

The Talented Captain Vraska

Alison Luhrs & Gregg Luben

From set *Ixalan*

HOUSE OF THE OCHRAN, RAVNICA

Vraska first found the dragon's invitation tucked into a copy of the book she was reading.

Her name was written on the front in golden ink, and the paper had the distant scent of sandalwood and cinders and magic. Whoever had spelled this here had a delicate enough touch to know just how to reach her.

At first she was annoyed—the Ochran had been assigned to a new client, and she had had her fill of shadows and secrets in the dark places of Ravnica for one day. She was looking forward to nestling in by the fireplace in her flat with a history she picked up on her last holiday. But that irritation vanished when she read what the invitation said.

“*MEDITATION PLANE*”

Vraska narrowed her eyes. She held the paper up to her eyes and tilted the note. The light of the fire reflected a faint blue haze over the words, and she realized the ink had been enchanted with some sort of information.

She held a hand over the letters and immediately knew where she was meant to go and what she had to do when she arrived.

It came to her in a flash—a faraway plane with an artificial texture about it, blue waters and hills that flew up and away from their base, with its location in the Multiverse delicately placed in her mind. And once she arrived, a spell to prove she was who she said she was to be granted entrance.

Vraska was intrigued. The whole business felt like a trap, so she put on her flats in the event she had to make an escape.

She concentrated on the location in her mind, her room fell into shadow, and she planeswalked through a dark slice in the air.



Pools of Becoming | Art by Jason Chan

She arrived in a courtyard filled with shallow water surrounded on all sides by a cage of violet arcs of lightning.

It was alarming, but Vraska remembered what the other half of the note had conveyed. She did her best to remember the spell to grant her entrance.

She held one hand out and traced a wide circle in the air in front of her. The other hand flicked a series of sharp gestures. Vraska channeled enough mana into the spell to manifest a slight glow of dark energy as the fingers of her outstretched hand completed the circle.

The glow vanished, and the cage of magic disappeared. The password had worked.

And a dragon flickered in front of her.

He was golden, vast and sinuous, with an unreadable expression and a strange calmness to his presence. Vraska waded ankle-deep onto the plane with confidence.

She had never seen a dragon so immense yet so *human*. It unnerved her, but she refused to show any intimidation.

"Vraska, assassin of the Ochron," he said in a voice like thunder, "I'm glad you received my invitation. I am Nicol Bolas, and I would like to hire you for the use of your talents."

Vraska crossed her arms, unbothered. "I'm not looking for new clients," she responded in a bored tone.

"I am uninterested in your skills as an assassin."

She stilled.

Vraska had never been hired to do anything other than kill before.

Her ears began to ring, and she had the odd sense that the dragon overheard that thought.

He lifted his mass to its full height. Nicol Bolas towered over her, a gold streak against the sky, posture as far from reptilian as his anatomy would allow.

“You wish to lead . . .” he mused, to Vraska’s horror. “. . . You crave a better world for those you call your own. You would pay whatever cost to deliver them the respect they deserve.”

You read my mind?

I am currently reading your mind.

Vraska’s arms had dropped to her sides. Her lips were parted in terror and her ears were still ringing at the dragon’s intrusion, and she began to charge the magic necessary to petrify a foe this large.

The dragon lowered his head. His eyes were as large as dinner plates, his teeth as long as daggers. Nicol Bolas smiled.

“I can make you Guildmaster of the Golgari, Vraska.”

Her breath caught in her chest.

She thought of Mazirek, of the kraul, of the rest of the Ochrans assassins and the malignant Jarad who reigned with casual ruin over the most downtrodden of the downtrodden. She remembered her years of isolation, and the heinous cruelty of the Azorius, and how no group deserved to suffer as much as those who would subjugate her own.

Eliminating that hell was all she ever wanted.

She responded with trepidation. “What is it you desire in return?”

“There exists a place on the continent of Ixalan on a faraway plane. The place is known as the Golden City of Orazca. Retrieve the item that is there, summon my associate to transport it, and I will give you the means to lead your guild to the glory it deserves. You will have an *empire*, Vraska, should your mission prove successful.”

