

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 16

Unknown author

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Ral and Tomik walked side by side, heading nowhere in particular. Rain poured down, drumming on the awnings of shops along the street, lines of splashes marching across the puddles that formed between the cobblestones. The drops bent away above the pair, leaving a dry space around them and a curtain of extra-thick rain beyond. When it was coming down this hard, it left them in their own tiny world, isolated from everything beyond by a curtain of rushing, foaming water. Mist rose from ricochets and coiled around their boots.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," Tomik said eventually.

After the euphoria had worn off, he'd pulled away from Ral, huddled in on himself in a way that made Ral's throat go thick. Ral wanted to take his hand, but didn't. *Not yet*. Tomik's glasses were beaded with raindrops.

"I wasn't going to," Ral said. "Not at first."

"What changed your mind?"

"I . . ." Ral glanced at Tomik. "You want the truth?"

Tomik, arms crossed, gave a jerky nod.

"I want to say I was worried about you," Ral said. "But I know you can take care of yourself. Most of the time, anyway."

Tomik smiled, very slightly, and Ral felt himself relax a little.

"I know you," Ral said. "I know how much you care about your work with Teysa, what it means to you. I thought, if you were willing to go against her on this, to risk everything . . . it's probably pretty damn important."

"More important than working on your machine?" Tomik said.

"We're nearly done," Ral said. "All that's left is actually building the thing, and I can only do so much. I just get . . . involved."

"I know you, too," Tomik said.

"You don't," Ral said. "Not really. There are parts of my life that I . . . don't talk about."

"Because they didn't happen on Ravnica?" Tomik said.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're too clever for your own good?"

Tomik smiled. "You. Repeatedly."

“Yes,” Ral said. “Because I wasn’t living on Ravnica. And . . .” He took a deep breath. “Some of the things that happened to me made it hard to trust people. To see them as anything but tools.”

“Teysa’s like that,” Tomik said quietly. “She’s not a bad person, Ral. But she was raised in this nightmare, and she can’t escape.”

“You and I . . .” Ral shook his head. “We don’t have to be that way. Not to each other. I . . .” He stroked his beard, irritably. “I want something different.”

“Like, actually caring about someone?” Tomik said.

“Like that,” Ral allowed.

“Well.” Tomik slipped his hand into Ral’s and bumped against his shoulder. “I don’t know if you’re there yet. But you’re learning.”

In Ral’s dream, he leaned over the desk, adding the finishing touches.

Building the thing he wanted hadn’t been easy, and he already had ideas for improving it. The power-storage cells were heavy and awkward, and didn’t hold nearly enough energy in their complicated network of metal and ceramic as he would have liked. At least he’d managed to get away from liquid storage—*carrying around a couple of gallons of acid on my back, now there’s a recipe for disaster . . .*

In some other place, in some other Plane, there might be better materials to be found. He had a vision of a crystal lattice, and spinning coils, but finding something with the right properties had thus far proved impossible.

Even so. He looked down at his creation and smiled, closing the last compartment on one side. Gingerly, he picked it up and slid his arms through the straps, letting the weight of the thing settle on his back. A pair of gloves hung off it from long, insulated cords, and he slipped them on, flexing his fingers and feeling the faintest crackle of energy.

It needed to be charged, of course. But even empty, the accumulator gave him a feeling of power. The energy of Ral’s magic came from the storms that raged overhead, and so his strength had always waxed and waned as unpredictably as the weather. *Not anymore.* Now he would carry his own storm, in leather, ceramic, and steel.

“Ingenious,” said a voice from the doorway. “You have learned a great deal since we last spoke, my friend.”

Ral looked up, alarmed. The front door was locked, he knew for certain, and so was the door to his office. Nonetheless, it now stood open, and an older man looked around the threshold. He was tall, gray-haired, impeccably well-dressed in clothes of a cut that somehow suggested he was from . . . elsewhere. Though it had now been a decade since they’d last spoken, Ral could hardly forget him.

