

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 6

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The skyship shuddered as its docking clamps released, lurched sideways in a gust of wind, and then rose gently in the mid-afternoon sky.

Ral was old enough to think of casual skyship traffic as a novelty, though it had been a part of the Ravnican skyline for years now. When he'd arrived in the Tenth District, the only ships had belonged to the guild militaries. Now vessels like this one took people up just for the pleasure of seeing the city from the air, circling gently around landmarks like New Prahv and Orzhova. Other, more nimble fliers darted out of the way of the lumbering tourist ship—Boros soldiers on rocs, gargoyles and giant insects, and the now-ubiquitous camera thopters.

The deck of the skyship was full of benches, but most of the passengers stood at the rails, leaning as far out as they dared and pointing out the sights to one another. The ship was packed, people eager to take advantage of another brief break in the rain and the endless, dreary clouds. Many of them were visitors from outlying districts, recognizable in the Tenth by their more formal, drab clothing. The Tenth was the hub of most important activity on Ravnica, and this was reflected in grander architecture, busier markets, and wilder traffic in the streets. In Tovrna, where Ral had grown up, he could have gone days without seeing anything but humans; here in the Tenth the crowds were full of elves, vedalken, viashino, minotaurs, loxodons, centaurs, and all the rest. Ral watched the out-district families, parents and children both dressed in their feast-day finest to gawk at the Tenth's wonders, and thought about what might have been.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up to find Lavinia frowning at him from under her hood.

"You're not very attentive," she said.

"And you're late."

"Had to wait until we got above the spy-thopters." She sat next to him, pulling her coat tighter. "Usually the clouds keep them blind to anything in the air. Inconvenient day for it to be clear."

Ral shrugged. Sometimes he thought Lavinia was overly paranoid; other days, he wondered if he himself was nearly paranoid enough.

"Tell me about Vraska," he said.

"She's a gorgon, obviously. There's a few of them associated with the Golgari, though they're anti-social and don't band together much. Vraska was a bit of a loner in her early years, apparently, and wasn't an official guild member. That didn't stop the Azorius from scooping her up with all the rest in the Duskend Purges, about twenty years back."

Ral winced. “She doesn’t have much love for your ex-guildmates, I take it.”

“It gets worse. You know who was the presiding official in her case?”

“Isperia,” Ral guessed.

Lavinia nodded. “Vraska and a few thousand others, of course. Isperia wasn’t guildmaster yet, but she was still a high-ranking judge. I doubt she gave Vraska more than a minute’s thought, but . . .”

“Yeah.” Ral shook his head. “Well, she asked for the meeting, so maybe she’s not the grudge-holding type.” From what he’d heard about her from Beleren, that was a faint hope. “How did she get out of the prison camp?”

“Azorius record-keeping is scrupulous, as always. She didn’t escape by any known means, she didn’t die, and she wasn’t released. As far as anyone can tell, she just disappeared.” Lavinia lowered her voice. “I dug a little bit in the archives, and one of the prison guards testified that she was undergoing administrative punishment for some infraction when she simply vanished into thin air.” Lavinia paused. “Administrative punishment means—”

“Getting a beating.” Ral’s eyes widened. “That must have been when her Planeswalker spark ignited. It’s common for the first time to be in a stressful situation. Being beaten by prison camp guards would certainly qualify.”

“Interesting.” Lavinia looked as though she were filing the information away for future use. “In any event, she turns up a few years later, now working directly for the Golgari as an assassin. She’s wanted by the Azorius for various crimes, but we never got close to catching her. It wasn’t our highest priority at the time.” Lavinia paused. “Then, about six months ago, she vanished again. Even her associates don’t seem to know where she was.”

“Off-plane,” Ral muttered.

“Quite possibly. If so, she came back quite recently, and almost the first thing she did was organize a coup against Jarad, the old Golgari guildmaster. She has the support of the kraul, those insect-people, and some kind of undead legion.” Lavinia shrugged. “Coups are pretty much business as usual in the Swarm, of course, but my contacts were surprised at how fast this one developed. Everyone thought the shadow elves had a pretty solid grip on power.”

“You sound suspicious.”