She was humbled, alarmed, and excited all at once. No one had hired her to do anything other than kill before.

Everything about this felt dangerous. Nothing about this beast was trustworthy. But Vraska thought back to her life of contract after contract, death after death, playing a role assigned for her with no opportunity to *escape*.

The dragon was staring.

He wanted an answer.

And *she* wanted to lead.

Against all better judgment she bowed.

“I accept your terms,” said Vraska.

I can double-cross him if this goes south.

“No,” said Nicol Bolas. “You cannot.”

He waved a claw, and Vraska felt the ringing in her ear vanish. The dragon had departed her mind.

“You will need this,” he said, holding his claw up again. Something heavy fell into the pocket of her dress.

“It is the thaumatic compass,” said the dragon. “It will lead you to the Golden City. I will also gift you with knowledge of two concepts.”

The dragon held out his upright claw.

“You will use this spell to call my associate when you have reached the center of the Golden City . . .”

A sharp migraine jabbed through Vraska's temples. Her knees buckled with the sudden onslaught of knowledge. The spell was complicated, intended to pass through worlds—but to whom? It did not matter; the spell was designed to have only one recipient on only one place. She was not privy to the privilege of knowing who that was.

She felt woozy, but awed. Vraska had no idea this sort of spell was even *possible*, and yet, she knew it inside and out. A single line that could reach between worlds to a single individual. She would not be able to convey a message, but by tugging the metaphysical line the recipient would know what to do. It was incredible and more than a little frightening.

But the dragon was not finished.

“... You will also need to know how to sail.”

The impact of the psychic weight made Vraska hit the ground this time.

She fell to her hands and knees and landed in the thin layer of water that covered this plane. She gasped at the influx of knowledge. *Spinnaker whipstaff leeward leeboard forecastle back splice moonraker headway athwartships*—Vraska's mind was overcome with an ocean's worth of knowledge. She grit her teeth and lowered her aching head until her forehead touched the water.

She inhaled. Exhaled.

She limply stood. The vast catalogue of new nautical knowledge in her head felt like a hangover and a study session combined in one foul package. She successfully avoided throwing up.

“You'd be surprised what one learns over millennia of boredom,” mused the dragon. “I never found the knowledge useful, but you and your lack of wings will need it if you intend to cross the seas.”

Vraska was trembling, and her head was aching. *Bowline sheet bend figure eight clove hitch*—the terms and techniques and libraries' worth of knowledge were crashing around the sides of her mind, tumbling over themselves as she mentally tried to catalogue it all.

The dragon did not care.

“Depart for your voyage. You will not be able to return until your task is complete.”

The end is worth the means, Vraska told herself, her mind still categorizing the lump sum of techniques and terms the dragon had impressed into her brain. *If I do this, I will get everything I've ever wanted for myself and my own.*

The area around her darkened into shadow. Vraska stepped through a rip of night in the midday air and planeswalked home.

She had preparations to make.

STORMWRECK SEA, IXALAN

The bright midday sun had turned the sea from slate gray to a brilliant cyan. A breeze like a warm bath brushed the tips of gentle turquoise waves, and a great schooner glided over the water's surface. Voices shouted over the rustle of canvas, and in the palm of Captain Vraska's hand, the largest light of her enchanted compass needle twitched violently south.

She held up an emerald hand. “Navigator!”

The navigator, Malcolm, flew up to the quarterdeck and approached Captain Vraska. He was a siren, naturally gifted in the art of navigation, and a lifelong member of the Brazen Coalition. As a celestial-

ist, he specialized in using charts, compasses, and astrolabes—combined with spells—to divine more information from the stars.



Siren Lookout | Art by Chris Rallis

“What’s wrong, Captain?”

Vraska held out the thaumatic compass. “We need to go south.”

Malcolm, ever the careful navigator, made a small noise of concern. “Are you certain?”

Vraska nodded. “We go where it points, and what we need is that way.”

She passed Malcolm the compass. He held it close to his face as if proximity could somehow illuminate the device’s purpose. He sighed and looked back to his captain. “Your patron never told you what exactly this thing pointed to?”

