

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 2

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The rot gardens of the Devkarin were legendary.

Any fool could build a midden, or grow mushrooms from offal. But the shadow elves approached the flora of decomposition with the same attention a surface-world gardener might lavish on roses or orchids. It was putrescence raised to high art, practiced by long-lived masters in a realm that never saw the sun.

The personal chambers of Jarad, guildmaster of the Gulgari Swarm, were a particularly fine example. A broad, circular courtyard was covered by a vaulted ceiling, crusted with long stalactites. The only light came from bio-luminescent fungi, which grew from wooden globes that hung down at irregular intervals. The planters were arranged to divide the space into many small, intimate meeting spots and corridors, and couches covered in soft moss were provided for guests who wished to recline.

Each planter was a corpse, or sometimes several corpses, carefully propped, cut, and arranged to promote the growth of some particular species of fungus. The rot gardeners' shamanic magic hedged out the common agents of decay, keeping the bodies relatively intact. Here a man sat with his legs crossed, head tipped back, vast yellow-white stalk growing out of his eyes; beside him a woman arched her back, her chest sectioned and peeled back to allow delicate blue fronds to reach up from her heart. Some of the fungi were so large and solid they grew around their hosts, leaving faces and limbs to jut out of quivering masses of gray-white flesh. Others were the smallest, most delicate things, that would dissolve under a stray breath. A few of them, if ingested, would kill a human in seconds. Many more would do strange things to the eater's brain.

Jarad sat on his fungus throne, long strands of soft-fringed moss falling all around him. Around him wait the Cilia, the most powerful and influential of the Devkarin, slim elven bodies clad in spidersilk, faces painted in insect patterns.

The silent servants that moved among them, bearing trays of food and a variety of intoxicants, were elegant as well. Though dead, they walked with the grace of nobility, and their clothes were intricate, ancient things, the burial finery of centuries past. These were the Erstwhile, raised from the vault of Umerilek by Mazirek, the kraul death priest. Jarad adored them. So much more graceful than the shambling rot zombies the shamans raised, with a poise and intelligence common undead couldn't match. They'd become quite the fashion in the Gulgari court, and it was a poor shadow elf these days who wasn't served by nobles of an ancient age.

There was a sound of splintering wood from the front of the room. Jarad looked up and frowned.

"I ordered that sealed," he said.

"You did." Storrev stood at Jarad's side. She was an Erstwhile lich, possessed of all the intelligence she'd had in life. Dressed all in black, with a long veil shrouding her dried, ruined face, she was almost invisible until she spoke, voice haughty with the accent of a long-dead court. "I believe someone is trying to get in."

"What?" Jarad got to his feet. "Who dares?"

Across the corpse-planters, through the delicate fungi, he saw the front door flex inward. It was a massive thing, root-wood banded with cold iron, but its timbers groaned and cracked. Another instant, and it shattered, sending splinters tearing through the delicate rot-sculptures. Fungal blooms that had taken decades to grow collapsed into pools of slime.

In the doorway was a hulking figure, a troll larger than any Jarad had ever laid eyes on. There were more creatures behind it, but his eyes were fixed on the humanoid shape who stepped forward. A woman, dressed in fighting leathers, a cutlass at her hip. Humanoid, but not human, and certainly not elven. Where her hair should have been was a mass of curling black tentacles, writhing like a basket full of snakes.

There were several gorgons in the service of the Golgari swarm, but only one who would dare such an insult. Jarad's lip curled.

"Vraska."

Vraska stepped into the rot garden. She'd always hated the place. The air was thick with the sick-sweet scent of decay, and the hundred little corners were made for the backstabbing, bickering conspiracies on which the Devkarin court had always thrived.

That, she thought, *ends tonight*. Jarga was still picking bits of door out of his fist, but the two kraul followed her, six-legged insects layered in chitinous armor. Mazirek, on her left, was nearly as tall as Vraska, his carapace daubed in spiraling black paint. He was the closest thing the kraul had to a leader, and had been her first ally among the hives.

On her right walked a much smaller kraul, a sickly-looking dead white specimen with drooping, useless wings. Xeddick had been an outcast among his people, for his coloration and his strange abilities, until Vraska had befriended him. Since then, he'd followed her like a puppy.

Jarad, in his spidersilk robe and blue and red face paint, rose from his throne and pointed at her.

"Vraska," he snarled. "I do not recall summoning you. Nor asking you to break down my door."

"And here I am, nevertheless," Vraska said. "Funny, that."

She started toward him, kicking a corpse-planter out of the way in a spray of pink spores. The two kraul followed, armor clicking. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see shadow elves scrambling out of the way, while their Erstwhile servants stood motionless.

