark, empty hole, with a single green spark glowing in its depths.

"Ral. Zarek." The thing spoke with a voice like gas forcing its way out of a rotting corpse.

Ral curled his hand into a fist, and felt electricity crackle across it. Hekara stared at the zombie, open-mouthed.

"Yes?" Ral said.

"A message. From Queen Vraska. Of the Golgari Swarm." A bit of rotting flesh dropped off the zombie's hand with a wet sound. "She wishes to meet. In person. To discuss. The upcoming summit."

"Vraska?" The gorgon Planeswalker had vanished from Ravnica after her run-in with Beleren. *Now she's calling herself a queen? Interesting.* "Very well."

"You will be informed. Of the details," the zombie gurgled. "The Queen. Bids you. Good health."

Then it collapsed, all at once, like a puppet with cut strings. Bones, flesh, and fungus collapsed to the floor, deliquescing rapidly into a noxious puddle. From the hallway, Ral could hear his attendant being noisily sick.

"Well," Hekara said. "*That's* not coming out of the carpet anytime soon, I tell you what."