“Hello, Bolas,” he said, forcing calm into his voice.

“Zarek,” Nicol Bolas said politely. “May I come in?”

Ral nodded. “Doors and locks don’t appear to mean much to you.”

“Ah, but politeness has a power greater than any padlock,” Bolas said, stepping into the office. He looked around, approvingly, at the blueprints pinned to the walls, the desk cluttered with tools and parts. “You’ve been busy.”

Ral shrugged. “I do my best.”

“And your best is quite extraordinary,” Bolas said. “Stranded here, without a penny to your name, bleeding out in an alley. And within ten years, here you are. Master of a tidy little empire, with a dozen inventors bowing and scraping for the privilege of assisting you. You didn’t even have to kill very many people to do it.” Bolas grinned, his teeth white and very slightly sharp. “Not that that would necessarily be a drawback, of course.”

“Did you know?” Ral said. “Back in Tovrna. Did you know what I was?”

“That you were a Planeswalker?” Bolas said. He shrugged. “Let us say I . . . suspected. Planeswalkers are exceedingly rare, and they cannot be taught to use their Spark. It must ignite on its own, or not at all, which often entails a certain amount of trauma.”

“So you set me up,” Ral said.

“I did nothing of the kind. I gave you what you wanted, did I not?” Bolas’s grin widened. “It’s hardly my fault that it went wrong. Young passions, you know.”

“Why?” Ral said. “You’re a Planeswalker, too, or you wouldn’t be standing here. So why bother having me shake down those poor bastards for coopers?”

“It was never about them,” Bolas said. “It was always about you. As I said, Planeswalkers are rare. When I think someone has potential, I do my best to . . . encourage them. And to place them in my debt, to facilitate our later collaboration.”

“I think my debts to you are paid,” Ral said, stepping around the desk.

“On the contrary,” Bolas said. “Do you think you would have accomplished this—any of this—without my help?”

“Your *help* nearly got me killed.”

“I pushed you to find out what you were truly capable of,” Bolas said. “And you have. Isn’t that worth something? Haven’t I done you a favor?”

Ral stared at the man, with his sharp-toothed smile. Very slowly, he nodded.

“You might put it that way,” he said.

“Then we agree that you owe me,” Bolas said. “And I’ve come to collect, Ral Zarek. Join me, and we will accomplish wonders.”

“Let me tell you what you taught me,” Ral said. “Loyalty is for fools. Trust is for suckers. And allies are there to be used, until they’re no longer useful.” He shrugged, settling the weight of the pack. “So, thank you for the lesson. But I won’t be repaying whatever debt you think I owe.”

“Regrettable,” Bolas said. His smile had disappeared. “Your position here—”

“You’re going to threaten to take everything I’ve built,” Ral said. “Go ahead. I’m done with it. I have this”—he patted his backpack, then touched the side of his head—“and what’s in here. That’s all I need, in the end.”

“Don’t imagine you can escape me, Zarek,” Bolas said. “Anywhere you can go, I can follow.”

“I don’t need to escape,” Ral said. “Just stay one step ahead.”

He focused his mind. Planeswalking was just like falling, once you learned the trick of it. Among the myriad worlds, he directed his mind’s eye to a familiar one.

Time to go home. To Ravnica. But not to Tovrna. *No more wasting my time in the boondocks.* The Tenth District was the heart of the city-Plane, and that was where he had to be. How, precisely, he would

fit in, he didn't yet know, but he was no longer worried. With his talents, and his power, there would always be a place for him.

And if someone's already in that place, well, that's just too bad for them . . .

Vraska stared at her throne.

It had felt good, in the moment. Righteous, even. The elves whose contorted, petrified bodies comprised the gruesome chair had been her enemies, and they'd spent decades pushing down anyone in the Golgari who wasn't one of them. Gorgons and kraul alike had suffered under the devkarin boot, and each screaming prisoner dragged to the throne and frozen in place with a wave of Vraska's power was a tiny measure of revenge. When it was finished, she'd promised herself, she'd do better.