“I’m always suspicious.” Lavinia gave a thin smile. “But she fits the profile for Bolas’s agents. Usually they’re ambitious people who suddenly move into leadership roles, with a little covert assistance.”

That sounds like the Bolas I know. I’m sure it would have been me, if I’d agreed when Tezzeret made his offer. “You think Vraska is working for Bolas.”

“I think it’s a definite possibility,” Lavinia said. “She hasn’t exchanged correspondence with any other known agents, so I can’t prove it. But . . .” She shrugged. “If Bolas’s goal is to sabotage the guild summit, having as many of the guildmasters be his own people as he can sounds like a good way to it.”

Ral nodded grimly. “Have you looked into what I sent you yesterday?”

He’d written out a quick summary of what had happened at Selesnya, including Garo’s strange behavior, and had an attendant leave it in one of her dead drops. Lavinia gave a cautious nod.

“It’s a good thing you were able to stop them, obviously,” Lavinia said. “As for Garo . . .”

“He spoke as though he were Bolas himself.” Ral shook his head. “Bolas can disguise himself as human, but if that *had* been him, we never would have gotten close. And Emmara has confirmed that the man

who died there *was* the same Glademaster Garo she's known for decades, and not any kind of replacement or shapeshifter."

"Mind magic, then?" Lavinia said. "If Bolas is working with Lazav, he certainly has access to the expertise. Maybe they twisted Garo."

"Twisted him so that he thought he *was* Bolas? That doesn't make a lot of sense."

Lavinia shrugged. "Maybe that was just a bluff to rattle you."

"Maybe," Ral said. "See if you can find out more about what happened to Garo. That kind of mind magic isn't easy. They would have needed to get pretty close to him."

"I'm already on it," Lavinia said. "Bolas is getting his orders to his people on Ravnica *somehow*. If we can find out how and put a stop to it, that might go a long way toward screwing up their plan."

"Right." Ral looked sideways at her. "Thank you, by the way. For the warning, and for your help."

"Oh." Lavinia looked slightly taken aback at the sentiment. "I'm still doing my job. Defending the Guildpact and Ravnica."

"Still. Thank you."

She ran a hand through her short brown hair, nervously. "You're welcome." The skyship was descending, and Lavinia got to her feet. "I'd better go, before some thopter gets eyes on us. Good luck with Vraska."

"Good luck yourself. And be careful."

"Always." She gave him a brisk nod and strode toward the rear of the ship.

Ral stared down at the streets of Ravnica, while children shouted to one another and hung on the rails. Eventually, the vessel settled back into its cradle, and the docking clamps engaged with a *clunk*. He got to his feet as the tourists flooded toward the ramp.

Well. Now let's see what the queen of the Golgari has to say.

"You said I could observe!" Hekara said. "That means no running off without me, yeah? Otherwise you could be plotting an' His Fireballhood wouldn't like it."

"Some things are too sensitive for observers," Ral said. "And some things are too personal. You're here now, aren't you?"

"Suppose." Hekara looked irritably at the sky, which had gone cloudy again as the last rays of sunlight drained away. A few drops of rain were already spattering the cobbles. "It'd be keen if it had stayed clear."

Ral waved a hand, and his rain-shield spell widened, bending the drops away from Hekara. She looked upward, then over at him, beaming.

"Thanks!" she said, and unexpectedly punched him lightly on the shoulder. "We're mates, us!"

"I told you . . ." He sighed as she hurried forward toward the next corner. *Oh, well*.

Turning, he was confronted rather abruptly with the Dyflin Crevasse, a vast fissure in the earth that interrupted the Ravnican street plan. Houses on the edge of the abyss stretched out dangerously above empty space, cantilevering themselves farther and farther to take advantage of the free real estate. They reminded Ral of a wasp's nest clinging to the side of a beam. This late, the crevasse itself was

nothing but darkness, a gap in the web of streetlights and shop lanterns, the twinkle of which were just visible on the other side. In between, a slender thread barely distinguishable from the shadows around it, was the Madman's Bridge.