"All this decadence," the gorgon mused. "The years have not been kind to you, Jarad."

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" Jarad, at least, was unafraid to face her. A few courtiers stood with him, and she saw hands straying toward weapons. "You have value to this court, but do not overestimate your importance. I could have your head for this."

"Could you?" Vraska murmured. She pushed another planter out of the way, stopping a dozen feet from the guildmaster. "Let's see you try to take it, then."

Jarad's eyes narrowed. "So that's the way it is."

“That’s the way it is.” Vraska rested her hand on her cutlass. “Well? I’m waiting.”

“Someone kill her,” Jarad drawled.

Two of his courtiers strode forward, a young man with the mantis tattoos of a fourth-grade blademas-ter and a woman in the flowing robe of a shaman. With a nod, Vraska directed Mazirek toward the woman, and drew the cutlass from her belt.

The blademaker was fast, his sword the thin rapier popular among the Devkarin for their lethal, pre-cise forms. She barely turned his first cut, and he danced back out of range of her riposte, his sword leaving a bloody line across her forearm. Vraska growled in irritation, slammed his next stroke aside with the greater weight of her weapon, and bulled forward until they were face to face. Golden energy gathered in her eyes.

He realized his mistake too late. Before he could look away, power flashed between them. A wave of gray flowed out from his eyes, turning his flesh cold and hard and dead. Stone fingers clenched on the hilt of his sword. Off balance, the statue stood for only a moment before toppling, smashing into pieces with a *crunch*.

The other duel was ending, too. Sheets of fungi rippled across Mazirek’s carapace, but the kraul seemed unperturbed. His forelimbs moved with blinding speed, working a spell, and the elf stumbled backward clutching at her throat. For a moment she stared, eyes bulging, as black lines like necrotic veins spread through her flesh. Then she fell, curling up on her side, shuddering as the flesh rotted from her bones. In a few seconds there was only a skeleton lying in a pool of slime.

Friend-Vraska. The mental touch was Xeddick’s. The kraul was a telepath, a rarity almost unheard of among his race. Vraska half wondered if he was the result of some rogue Simic experiment. *The dead gather.* She looked over her shoulder. The Erstwhile were assembling by the door, ladies in threadbare court dresses, men in rotten coats and cobwebbed wigs. Four of them stepped from behind Jarad’s throne, wearing the armor of an ancient royal guard, swords at their belts. Storrev stood beside Jarad, face hidden behind her veil.

I see them, she thought to Xeddick. She felt his nervousness, and sent a pulse of reassurance. *Every-thing is under control.* “How do you expect this to end?” the guildmaster said, apparently uncowed by the demise of his champions. The rest of his court had retreated to a safe distance.

“With you on your knees, begging for mercy.” Vraska sheathed her cutlass and rubbed at the wound on her arm. “We can skip straight to that, if you like.”

“Suppose you kill me,” Jarad said. “You know what will happen? The Devkarin—”

“The Devkarin have been in power too long,” Vraska said. “You’ve treated the Golgari as an instrument of your personal pleasure, squandered our strength in decadence. That ends today.”

“You don’t have the strength,” Jarad sneered. “A few bugs aren’t enough. Start a civil war here, gorgon, and it will end with your head on a spike. And *your* people, Mazirek, will suffer for a hundred gener-ations.”

“We have borne your tyranny long enough,” Mazirek said. His speech was slurred and clicking, coming through mouthparts not designed for the common tongue. “Vraska offers the kraul respect.”

“Respect will do you very little good when you’re rotting in my garden.” Jarad grinned, bright and unhinged. “But enough of this! Put aside your grievances, and I will make you—”

Vraska lashed out, a fast punch that caught Jarad on the nose with a solid *crunch*. He staggered back-ward, blood streaming over his upper lip.

“Storrev!” he shrieked. “Stop her.”

And now, Vraska thought, *we find out if Bolas was right*. The assembled Erstwhile stood, waiting. The four guards around the throne, the servants now standing in ranks around the room. They stood—
—and did nothing.

“Storrev!” Jarad whirled in a spray of blood. “What is the meaning of this?”

“You are the past,” the lich said, without inflection. “Vraska is the future.”

Ahhhh. Jarad turned back to Vraska, and *now* there was panic in his eyes. She drank it in like nectar. His mouth worked, hands clutching at his robe.

“You still won’t get away with it,” he muttered. “Enjoy your little victory. The rest of the elves—”

“Have Erstwhile servants,” Vraska said. “Don’t they?”

Jarad’s eyes went wide. “No.”