And what have I accomplished? An ancient and beautiful kraul city reduced to rubble. Thousands of Golgari dead. All for nothing. All for *Bolas*.

Xeddick. The albino kraul should never have been on the battlefield, but he'd insisted, and she'd been too soft-hearted to refuse. As a result she'd had to watch, helpless, as Aurelia carved him apart, then flee lest she be the next to be spitted on the angel's blade. *I'll have her in my garden someday. I swear it.* She clenched her fists, knowing how pitiful that sounded.

Xeddick was right all along. I never should have let him unlock my memories. Her time on Ixalan had dulled her purpose. Made her soft. *I would have been better off if I'd never remembered meeting Jace, or . . . or any of it.* Bolas still had his claws around her throat, so what did it matter? *At least if I'd forgotten all of it, I might have had a chance at being happy in his service.*

She stood alone, breathing hard, her tendrils waving in agitation. She wanted to hit something, *hurt* someone. To feel the heat behind her eyes and the softness of flesh hardening into stone. She wanted . . .

Xeddick. Jace. Vraska leaned against one of the pillars, turning away from the hateful throne. *Someone who understands.*

But there was no one left.

A scrape of claws on stone announced a visitor. Vraska looked up, lips stretching to bare her needle-sharp teeth. Mazirek entered, forelegs waving in brief obeisance.

"You wished to see me, my queen," the kraul said, in his clicking, buzzing tone.

"When I wished to see you was by my side, at the battle," Vraska said, pushing herself away from the pillar. "Strangely, that was when I found you absent."

"I regret that I was forced to leave you," the death priest said. "I was set on by a pack of Orzhov thrulls, and it took a few moments to destroy them. The tides of battle are difficult to navigate, even for me."

"Indeed." Vraska felt power building in her eyes, unbidden. *It would be so much easier to just mount him in my garden.* She blinked it away, and shook her head. *He's still too useful.*

Mazirek, apparently unaware how close he had come to destruction, did his little half-bow again. "Was there anything else you needed of me, my queen?"

"No," Vraska said. "Get out of my sight."

The dark green kraul withdrew. Vraska stalked across the empty throne room, one hand on her saber, and threw herself restlessly into twisted throne. When someone rapped at one of the doors, she nearly screamed in frustration.

"What?"

“A guest.” A man’s voice, and not one she recognized. “Hoping for a moment of your time.”

Only a few people would dare to disturb her in her sanctum. Mazirek, Xeddick, Storrev. *And* —

“Come in, then,” Vraska said. “I can’t stop you.”

The puppet Bolas had sent this time was a young woman in the tattered remains of a Boros Legion uniform. She was caked with mud and slime, and a long cut across her cheek had already gone foul in the ever-damp heat of the Undercity, swollen red and dripping pus. Two Erstwhile escorted her, moving with their stiffly formal gait in their ancient finery. *Showing off*. The Erstwhile were the knife Bolas held to her throat, a knife she’d placed there with her own hands.

“Are you here to chastise me?” Vraska said, lounging on the throne with an affected casualness. “Lecture me like a disappointed schoolmaster?”

“What would be the point?” Bolas’s puppet said, stepping forward. At an unseen command, the zombie escorts turned and walked out. “It’s obvious you did your best. Your best was simply not good enough.”

Somehow, that stung more than she’d expected. “The Golgari can’t stand alone against an alliance of half the other guilds. I would have thought someone of your intelligence could have figured that out.”

“I am only a shadow of my master,” the puppet said. “Delivering his instructions.”

“If you want me to attack that machine they’re building, you can tell your *master* that it can’t be done.” Her spies had been observing the work, and the defenses going up around it. “Ral’s people have been putting in minefields and flame turrets and who knows what else, and the Azorius lawmages have surrounded the site with so many wards that a herd of trolls couldn’t dent them. Whatever it is they’re making, it’s here to stay. I’m not sending more of my people to their deaths.”