The Madman's Bridge was a cautionary tale passed down by architects to their apprentices. After more than ten thousand years of building and rebuilding, most Ravnican structures were constructed not on solid ground but atop the crushed remnants of the previous layer, the ruined city stretching down underneath them through basements and sub-basements, ruins and covered yards, until it merged into the underground depths. Every so often, the rubble *shifted*, like a giant shrugging in his sleep, and some house in the daylight world found one of walls had suddenly dropped two feet or was canted at sharp angle to the rest.

That was what had happened to the Madman's Bridge, on the very day it was supposed to open to the public. It was a long, thin structure, built as a public works project by the Senate in more relaxed days to facilitate traffic from one side of the Crevasse to the other and relieve crowding on some intervening streets. Some claimed the contractors had done substandard work to pad their profits, others that the bridge had been sabotaged as part of Azorius infighting; the resulting litigation had been tied up in the Senate for years afterward. However it happened, just before the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the ground under one end of a footing of the bridge had suddenly dropped, causing the span to *twist* like a ribbon. Huge chunks of stone had broken away, crashing down into the depths of the crevasse. The whole thing had been expected to collapse at any moment, and a crowd had gathered to watch, ready to cheer on a good disaster.

But, improbably, the bridge had held. When it became clear that it wasn't going to fall, the crowd went home, and the Senate declared the whole thing unsafe and washed their hands of it. Decades later, the Madman's Bridge still stood, canted about ten degrees to the right and missing big chunks from both sides, as though it had been nibbled by giants. The remaining roadway was too narrow to drive a cart across, and there was always the chance that any substantial load would be the straw that broke the dragon's back, so sane people gave the place a wide berth. That made it an excellent place to meet without anyone watching.

And I suppose it's convenient for the Golgari. It was well-known that the depths of the Crevasse connected to the Swarm's underground kingdom. The local children tested their courage by "raining on the Golgari," which meant going out to the center of the bridge, where it was most tilted, and pissing over the edge. Ral paused at the foot of it, eyeing the long stretch of stone held together by little more than mortar and force of habit. *Madman's Bridge, indeed.*

"Come on!" Hekara charged out onto the bridge. "Don't want to be late, yeah?"

Ral shrugged. *It's stood this long, it'll stand a few hours longer.* He stepped onto the tilted stone, leaning to the left to compensate for the angle, feeling the odd tingle of a yawning gap in the soles of his feet. He did his best to ignore it. Even with the missing blocks, the remaining bridge was quite wide. *It only feels like you're about to fall.*

Hekara had slowed a hundred yards ahead, and as he got closer Ral could see two shapes waiting in the rain. One was humanoid, hunched under a heavy cloak. The other was a six-legged creature the size of a small pony, covered in chitinous armor plate. It was a stark, unhealthy-looking off-white, and in spite of its bulk it crouched slightly behind the humanoid, as though for protection.

Ral caught up with Hekara, who had come to a halt and was staring, fascinated, at the insect. He waved his hand, extending his rain spell to the Golgari emissaries. The hooded figure straightened, then threw her hood back. She had narrow features, bright yellow eyes, and long, black tendrils where her hair

should have been, wriggling of their own accord like snakes. She wore tight-fitting leather armor, and carried a saber on her hip.

Hekara whistled. "Well. There's a bit of all right."

Ral glanced at her. "The gorgon?"

"Yeah." The Rakdos emissary raised her eyebrows suggestively. "Those wriggly bits. Don't you just want to grab 'em?"

"Gorgons have a habit of petrifying their lovers when they tire of them, you know."

"s all right. Keeps me inventive, yeah? Keen."

"Just stay quiet, please," Ral said, as Vraska stepped forward.

"Master Zarek," she said, in a surprisingly pleasant voice. "I'm afraid I don't know your companion."

"Queen Vraska," Ral said. "This is Hekara of the Rakdos."

"Very pleased to meet you," Hekara said, with a bow.

"Vraska is fine," the gorgon said. "Queen is a bit of an affectation." She gestured to her insect companion. "This is Xeddick, my advisor."

"I was surprised to get your . . . messenger," Ral said. "My understanding was that all our attempts to invite you to the summit had been rebuffed."

Vraska smiled slightly, revealing sharp, pointed teeth. "I'm afraid I don't respond well to entreaties from the Azorius."