Vraska sighed. “Lord Nicolas was not willing to share that information. His instructions were only to find and retrieve the object it led to.”

The quartermaster climbed up the steps and looked to Vraska. “Captain, the crew awaits your orders.”

Amelia, *The Belligerent*’s quartermaster, was tall as a foremast and just as sturdy. The quartermaster was in charge of day-to-day management of the ship and oversaw distribution of both plunder and pay. She was also a talented helmsmage, gifted in the magic of ships. Her spells lifted the breeze as well as the sails, and knots would tighten at her touch. She won her position as quartermaster in a landslide vote, and the crew knew better than to cross her. Amelia had a penchant for using her skills with a sail for punitive purposes, after all, and fulfilling any duties wrapped in a canvas sheet was no pleasant punishment.

Malcolm was staring at the strange compass. “But the direction it is pointing to is away from the continent of Ixalan. The Golden City isn’t an island off its coast . . .”

Vraska spoke with reassurance. “With all due respect, Malcolm, *you* are the navigator. If you do not feel we should follow our mission, and thus, the compass, it is your decision to make. I implore you to trust me as I trust you.”

The navigator pursed his lips. He looked to the weathervane, nodding to himself.

“Set course due south,” he said firmly to Vraska. Vraska looked to the quartermaster and confirmed, “Set course due south.” Amelia nodded, and turned to the rest of the crew below. “Set course due south!” she relayed.

The quartermaster’s command echoed across the length of the ship as each of her crew repeated the order. It sounded like a folk song sung in the round, chorus after chorus overlapping as it travelled down *The Belligerent*. Vraska couldn’t help but smile at the effect.

The crew immediately set about raising the sail, adjusting the rigging, and preparing for the course change. The navigator moved toward the tiller, sat down, and walked the large rudder to one side. *The Belligerent* began to turn. They worked diligently, a motley collection of humans, ogres, and goblins. All capable, all skilled, all loyal only to each other.

Perhaps our prize is closer than we think, Vraska mused to herself.

“Where did Lord Nicolas find that compass, anyway?” Malcolm asked. He was walking the tiller back to its resting position, the ship having completed its turn.

“Our client is a purveyor of rare curiosities. This is on loan from his private collection of magical navigational tools.”

Amelia nodded, lighting a pipe she revealed from a pocket in her coat. “Have you worked for him before?”

“No. He only approached me just before this assignment. At first, I was uncertain if I should accept, but he was confident I was right for the job.”

“He’s a good judge of character,” Malcolm said with a reassuring smile.

Vraska wrinkled her nose. *Good is a stretch.*

“He has lofty expectations.” She replied. “High risk, high reward.”

Malcolm grinned. “Those are odds I can live with. I’ll be sure to tell my beloved to expect a shipful of gold on our return.”

“And a shipful you’ll have, friend,” Vraska said with a nod.

And she meant it.

The implicit trust between Vraska and her crew had turned what should have been a frightening challenge of her untested skills into the most satisfying period of her life. She had spent the prior months assembling her crew. While initially it had been difficult to convince strangers to join the crew of an unknown captain, Vraska proved herself with fair payments, a truly phenomenal knowledge of sailing technique, and an unparalleled protectiveness of those she saw as her own. The people of this plane were stubborn, prone to swearing, and morally mercurial—and Vraska adored them for it. She secured her own ship through hefty payments and more than a little negotiation and soon sailed to begin her journey.

Gorgons on Ravnica could only ever be one thing. But here? A gorgon could be whatever she damn well pleased. Vraska relished in that newfound freedom and beamed with pride when she thought of how she would lead the Golgari when she returned home.

Vraska, Malcolm, and Amelia—captain, navigator, and quartermaster—set about discussing the logistics of their expedition, inspecting their maps and charts for the best route inland once they reached the continent of Ixalan.

The compass had proven difficult to interpret. It changed direction occasionally only to switch back hours later, and its several hands pointed in several directions. Vraska had reasoned the largest needle would point where she needed to go, but its reliability was proving questionable.

She wondered what the dragon would do if she should fail.