“We’ll spare those who don’t resist.” She took another step forward, and he fell to his knees. “But the Golgari are *mine* now.” Vraska glanced at Mazirek, who made a deferential gesture with his forelimbs, and Storrev, who inclined her head. “The reign of the shadow elves is over.”

“I . . . I can help you,” Jarad mumbled. “There are things I know . . . secrets. You need me.”

“You know, you’re right?” She motioned to Xeddick, and the little kraul came forward to stand before the guildmaster. *You know what to do*, she thought at him.

Yes, friend-Vraska. Xeddick’s mental touch was unhappy. He didn’t like using his powers this way. *Do not resist, enemy-Jarad. It only makes the pain worse*. Judging by the way he screamed, Jarad resisted. When it was over, he lay in a whimpering heap at the base of his throne.

You have what we need? Vraska thought to Xeddick.

I believe so, friend-Vraska. Lists of agents in the surface world, passwords, meeting places. Xeddick sent a wave of disgust. *His mind tastes of filth. I can imagine*. Vraska leaned down and grabbed the guildmaster by the collar, dragging him up to meet her gaze. Golden energy gathered, and Jarad screamed again.

Rain lashed the side of Orzhova, the Cathedral Opulent, great stronghold of the banker-priests of the Orzhov. Kaya was certain it was a beautiful building, all flying buttresses and bas-reliefs, with wide stained-glass windows and gilded fixtures. She just wished it wasn’t such a pain in the ass to climb, especially at night and in the rain.

This is probably high enough. Her hair hung in a sodden mass at the nape of her neck, and she was soaked through to her smallclothes, in spite of a leather raincape. She’d entered the building at ground level, then worked her way up as far as she could manage without raising the alarm before slipping over to the outside to climb the tower. So far, this had allowed her to bypass most of the Orzhov security, though she doubted her luck in that respect would continue. *You don’t get rich enough to build your own cathedral without getting a little paranoid*. Still, she’d had worse jobs, and in much worse places. The city-plane of Ravnica was positively pleasant when measured against some of the swamps and catacombs where she’d been sent to hunt her incorporeal prey. *The food’s good, as long as you don’t think too hard about where they get it. And when you ask about a hot bath, the innkeepers don’t look at you like you’ve gone mad. Though it would be nice if the rain ever stopped*. She found a handhold on an outcropping cornice, beside a carved gargoyle whose open maw spouted a stream of rainwater. Kaya gave the gargoyle a long, suspicious look, but it didn’t seem inclined to suddenly spring to life.

Bracing herself against it, she took a deep breath and drew on her power. Violet energy flowed around her, shifting her body from solidity to ghost-like incorporeality, and she stepped in through the solid stone. It was a more difficult trick than it appeared—the hard part was keeping her grip on the *outside* of the wall solid until she'd gotten sufficient footing on the *inside*—but Kaya had been sliding through barriers at odd angles most of her life.

As she'd hoped, her climb up the main tower of the Orzhova had gotten her past the first few lines of defense. She found herself in a sumptuously carpeted hallway, lit by candles burning softly in gilded braziers. Doors at regular intervals bore brass nameplates, and the wood was engraved with the elaborate coats of arms of the knights and syndics who worked here, making the wheels of Orzhov commerce turn. Judging by the height of the ceiling, there were at least three more stories between her and her target.

Assuming, of course, the information the dragon provided is accurate. The first rule of mercenary work was “never trust the client,” and that was doubly true in the case of Nicol Bolas. But the payoff was big enough that she'd thought it worth the risk. *If anyone has the power to fix the broken sky, it's Bolas.* And her contacts had insisted he was at least reasonably trustworthy. *For a dragon, anyway.* She padded softly down the hallway, water dripping noiselessly onto the silk carpets. At the end of the hall, there was a stairway up to the next floor, secured by a floor-to-ceiling iron grill. Kaya examined the tiny golden runes inset around the keyhole that locked it in place, found a ward that would raise an alarm if the lock was picked, and grinned. She stepped through in a shimmer of purple, and jogged up the switchback stairs.

The next floor was some kind of records archive, which seemed to go on forever. *No surprise there. Priests like to write things down, and so do bankers, so I'm sure banker-priests are even worse.* The doors to the storerooms were inscribed with dire magical traps, but the hallway had only a few tripwires, which were so easily disabled it was almost insulting. *If this keeps up, I'm going to have leave them a stern note.* Another grate blocked off the stairs, and this one was augmented by a pair of guards in plate armor and conical helmets. They had the stolid, bored look of guards everywhere. Observing them from around a corner, Kaya figured she could probably take them both down if she had to—a knife throw to the unarmored throat of the one on the left, then close and take the other one's legs out from under him before he could get that clumsy sword out. *But that's hardly elegant.* Besides, she didn't want to kill anyone she didn't have to.