"I understand you have a history."

"You understand nothing," Vraska snapped, then paused, visibly calming herself. "I am sorry. I have had certain revelations recently that have made me . . . less certain of myself."

"Why did you want to meet here?" Ral said. "If you intend to come to the summit, a note would have sufficed."

"Would you trust me, if I turned up to your meeting at the last minute?"

"Probably not. My associate thinks you're working for Bolas."

"Your associate is very perceptive," Vraska says.

Ral's eyebrow went up. "Excuse me?"

"I am . . . I was . . . doing the dragon's bidding."

"I see." Ral flexed his fingers, feeling the power crackle over them. His accumulator was on his back, fully charged, and his bracers were secure under the sleeves of his coat. "Then I have to ask about your intentions."

Vraska smiled again, looking a little strained. "I'm afraid they have recently changed. It's a complicated story."

"I'm listening."

"How well do you know Jace?"

Beleren. Ral ground his teeth. *Even when he's not here, he has to be at the center of everything.* He gave himself a moment before responding. "Reasonably well."

"I met him on a plane called Ixalan. We became . . . friends, in a strange way. I was there doing the dragon's business, but I had found more than that. I . . ." She shook her head. "I don't expect you to understand."

"What was Beleren doing there? He's the Living Guildpact. He ought to be *here*, helping us work this out."

"I don't know most of that story. But Jace and I discovered that Nicol Bolas's ultimate intention was to come here, to Ravnica, and he intends to conquer. He has an army of undead champions at his back."

"That's new," Ral muttered. "If you were working for him—"

"He promised me leadership of the Golgari," Vraska said. "He didn't tell me he intended to crush all of Ravnica beneath his claws. Jace helped me see that I had to stop him."

"Then why reject our invitation?"

"Because I had to meet Bolas before returning to Ravnica. If I had intended to betray him, he would have seen it in my mind. So I had Jace . . . alter me. Our original plan was for him to undo it himself, but my friend Xeddick here found the blocked memories."

It is the truth, a voice said, directly into Ral's mind. *I untangled Jace's work. He is a master, far more skilled than myself, but he left those memories intending that they be returned to friend-Vraska.*

"Ooh," Hekara said, scratching at her temple. "That tickles."

"So you came back here ready to do Bolas's bidding," Ral said. "Then the bug rummaged around in your head, and you had a change of heart?"

"I'm aware it sounds unlikely," Vraska said.

"Nothing is *likely* when Beleren's involved," Ral said. "But it's very convenient. How can I trust you?"

There was a long pause.

"I do not know," Vraska said. "I have asked myself this, many times. It is why I have forced myself to be . . . honest with you. But I admit that in your position, I would not offer trust so easily." She shook her head. "All I can tell you is that I wish to defeat Bolas and protect my people."

"Keen!" Hekara said. "We can be mates, then."

"Mates?" Vraska said quizzically.

"Hekara," Ral said. "*Observe*."

"Kay," Hekara said, sulkily.

To Vraska, Ral said, "I'll have to consider this. If you're willing to bring the Golgari to the summit, that's certainly a start. But . . ."

"I understand." Vraska let out a frustrated sigh. "If I can offer assistance in another way, please tell me. I would like a chance to . . . prove myself."

Ral nodded. "I'll be in touch."

"As you wish." The gorgon gestured to Xeddick, and the pair of them turned away.

"See you soon, I hope!" Hekara called after them. At Ral's look, she shrugged. "What? I like her. An' the bug is cute."

Ral had to admit that Vraska's poise was impressive. *But that just makes her a better liar. So now what?*

The question was answered almost as soon as they returned to the city streets. A red-coated messenger was waiting under the eaves of a nearby inn, and hurried over to Ral as soon as he stepped off Madman's Bridge.

"They said you'd gone out there, sir, and I thought I'd just wait here to see if you came back." The young man bowed and presented a single folded sheet of paper. "With my compliments, sir. The sender said it was urgent."

Ral unfolded the page. There were no sorcerous protections or seals on this one, just a few lines scribbled in an achingly familiar hand. *Ral –*

I need to talk to you, as soon as you can. Guild business. I'll be at the apartment.