Later in the day one of the crew called down from the crow's nest.

"Avast! Man onshore!"

Edgar, the ship's other helmsmage, balled his hands into fists and willed the ship's sails down in a gentle wash of blue light. For the second time that day, *The Belligerent* stowed its sails and came to a halt.

A lump of rock jutted out of the water nearby, its tops coated in a thick layer of white and its surface dotted with hundreds of nesting seabirds. Laying on that rock was a lump of blue clothes and sun-burned pale skin.

Amelia looked over the edge and turned her round face to Vraska. "Should we send Malcolm over?"

"No." Vraska said, irritated at the prospect of having one more mouth to feed on the voyage, "Prepare the dinghy. I want a good look at him first." The coxswain, a dour-looking man named Gavven, prepared a small vessel to retrieve the castaway, and Vraska leaned over the rail to see who had been found.

He was laying on his back on the one piece of the seastack *not* covered in bird excrement. He was dark-haired, desperately flicking away flies with whatever energy he had left. A pile of blue clothes sat under his head, but dipping into the water was a piece of blue cloth with familiar white symbols stitched on the front.

Vraska's heart stopped in her chest.

No.

It was Jace Beleren.

How the hell did he find me?

Vraska didn't bother to answer. Panic and fury alit her mind, and she mentally prepared herself to kill the man as soon as she could look him in the eye. She had taken every precaution, every measure, used every ounce of an assassin's talent to avoid being seen. *No one* from Ravnica knew where she was, and no Planeswalker should have been able to find her. What the *hell* was Jace doing here?

Vraska thrust her spyglass into Malcolm's feathered hand. "Let me deal with him."

She climbed into the dinghy and yelled to Gavven to get in and lower them down. Edgar, the helmsmage, followed suit and took the oars in hand.

Edgar called out his intent, "Lowering the away vessel!" The three of them took their seats, and Edgar made a sharp hand gesture causing the dinghy to descend. The away ship hit the surface of the sea with a slap, and Vraska quickly detached the hooks that had lowered her craft.

She sat back as Edgar rowed and Gavven steered their dinghy toward Jace. With every stroke of her oar, she grew more resolute about what needed to be done.

He must have been following me from the start. As soon as I approach, I need to petrify him before he can slough off this ruse and wipe my mind. Of course, of all the obnoxious interlopers in the Multiverse, it had to be him.

"I'd tell you not to leave, but the point is a bit moot. It's like planeswalking into a window, isn't it?" Vraska yelled.

Edgar and Gavven gave her a confused look, but Vraska didn't bother to translate what "planeswalking" was. She was too angry.

"My ship needs a new figurehead, Beleren! Tell me who you're working for and your death will be a painless one!"

Vraska called on that little flicker in the back of her mind and felt her gaze charge with the petrification magic only gorgons possessed. She stood up, sensing her own magic as a warm heat behind her face, and in one swift motion, turned to lock eyes with her foe.

But his lids were shut, glued together with salt and sleep, and his hollow cheeks were covered with a thick beard that obscured the tattoos on his face. His arms were lean with muscle, but Vraska could count the ribs beneath his sunburned torso.

Dear gods, what happened to him?

He looked devastatingly ill. There was no freshwater in sight on the island, no evidence of means for survival. The look of him derailed her train of action.

He may as well already have been dead.

Jace coughed and blinked open his eyes. Vraska snuffed the fire in her mind and looked down at him with no magic in her eyes.

I can kill him after he gives me some goddamn answers.

"Jace, what the hell happened to you?"

Her words tumbled out as more fact than question. She ought to have killed him on sight, but what logic told her should be straightforward was muddled by the fact that . . . it was him.

Why was it always *him* ?

Jace finished his first bowl of porridge in two minutes flat, and his flagon of freshwater in even less time. He hadn't said a word since he arrived. He looked around the galley of *The Belligerent* with a curious-yet-overwhelmed interest. Upon close examination, Vraska was struck by how much he had changed since she last saw him. There was no way he'd been hiding those muscles under that cape all these years.

They sat now in the galley with an empty bowl at Jace's feet. Vraska nodded at her crew to leave her alone, and pulled a stool directly in front of the mind mage.