“An attack on the resonator is not required,” Bolas’s puppet said, smiling slightly. “I have assigned that task to a more . . . competent agent. For you, my master has reserved the job of disrupting Zarek’s backup plan.”

“What backup plan?” Vraska said.

“There is a tower, on the surface, that contains a very clever machine. When Zarek’s scheme fails—and it *will* fail—he will realize he has lost, and reach for his final throw of the dice. You will be there to stop him. My master requires all possible contingencies be accounted for, even remote ones. You will send your forces to block him.”

“No.” Vraska got up, abruptly, and stalked across the throne room.

“No?” The puppet quirked an eyebrow, the expression out of place on her filthy, bloodstained face. “Need I remind you of the consequences of betrayal again, Vraska?”

“I won’t send my forces. I’m done spending Golgari lives for you.” Vraska stood opposite the puppet and bared her teeth. “I’ll go myself, and kill Zarek. I trust that will be sufficient?”

“It will.” The puppet leaned closer. It smelled of rot. “But failure is not an option. Not for you. Ral Zarek may have mercy on you, but Bolas will have none. When he is victorious—and he *will* be victorious—he will deal with you as your service to him deserves.”

“I understand,” Vraska said. “Are you done making threats?”

“For now.” The puppet smiled. “And I am finished with this shell. Dispose of it, will you?”

The Boros woman blinked, and her eyes focused on Vraska and went very wide. She screamed until Vraska grabbed her by the throat, focused her power, and let it pulse through her eyes. When she let

the stone statue of the terrified soldier slip through her fingers, it shattered into a hundred pieces on the floor.

linebreak Vraska kept her armory in a small room adjoining her personal chambers. Over the years, she'd accumulated quite a bit of armor and weaponry, and once she'd taken control of the Golgari she'd moved her various stashes from their hidey-holes to the palace.

It was as much a repository of her memories as anything else. There were suits of armor, each from a different time in her life—the tight blacks of a rooftop assassin, more elaborate suits of scale-mail she'd worn to impress, the costume she'd returned to Ravnica in from her life in Ixalan. There were sabers in a long rack, from the plain weapon she'd carried in her early days through jeweled showpieces given to her as gifts on her ascension to queen.

She ran her fingers along the steel blades, lost in thought. Finally she stopped in front of one sword, its edge serrated like a shark's tooth, a brutal punching spike built into the hilt. It was an ugly weapon, viciously functional, designed to inflict maximum pain on an opponent. *Perfect.* linebreak "Queen." Storrev glided into the room, her voice a thready whisper. "You summoned me."

"I have been thinking," Vraska said. "About you and the other Erstwhile. You are bound to obey Mazirek, are you not?"

Storrev inclined her head. "He raised us from our tombs, my queen. But he has given us instructions to obey you as well."

Mazirek, who'd vanished at the critical moment. Who spoke to her with such unweaning arrogance. Vraska felt her suspicion harden into certainty.

"Are you required to tell him everything you do?" Vraska said.

"Only if he specifically asks, my queen," Storrev said. "Do you have a task for me?"

"I do." Vraska slipped the shark's-tooth sword into her sheath. "I may be . . . absent for some time. In the meanwhile, I would like you to deliver this note." She handed a sheet of spongy fungus paper to the lich, who read it carefully. "I trust you can figure out the rest."

Storrev was always expressionless, but Vraska could have sworn that the ghost of a smile crossed her face. She gave a formally correct bow.

"Of course, my queen. Your will be done."

The lich glided out. Vraska looked across the suits of armor, shed her formal robe, and began donning the simplest, leather and scale from her days as an assassin.

I'm done being blackmailed, one way or the other. As she tightened the straps, she found a certain peace coming to her. Kill Zarek, and let the rest take care of itself. That's all I have left. linebreak *Sorry, Jace.*