Tomik

He folded it again, tucked it in his pocket, and turned to Hekara.

"Go back to the Nivix. I have something to take care of."

"Aw." She cocked her hip. "I thought I was observing!"

"This is personal business."

"That's what you said this morning!"

"Go, Hekara."

She gave a sulky nod. "But you'd better not be getting up to any fun without me."

"I promise."

It was some distance from the crevasse back to the apartment, so Ral flagged down a rickshaw pulled by a burly centaur, and sat back in the seat as creature worked up to a canter, threading around the late-night traffic. His driver exchanged good-natured profanities with other vehicles and the occasional frantic pedestrian as they passed, but Ral ignored it, his mind elsewhere.

Guild business. Does he mean that? It could be a joke, but Tomik wasn't much of one for that kind of humor. Is he worried about me? Angry I haven't been back recently? The summit had been taking up virtually all his time, it was true. Tomik understands, though. It's not like he hasn't vanished for days.

The ride seemed to take forever. When they finally pulled up, Ral tossed the centaur a handful of coins and took the steps two at a time, taking a few moments to compose himself when he got to the top. He ran one hand through his hair, a small crackle of electricity giving it that static frizz.

The door was unlocked. Ral pushed it open to find Tomik pacing in front of the sofa, taking his glasses off to clean them and then putting them back on, only to repeat the cycle a moment later. *Something must really be wrong.*

"Tomik?"

Tomik froze, like a mouse sighting a cat. Ral kicked the door shut behind him and hurried over.

"Tomik, what the Krokt is going on?" he said. He tried putting his hand on Tomik's shoulder, but the younger man pulled away. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Tomik reached for his glasses again, thought better of it, and shoved his hands in his pockets instead.

"Did something happen?" *Guild business.* "I've been out, if there's news."

“Nothing’s happened yet. I . . .” He shook his head. “I’m afraid.”

“Why?” Ral tried to fix his lover’s gaze.

“It’s—” Tomik took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and finally met Ral’s eyes. “This. What we have here. Our relationship.”

Oh, damn. Ral felt himself tense reflexively. “What about it?”

“It’s . . . good.” Tomik’s jaw trembled. “Very good. I think . . .” He shook his head again. “It’s very important to me, and I’m afraid I’m about to screw everything up.”

“You’re *about* to screw it up?” Ral said.

Tomik gave a tight nod.

“Because you want to talk to me about guild business?”

Another nod.

Oh, Tomik. Ral felt something in his chest unclench. He stepped closer, and this time Tomik consented to be pulled into a hug. Ral could feel the tension across his lover’s back, pulled as straight as a sword blade.

“It’ll be all right,” Ral said, quietly. “You won’t screw it up.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say,” Tomik whispered.

“Doesn’t matter. I know who you are.” Ral pulled away from Tomik slightly and kissed him. “No guild business was a good rule at the start, but maybe we’ve grown past that. I *trust* you, Tomik.”

“I . . .” Tomik swallowed hard, and kissed Ral again. For a moment they stood in silence, cheek to cheek. “Thank you.”

“Just tell me,” Ral said.

“I need your help,” Tomik said. “Or Teysa does. They’re going to extinguish her, if nothing changes.”

“All right,” Ral said. “What can I do?”

“I need you to attack Orzhova.”

Ral raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you’d better start at the beginning.”

“They’ve had Teysa in a cell for months now,” Tomik said. He had calmed down somewhat, and they were sitting side by side on the sofa, drinking tea from matching mugs. “She’s been trying to push back against the Ghost Council, and they finally got tired of it.”

“And you think they’re going to kill her?”

“Worse,” Tomik said miserably. “They’ll extinguish her. Kill her inside a ward that will prevent her from rising as a ghost. For a member of the Karlov family, it’s the ultimate punishment.”

It was odd to think of a family where *not* rising as a vengeful spirit was considered a punishment, but Ral just nodded. “And this mercenary?”

“Kaya. Teysa got in touch with her through a friend. She apparently has the power to destroy ghosts. But the catacombs are too well guarded. We need something that will pull the tower guards away, without it being directly attributable to Teysa.” Tomik looked sidelong at Ral. “I know you haven’t got the Orzhov onboard for your guild summit.”