Instead, she worked her way back the corridor to the outer wall and phased back onto the exterior of the tower. This was even harder than going the other way, but she found a convenient handhold on the sculpted bust of some long-dead aristocrat, and swung her legs out in a spray of violet before managing to set her feet against another buttress. From there, she climbed, ascending until she figured she was well past the guards. *Better to stay inside as much as I can, though. They must have some protection against flying thieves.* She braced again on another convenient gargoyle. It was only when she already had one hand reaching into the stone that it occurred to her that *this* one didn't have a rain pipe in its mouth and seemed considerably less weathered. By then, it was already moving.

Ah, hell. A very complicated moment followed. Kaya had one hand incorporeal and reaching through a stone wall, and her other arm and one foot shoved against the gargoyle. It shifted away from her, and she was suddenly falling off the wall. At the same time, it opened its beak to shriek a warning, which would undoubtedly bring every guard in the cathedral running.

Think fast. She let her left hand, inside the tower, slip back into corporeality and scramble blindly. Thankfully, her groping fingers found the stem of a brazier, and she grabbed it, setting her weight against the wall. It took most of her concentration to maintain the narrow band of incorporeality around her wrist, but she had enough left to lash out with her other hand and jam it into the gargoyle's

throat, grabbing its tongue in her fist. The stony creature's eyes bulged, but it remained silent. For a moment, Kaya hung suspended from her impromptu handholds.

Now what? The gargoyle started closing its beak. It didn't have the best leverage, but the edges of its beak were razor sharp, and the upper and lower tip dug into Kaya's arm, cutting through the leather and drawing blood. She gritted her teeth and set her legs against the tower again.

"You know," she told the gargoyle, "I'm willing to live and let live here. Any interest?"

It glared at her malevolently and upped the pressure. Much more, and her arm would snap.

"Fair enough," Kaya muttered.

She let go of the brazier and let her arm phase back outside, leaving her hanging from her grip on the gargoyle. That set her swinging sideways toward it, and she pushed off with her legs to turn the motion into an arc, like a circus acrobat spinning around a trapeze only infinitely more painful. As she neared the end of her swing, she pulled one of the long knives on her hips with her free hand, and used all her momentum to jam it home into the gargoyle's neck, with a little touch of her power ensuring it slid easily through the creature's stony hide. The gargoyle gave a strangled squawk and toppled forward, losing its grip on the wall. Kaya let her hand phase through it, then pushed herself up in a standing jump that took her all the way through the outer wall and back inside the tower.

All in all, she felt she'd earned a few moments writhing on the carpet, silently cursing all gargoyles as she clutched the torn skin of her forearm and tried hard not scream. When the pain had subsided a little, she wiggled her fingers just to make sure she still could, extracted a bandage from her pack, and bound the wound.

I hope the damn thing didn't land on anyone. A random splattered passerby wasn't what she needed on her conscience.

This level, thankfully, was as empty as the previous. Another switchback stair led upward, with no obvious protections. Kaya took it, cautiously, and found that it led to a very solid-looking door. More runic warding, in fine golden script, was inscribed around the edges. She leaned close to read.

Pass through the door, summon a dread spirit of vengeance, blah blah blah. She flexed her injured hand again, checked her knives, and took a breath. *Here goes.* Purple flared around her as she passed through the door. She got a brief impression of a large, well-appointed sitting room beyond, but her view was almost immediately obscured by a maelstrom of ghostly energy that coalesced in front of her. A humanoid figure, like a translucent, emaciated corpse, formed out of nothing, red sparks of hate blooming in wide, empty eye sockets. It reached for her throat, and she felt the chill of the grave washing over her.

The thing looked *very* surprised when Kaya's daggers, glowing with the purple of her incorporeality, slammed into its chest. Ghosts and spirits invariably were shocked to learn that the phasing which made Kaya pass freely through physical world also made her very solid indeed to their kind. Typically, though, they didn't live—or *continue to exist, or whatever*—long enough to spread the lesson around, since they usually had few defenses against a foot of cold steel in their ghostly hearts.

This one screamed, thinned, and vanished into the thin air from whence it had come. Kaya sheathed her blades with a satisfied smirk. Looking around the room, she found a dark-haired woman standing behind a long wooden table, leaning on a cane, with a bespectacled young man beside her with the air of a clerk.

"Teysa Karlov?" Kaya said, and got a cautious nod. "I'm here to rescue you."

