

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 9

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From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

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Ral awoke in a cold sweat, the long-ago slum-dweller's scream still ringing in his ears. He lay back against his pillow with a groan.

It's been a long time since I had that dream. He turned his head to look at Tomik, curled up beside him, his features smoothed in sleep. *Small wonder what's called up those demons, though.*

Through the ignition of his Planeswalker spark and everything that had followed, Ral had kept his romantic life to a minimum, dallying with the occasional casual encounter but nothing more. He'd been determined that no one would be in the position to hurt him so badly again. Tomik had been one such casual encounter, at least at first. *Now things are . . . different.*

He could appreciate the courage it had taken Tomik to come to him with Teysa's request. *And there's a reasonable chance that he's saved Ravnica because of it.* Part of him, though, still wished it could have been avoided. *Now that the line's been crossed, there's no going back.* They'd been able to be together as two anonymous people in a rented apartment; whether a relationship could work between Ral Zarek, second-in-command of the Izzet, and Tomik, private secretary to the Karlov heir, he had no idea.

It will work, Ral told himself. *I'll make it work.* Besides, if everything went according to plan, he would be guildmaster of the Izzet after the Firemind took up his new position. *Who's going to stop me?*

Trying to ignore the flutter in his chest, Ral leaned down and kissed Tomik gently on the forehead. His lover mumbled something and rolled over in his sleep. He'd been out late, Ral knew, working with Teysa on the new leadership of the Orzhov.

"Get some rest," he told Tomik quietly. "We've got a lot to do."

When Ral arrived at his office at the Nivix, Hekara was waiting for him. This was not a surprise—the Rakdos emissary had left the infirmary the previous evening, apparently none the worse for wear and as bouncy as ever. More unusually, Lavinia was there as well, listening patiently to Hekara's somewhat confused explanation of the action in the cathedral.

"... an' then Ral was like, 'Hekara, if you don't do something, we're all dead!' An' I said, 'I'll take care of it,' all cool, an' I went *tzing* an' hit the stupid guy right in his stupid eyeball. An' he was all like, 'Aaargh, damn you, Razorwitch Hekara, how could you defeat me?!' an' I said—"

"Ow', if I recall correctly," Ral said, coming in the door.

"That wasn't it," Hekara said. "It was something much cooler."

"It sounds like you had an exciting time," Lavinia said diplomatically. It was the first time Ral had seen her without a robe and hood. She wore well-fitted scale armor, etched with runic protections, and carried a longsword on her hip like she knew how to use it. "Hello, Ral."

"Good morning." Ral sat behind his desk, which was already cluttered with the day's papers. "I thought you didn't want to be seen with me?"

"I didn't want to tip off Bolas's people that I was working with you," Lavinia corrected. "Now that your guild summit is going forward, it's perfectly natural that I meet with you to discuss it."

"That's convenient," Ral said. "So what did you want to discuss?"

"There's still a lot of messages going back and forth between the agents I've identified," Lavinia said. "I'm certain that at least one of the representatives is working for Bolas."

Ral grimaced. "Anyone we can rule out?"

"Aside from you?" Lavinia said, smiling slightly. "Isperia is certainly above suspicion. And, while I may not like her methods, I can't imagine Aurelia working with the enemies of Ravnica."

"The Gruul leader, Borborygmos, has been around for decades," Ral said. "I doubt he's working for Bolas, though whether he can be persuaded to agree to *anything* is anyone's guess."

"I don't know about that Rakdos emissary," Hekara said from the corner. "I hear she can't be trusted." Ral and Lavinia turned to look at her, and she shrugged. "What?"

"That leaves five," Lavinia said. "Orzhov, Gulgari, Dimir, Simic, and Selesnya."

"I killed Bolas's agent at Selesnya," Ral said.

"Assuming he only had one."

"Fair." Ral frowned. "I still think we can trust Emmara."

"Simic is a black box," Lavinia said. "I have no information since they went on the defensive, when all this started."

"And I still think Lazav is the most likely problem," Ral said. "It was one of his mind mages who made the attempt on Niv-Mizzet."

"I don't disagree," Lavinia said, with a sigh. "It just seems a little . . . *obvious*, don't you think? Lazav usually plays a subtler game than that."

"Maybe he's getting lazy."

"Maybe." Lavinia shook her head. "That leaves Vraska and Kaya."