“Why does *everyone* seem to know everything about my private business?” Ral muttered. “Don’t answer that. You’re right, they’ve turned down every approach, whether it’s from me or Ispيريا or even Niv-Mizzet.”

“If Kaya succeeds, Teysa will inherit leadership of the Orzhov. She’s willing to guarantee that they get on board in exchange for your help with this.” Tomik looked nervous. “It seemed like a good deal for both of you. I wouldn’t just come begging for your help if I didn’t think—”

“Tomik, I know,” Ral said. “It’s all right. Really.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

All the tension had flowed out of Tomik, leaving him boneless. He sagged against the arm of the sofa. “That is . . . better than I expected this conversation to go.”

“That said,” Ral went on, “it may not be that easy.”

“What’s the problem? You don’t think Niv-Mizzet would allow it?”

“No, he wouldn’t object. But in order to cause chaos in the cathedral, we’d need a force of significant size.”

“I thought you had all the authority you needed.”

“I do.” Ral made a face. “But keeping a secret from the Orzhov is nearly impossible when you’re talking about that many people. They’re sure to catch wind of it, and then they’ll be ready for us. Even if we succeeded, it would mean a guild war, and that’s the last thing we need right now.”

“Damn,” Tomik said. “You’re right.”

“I can help, though,” Ral said, giving Tomik’s hand a squeeze.

“Please don’t attack the cathedral by yourself,” Tomik said.

“I’m sure Hekara would come too,” Ral said, with an absent grin. He was thinking hard.

“Who’s Hekara?”

“I’ll have to introduce you. You’ll like her. Possibly.”

The problem is the bureaucracy. It would be one thing if Ral only had to give the word to assemble a strike team. But Izzet, while not Azorius, was laden with hierarchies, meetings, and committees. Even with Niv-Mizzet’s own authority behind him, any order Ral gave would have to be disseminated through a hundred channels, and the chances of it leaking to the Orzhov spy network—said to be second only to the Dimir—were high.

If there was another way to get the forces we need . . .

An audacious thought occurred to him.

“Tomik,” Ral said. “Can you set up a meeting with Kaya? I may have an idea.”

Vraska ran through the shadows.

Surface-dwellers rarely paid much attention to what was going on over their heads. She’d used the roofs of the Tenth District as her private highway back in her days as an assassin, trusting to darkness and speed to keep her passage from the Boros skyknight patrols. Now the new Azorius thopters were

an added threat, but they were mostly concentrated around New Prahv, and hampered by the endless rain. Vraska had always loved the autumn rains. They made it even easier to disappear.

Her mind was still a tangle, days after Xeddick had unlocked her hidden memories. Being up here, in her drab, hooded black clothes, made her feel like she'd dropped seamlessly back into her former life. Stalking her prey across the city, awaiting the right moment to strike and claim another trophy for her wall. She'd killed without mercy or pangs of conscience—the Azorius, the enemies of the Golgari, and anyone else who got in her way.

At the same time, she could now remember standing in the light, on the deck of the *Belligerent*. Surrounded by her crew, a gang of monsters and misfits, with no need of hoods and darkness to hide what she was from the world. She'd won a place there by her own ability. And when Jace had joined her—

Thinking of Jace almost made her miss a jump to the next building. Furious, Vraska pushed the thought away and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand.

She wasn't the only one who used these secret roads. The thieves, spies, and assassins of the Tenth District all knew the routes, and she got glimpses of others from time to time, moving as swift and quiet as she. There was a freemasonry among roof-runners, and they generally kept to themselves, but not always. Tonight, something was definitely amiss. She'd already passed two bodies, both dressed in the blue robes of Dimir mind mages, sprawled in pools of blood where they'd easily be found in the morning. *Someone wants to make a very clear statement.* Who and why, she didn't know, but she kept well away.