A few minutes later, Kaya was sitting at the big, polished table, redoing the bandage on her arm a little more carefully. Teysa and the young man, whose name turned out to be Tomik, sat across from her.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Teysa said, steepling her fingers. Even with her hair mussed from sleeping and wearing only a black silk nightgown, she retained her poise. “You’re on a contract from”—she glanced significantly at Tomik—“our mutual friend.”

“Mhmm,” Kaya said, wincing as she peeled away blood-crusted cloth.

“Your contract is . . .”

“To help you take control of the Orzhov,” Kaya looked up. “I figured getting you out of a cell would be a good start.”

“How much do you know about the Orzhov?”

“Almost nothing,” Kaya said cheerfully. “Our *friend* said you were locked up by a bunch of ghosts, which I figure is why he came to me in particular.”

“Did you have a plan for what happens next?”

“Not really. I figured that was your department, though I’ll certainly take care of your ghost problem for you.”

Tomik shook his head, as though he were still half-asleep. Teysa wore a tight expression, and her fingers interlaced.

“It’s not just a ‘ghost problem,’” she said. “The *Obzedat* are the spirits of the most powerful of the Orzhov, who have ruled our guild for millennia.”

“And you want to get rid of them.”

“Yes,” Teysa admitted. “But it’s not going to be that easy.”

“No?” Kaya tied off the bandage and smiled. “You’ve seen me work.”

“It’s not your ability I doubt, it’s the rest of the plan,” Teysa sighed. “If you break me out of here *before* you assassinate the Ghost Council, everyone will assume I was involved. The powers of the guild will rally to the enemies of the Karlovs. We’d have a costly civil war on our hands, and no guarantee we’d win.”

“Assuming,” Tomik added, “the other guilds didn’t take advantage of our weakness.”

Kaya looked at the clerk and raised an eyebrow. Teysa pursed her lips.

“Tomik is my personal secretary,” she said. “I trust him implicitly.”

Except you don’t want him to know you’re working with Bolas, Kaya thought. *Interesting*. She sat back in her chair, hands behind her head.

“Okay,” Kaya said. “So you *don’t* want me to break you out of here?”

“It wouldn’t achieve what we want,” Teysa said. “Grandfather locked me up—”

“Who?”

“Grandfather,” Teysa repeated irritably. “He’s the head of the Ghost Council now.”

Kaya, whose family relationships could be best described as “complicated,” tried to imagine what it would be like if clan elders persisted indefinitely into undeath. *The mind rebels*. “All right. Go on.”

“He locked me up because I wanted to take the Orzhov in a different direction.” Teysa glanced at Tomik. “Less isolation, and more engagement with the other guilds. There are those in the hierarchy who support me, which is why he was afraid of admitting me to the council. But if I ally myself with outside forces, those allies will abandon me.”

“So what then?”

“You have to destroy the Obzedat without the appearance of my help. With Grandfather gone, the hierarchs will have no choice but to turn to me.”

“Lady Karlov,” Tomik said. “You know how dangerous that is. If she were to fail, and admit the plan to your grandfather—”

“Have a little faith in me,” Kaya said.

“It’s a valid point,” Teysa said. “If you *were* caught, Grandfather would have your living spirit ripped from your body, and then his necromancers would get whatever answers he wanted before condemning you to utter oblivion.”

“Let’s not kill me off *just* yet.” Kaya scratched her nose thoughtfully. “The ghosts meet in the basement, right?”

Tomik nodded. “In the Catacomb, several floors below the base of the cathedral. No one living has been down there for centuries.”

“And I’m sure it’s full of death traps and bound spirits. These places usually are.” She pulled a face. “I have to admit, I don’t relish the prospect of trying to cut through all that with every guard in the tower on my ass. I got a look at the wards on my way in, and I’m not going to be able to get in there without sounding the alarm.”

“We need allies,” Teysa said. She glanced at Tomik speculatively, but before she could say anything more there was the sound of booted feet and jingling metal from the hallway.

“Ah, hell,” Kaya said, jumping up. “Someone must have noticed what happened to your doorkeeper.”

“Go,” Teysa said urgently. “I’ll tell them it was an attempt to kill me, they’ll believe that. Find the Twisted Stem Inn, Tomik will get a message to you there.”

“This job is getting more complicated by the minute,” Kaya muttered. But she had to admit it sounded like the best option at present. *Certainly better than fighting a tower full of guards.* She nodded curtly to the pair of them and hurried to the window.

“You can’t get out that way!” Teysa said. “The windows are—”

Kaya phased through, in a burst of purple light, and was gone.

“—sealed,” she finished, thoughtfully. The door banged open, and she turned to face the guards, putting on her best smile.