Kaya. They'd gotten word that morning that the Planeswalker mercenary, rather than Teysa, had taken up the mantle of guildmaster of Orzhov. Ral didn't know what was happening there, and he didn't want to push Tomik for answers. *We'll have to deal with them either way.*

"Both Planeswalkers," Lavinia said. "Both new to control of their guilds."

"And they both signed on to help at Orzhova to help put the summit together," Ral pointed out. "If they were working for Bolas, wouldn't they have sabotaged us already?"

"I don't know," Lavinia said. "I'm closing in on some of Bolas's agents, but unless I can catch them and make them talk I still don't know what his game is."

"You're running out of time." Ral leaned back in his chair. "The summit opens tomorrow. If you have iron-clad *proof* that someone is working for Bolas, we can present it to the representatives, and everyone can deal with the traitor together. Anything short of that, and we're just going to start a brawl on the spot."

"I understand that." Lavinia ran one hand through her hair, frustrated, pulling at knots. "I'm trying."

"I know," Ral said. "We're nearly there. A month ago, I would have said it was impossible to get this far."

"So would I." Her lip quirked. "A lot can change in a month."

"A lot can change in a day."

Tomorrow. He looked down at the papers on his desk, without really seeing them. *For better or for worse.*

Kaya wondered if this dullard priest was *ever* going to shut up.

He was the High Something of Something, and was quite important, judging by the enormous black and gold hat he wore. (Hat size, Kaya had found, was often quite a good guide to someone's importance—or at least their *perceived* importance—in an organization.) He had a long, wispy mustache, which wobbled as he spoke and made him look a bit like a walrus. *High Walrus of Boredom, maybe?*

His speech, as best she could tell, was about the importance of debtors paying what they owed to the maintenance of a civil society. Which, all right, Kaya could get behind, but she didn't see any need to ramble on about it for upwards of half an hour, while everyone in the cathedral sanctuary sat in the stifling heat of dozens of braziers while rain battered the stained-glass windows.

It wasn't the first speech she'd endured today, either. She sat at the back of the sanctuary, on a very impressive throne that wasn't actually particularly comfortable, and tried her best to smile knowingly as one guild official after another came to the lectern to regale the audience with homilies on duty and probity. Teysa sat beside her, stone-faced; she'd obviously been enduring this sort of affair since she was a girl, but it made Kaya want to slip through the floor and make a run for it.

As His Walrusness wound down, Kaya leaned toward Teysa. "I'm going to need a break."

"We're coming up on the most important part," Teysa said. "The high officials will each swear their allegiance to you."

"Wonderful. But unless you want them to ask why the throne smells like piss, I need five minutes to run to the toilet."

Teysa sighed, but she made a small gesture to a functionary, who ran up and whispered in the ear of the walrus priest. After he'd reached the end of his remarks, he raised his hands to silence the weak round of applause, and said, "Honored guild members, we will take a brief recess before the Swearing of Oaths."

There was a rustle among the crowd. Kaya shot to her feet before anyone could try to talk to her, or Teysa could suggest she needed a proper escort or some such silliness. She pushed her way to the back of the dais, where a small door led to a corridor that wrapped around the sanctuary. From there, a stairway led up to the galleries, which were unoccupied for this relatively small service.

Kaya wasn't sure if there were toilets up there. Honestly, what she really needed was a breath of clean air, but since that wasn't going to happen unless she stuck her head through the wall, she'd settle for a few minutes without everyone staring at her.

How did I get into this mess? She could look back at the decisions she'd made, step by step, but somehow they didn't seem to add up to her current predicament. *Bolas set me up.* She grit her teeth. *And he may be the only one who can get me out.*

Reaching the gallery, she went to the rail and leaned out, watching the dignitaries mill around below. For a moment, Kaya resisted a very strong urge to see if she could spit into some hats.

"Guildmaster?"

Oh, for the love of—

She turned, and found herself facing a small, wizened man, with downcast eyes and liver-spotted hands. He held a broom like it was a cane, leaning on it for support, and his breath was wheezing. Her anger seeped away, and she shook her head.

"That's me," she said. "Guildmaster. Absolutely. What can I do for you?"

"I beg a boon." Very slowly and with considerable effort, the old man fell to his knees. "Please."

"What kind of boon?"

"I wish forgiveness."

"Of your sins?" *Is that something I do?*

"Of my debt, Guildmaster."