When she reached the building Ral had indicated, she found him standing on the roof by the stairwell, a lantern at his feet casting a wan glow. With him was the Rakdos emissary, Hekara, whom she'd met at the bridge. Vraska hadn't yet decided if the girl was actually a fool or merely playing one; she'd believe either, given the legendary unpredictability of the fire demon. Vraska stepped from the shadows well away from the pair of them, so as not to alarm anyone, and gave a shallow bow.

"Zarek," she said. "Hekara. I hope you understand the risk I run, coming here." Most of the city didn't react well to gorgons.

"I understand," Ral said. "Thank you."

"So?" Vraska crossed her arms. "You said that you had an opportunity for me to earn your trust. In the name of defeating Bolas, I'm willing to do so. What do you need?"

"Just a moment. We're waiting for one more person."

A purple glow suffused a section of rooftop beside Ral, and a young woman climbed up through it, as though it were only as solid as mist. She was dark-skinned, with dark, frizzy hair, wearing a thief's leathers and a pair of long daggers on her wrists. Pulling her legs up, she sprang to her feet, looking over the other three with undisguised curiosity.

"You must be Kaya," Ral said. "I'm Ral Zarek."

"I gathered that," Kaya said. "Tomik described your hair perfectly."

Ral ran a hand through his hair with a slight crackle of electricity and grinned. "This is Hekara, the Rakdos emissary."

"Charmed, yeah?" Hekara bowed with a jingle of bells. "Nice trick with the roof."

"And this," Ral went on, "is Vraska, queen of the Golgari."

Kaya looked her up and down. "Not what queens usually look like, in my experience, but fair enough."

Vraska tossed back her hood, exposing her agitated tendrils, and had the satisfaction of seeing Kaya's eyes widen.

"I am not a typical queen," she said. "Now we're all here, Zarek. Why?"

"I don't know if you're familiar with the situation in the Orzhov," Ral said. "Teysa, the heir, is imprisoned and under threat of execution. She's willing to work with us, and the current leadership isn't."

"Sounds like it's time for a change of leadership, then," Vraska said.

"Indeed." Ral nodded at Kaya. "Orzhov is ruled by a council of ghosts."

"And I am a ghost-assassin," Kaya said. "Very convenient."

"I would have thought that a ghost assassin was the ghost *of* an assassin," Hekara said. "Not an assassin who kills ghosts."

"It could be both," Kaya said. "Or would that be a ghost assassin-ghost?"

"Or a ghost ghost-assassin!" Hekara said excitedly. "Or—"

"Please don't encourage her," Ral said. "The point is, Kaya is ready to resolve the situation to everyone's satisfaction."

"So what's the problem?" Vraska said.

"The catacombs are too heavily guarded," Kaya said. "Even for someone who can walk through walls."

"We need a distraction," Ral said. "An attack on the tower would serve nicely."

"And you can't use your Izzet people because the Orzhov would find out," Vraska said, her mind running ahead of the conversation. "So you want me to bring in some of mine."

"Yes," Ral said, frowning. "You said you would do whatever was necessary."

"I will," Vraska said. "And I can guarantee that Orzhov has no spies in *my* ranks. Their gold doesn't go as far in the undercity."

Ral blinked. "Just like that?"

"Of course." Vraska shrugged. "You're right. It's the correct move."

"How long do you need?"

"A day," Vraska said.

"Tomorrow, then," Kaya said, raising her eyebrows at Vraska. "I look forward to working with you."

"Likewise," Vraska said.

"Mates!" Hekara bellowed, grinning hugely.

Ral stepped forward. "Can I have a word?"

They strode off a few paces, leaving the other two behind. Vraska looked up at him curiously. Most people had at least some hesitation about matching a gorgon's gaze at close range, but if Ral was afraid he didn't show it.

"I have to ask," Ral said. "Really, just like that?"

"I told you I was willing to do whatever it took."

"Why?"

“Because now that I’ve become queen, I don’t want to see Bolas crush the Golgari underfoot.”

And because Jace is coming back, a traitorous part of her thought. *And I have to be able to face him when he gets here.*

Ral didn’t look like he believed her, which was fair enough. If she had only met her former self, Vraska was fairly certain she wouldn’t have believed it either.

People can change. Even gorgons. Someday, even here on Ravnica, she was going to be able to hold her head up in daylight.