"Oh." Kaya pointed over her shoulder. "Paying debts is important. Didn't you hear the High Whatnot?"

"I know, Guildmaster. But . . ."

"If you didn't want to be in debt, you shouldn't have borrowed money."

"My wife was ill," the old man said. "The doctor wanted much more than we could pay, so I turned to the Bank. My priest assured me the terms would be reasonable."

"When was this?"

"Forty years ago," the man said, his head bowed. "My wife died, in spite of the doctor's efforts. I am an honest man, and I have worked for the Bank ever since. But there is still so much left, and I . . ." His hands twisted around the handle of his broom. "I will not live much longer, Guildmaster. I feel it in my bones. My only desire is that this burden that has crushed out my life not be passed on to my children."

"Your children inherit the debt?" Kaya said.

"Yes, Guildmaster. Such is the law."

"I . . ." Kaya shook her head. *I should talk to Teysa.*

On the other hand, what was there to talk about? *This poor bastard has already spent his life in chains. He doesn't deserve to have his children bound as well.* It's not like the sum involved could be enough to bother the Orzhov. *Why not? I am the Guildmaster, or I'm supposed to be.*

"All right," she said. "Your debt is forgiven. Run along."

"I . . ." He stayed on his knees. "The bond remains. I feel it—"

"In your bones. Right. Okay."

Kaya closed her eyes and took a deep breath, looking inside herself. She could feel the weight of the contracts and obligations she'd inherited from Grandfather Karlov, like thousands of chains hung

around her neck. Telling one from the next was difficult, but it was easy enough to pick out the thread that led to the man standing directly in front of her, a black rope connecting his soul to hers. As she'd suspected, compared to some of the others, it was miniscule. With an effort of will, Kaya tore the bond apart.

She felt the impact as a moment of dizziness, but it quickly passed. At the same time, she heard the old man gasp, and when she looked up there were tears in his eyes.

"Thank you, Guildmaster," he said, voice cracking. "Thank you. My children . . ."

"It's all right," Kaya said, seeing Teysa approaching. "Just, uh, don't do it again. And continue to worship on . . . whatever day it is you're supposed to."

"Yes, Guildmaster. Of course."

"Kaya," Teysa hissed. "Everyone is waiting."

"Sorry," Kaya said, watching the old man scuttle away. "I just had to . . . deal with something."

"Come on," Teysa patted her shoulder. "I know this is hard. I swear we're working on a way to get you out of it."

"Good," Kaya said, shaking her head. "That's . . . good."

linebreak "Are you certain you will not require more protection?" Mazirek said, in his slurred, clicking speech. "We could arrange a larger escort."

"It'll be fine," Vraska said, with a little more certainty than she actually felt. "If this *is* an ambush, then having more fighters isn't going to help me get out of it. And it's only going to make them nervous if I turn up with an army."

"As you say," the kraul clicked. "I will instruct the party to make ready for the journey to the surface."

"Good."

Vraska watched him depart, sitting on her throne with her chin in her hands. Her tendrils wriggled, unhappily. After a moment, she got to her feet.

"I'm going outside," she told Storrev, who waited as silent as ever beside the throne. The lich nodded, gesturing minutely, and four Erstwhile in long, half-rotted dresses fell into step behind her. Vraska ignored them. As bodyguards went, the zombies were about as unobtrusive as you could ask for, and they never talked back.

A door behind the throne led into a branching corridor. One way led to her private chambers, but she took the other branch, heading out to the vast balcony that wrapped around the back of the palace. Sometimes her guards used the space for military exercises, but today it was empty. The ground behind the palace dropped off rapidly, so the balcony looked out across a considerable vista, the darkness of the underground kingdom punctuated by the glowing lights of Golgari settlements or the faint phosphorescent glow of rot farms.

The surface dwellers will never understand this place, she reflected. When they thought about the Golgari at all, they thought of them as monsters dwelling in filthy tunnels. There was more space down here, in the bones of Ravnica, then in every grand building up in the Tenth District. Without the reclamation efforts of the Golgari, and the food those efforts provided, the city would starve in days, if it didn't drown in its own filth first. *But to them we'll always be monsters.* linebreak The shadow elves

were unhappy that she was attending the guild summit. When she was in this sort of mood, Vraska saw their point. *Why should we treat with people who hate us?* But she knew Bolas, and they didn't. She'd seen in Jace's mind what the dragon had done to the people and gods of Amonkhet. *If that's what he plans for Ravnica . . .* linebreak "Queen," a man's voice said. "You're not an easy person to reach."

Vraska turned. A shadow elf stood by the balcony rail, dressed in the worn leather of a rot farmer. She dropped one hand to her saber.

"I thought we'd finished with this assassination nonsense," she said. "But I suppose that was too optimistic of me. Come on, then."

"I'm not here to kill you," the man said, walking closer. As he did, the Erstwhile behind Vraska moved up protectively, until they were standing at her shoulder. The man paid them no mind. "I'm just here to express my . . . concern."

"Your concern? What is that supposed to mean?"

"You're not playing the role you were assigned, my dear." The elf grinned, but Vraska saw a shadow of another smile, one full of jagged teeth.

"Bold of you, to come here," Vraska said, showing her own fangs. "You'll make a fine addition to my sculpture garden."

"Oh, this is only a vessel. Tear it to pieces or turn it to stone, it's all the same to me," said the elf. The voice was definitely Bolas. "It won't change the fact that we had a deal, and you have not followed through."

"I found you what you wanted on Ixalan."

"You did." Bolas inclined his head. "But that was never supposed to be the end of it. I installed you as the head of the Golgari, as I promised. And yet here I find you working against me."

"I had a change of heart," Vraska snarled.

"I can see that. My old friend Beleren's work, I suspect."

"Take this *thing* to the dungeons," Vraska snapped at her zombies. "Tell Mazirek to see how long he can keep it alive." When the elf raised an eyebrow, Vraska added, "Next time you come to lecture me, maybe you'll be brave enough to do it in person."

"If I have to lecture you again, Vraska, it will be the last time," Bolas's puppet said.

"Bold words."

The elf snapped something fast in a language Vraska didn't understand. The four zombies, which had advanced to take hold of him, stopped in their tracks.

"I think that you can still play your part," Bolas said.

"I said to take him," Vraska said, one hand on her saber again.

Bolas muttered another word, and the zombies turned, advancing now on Vraska. She swore and drew her sword, backing up to put the palace wall behind her.

"The Erstwhile," Bolas said, moving up behind them. "So useful. So willing to help you overthrow Jarad and his sycophants. And they ask for nothing in return." He smiled. "Extraordinary."

"I can handle a few zombies," Vraska said. "If this is supposed to threaten me—"

“Oh, I’m not threatening you,” Bolas said. “Physical threats rarely mean much to a Planeswalker, do they? But your precious *people*, that’s another matter.”

He snapped another command, and the zombies froze. Vraska didn’t lower her sword.

“Imagine every Erstwhile turning on its master, just as they did to Jarad and his elves,” Bolas said. “But this would be so much worse. You prepared your coup carefully. This time, it would simply be chaos. No doubt the remaining Devkarin would take it as their chance to reclaim power. The kraul would certainly fight back. It would be civil war, with you caught in the middle. Everything you love would be torn to pieces.”

“You . . .” Vraska’s throat was thick.

“I *made* you the head of the Golgari,” Bolas said. “Did you really think I would do that without a way to *un* make you, if I chose?” He stepped closer, leaning between two of the motionless zombies. “Live as long as I have, and you’ll learn about betrayal. Did you really think I hadn’t anticipated yours?”

“What . . .” Vraska felt her tendrils flailing in agitation, and tried to clamp down. “What do you *want* from me?”

“I want you to make the correct choice. Either the Golgari can thrive, under your leadership, and claim their rightful place in my new order. Or else they can be torn asunder, here and now, and when I come to this plane I will take particular pleasure in grinding what’s left of them under my claws. And only once the last remnants of your pathetic tribes are dust will I come for *you*, Vraska. And you will know an eternity of pain.”

She felt golden energy building behind her eyes, her instinctive threat response, but she blinked it away. Turning this messenger to stone wouldn’t help. *Nothing* would help.

Jace . . . linebreak She’d trusted him with her memories, her *identity*, the next best thing to her soul. *He said he would come*. That, together, they’d defeat Bolas.

But he’s not here. And this *thing* was, a dragon’s face grinning out from a puppet body, standing behind its tame zombies. *Jace, what am I supposed to do?* linebreak “Well?” Bolas smile faded. “What’s it going to be?”

Vraska swallowed.