Vraska's tendrils twitched against her face. "You have two minutes to explain how you found me before I turn you to stone and use you as a paperweight, Jace."

He blinked once.

She raised her eyebrows.

Jace shook his head. "I wasn't looking for you because I do not know who you are."

Both of Vraska's eyebrows raised as high as she could lift them.

"Are you trying to make a joke, Beleren?"

He shut his mouth and shook his head again. “I don’t remember anything from before I woke up on the first island.”

The first island?

Vraska picked up his spoon and threw it at his chest. He tried to bat it away and missed.

“Hey!”

Clumsiness like that couldn’t be faked. “Not an illusion,” she concluded.

Jace’s irritation evaporated into happy surprise. “You know I can make those?” His lips were lifting in a little half smile.

Vraska couldn’t believe this. Why the hell was he so *chipper*? Where was the pasty, moody Guildpact she knew and loathed?

She pursed her lips. “You’re an illusionist. Not an actor. Why are you still lying to me?”

“You know more about me than I do. What would I have to gain by lying to you?”

“A lot,” Vraska deadpanned. “I think you’re faking this.”

“What is your name?”

This is hell. I’m actually in hell.

“. . . My name is Vraska.”

“Vraska.” Jace smiled a bit. “Your name sounds like it has a different linguistic root than mine. Where are you from?”

“You know damn well where I’m from, asshole.”

Jace looked visibly hurt.

Oh.

Vraska felt . . . bad?

He’s like a dog, Vraska thought. *He’s a human-shaped retriever. What happened to him?*

It would be best if Jace were dead, but he was clearly harmless in his current state. She had a personal rule to not kill those who didn’t deserve it in some way, and here sat a man with no past in his mind, no sin in his heart, and one foot in his grave.

She awkwardly stood and made her way to the stove. Everything about this was strange, unexpected, a departure from what this quest was supposed to be.

Vraska was entirely uncertain what to do, so she did the one thing she knew that eased the sensation of helplessness.

“Do you take sugar, Jace?”

“Let’s find out,” he said with a playful look.

Vraska sighed. This was going to get old.

Jace busied himself, and she watched him as she prepared the tea.

There was no mystery in his movements; he existed entirely in the present. Gone was the uptight Guildpact Vraska had known, who hid uncertainty with fidgeting and wrapped himself in melancholy. Here sat a lean, earnest, and jarringly friendly variation of the second most dangerous psychic in the Multiverse.

“How do we know each other?” Jace asked, brimming with curiosity.

Vraska recalled the distant memory of killing terrible people with convenient names to get the Guild-pact’s attention all those years ago.

It was, admittedly, clumsy.

“I asked you to work with me, and you turned me down.”

“What were you asking me to work with you on?”

Vraska chose her words carefully. “I was hoping we could work together to get rid of some very bad people in very important places.” She then poured the tea into a mug and handed it to Jace.

Jace gingerly sipped at the tea. “What did these bad people do?”

Vraska’s mouth went tight and she turned her back to him. *Arrested me. Beat me. Locked me away when I had done nothing wrong.*

Jace gasped. “Are you serious?”

Vraska turned her head around in alarm.

He had read her mind . . . but had not realized it. Jace must have thought she had spoken aloud.

He was staring back with a genuine shock and empathy in his eyes.

“That should never have happened to you, Vraska.”

His expression was transparent, the emotion in his voice gentle and honest.

Vraska loudly hummed a song in her mind to drown out any other thoughts she might be projecting, and eventually found words. “My past is a part of me, but it is not who I am.”

Jace smiled.

“I know that feeling all too well,” he said with dry mirth.

Vraska was taken aback. *The man has a sense of humor after all.*

“What is the first thing you remember, Jace?”

His lips parted as if he were going to say something, but his jaw quickly shut. He looked at her sheepishly.

“May I show you?”

Vraska shifted uncomfortably. “What do you mean show me?”

“I want to practice, if it’s all right with you.”

Vraska had a feeling she knew what was coming next. “Yes. It’s all right.”

The galley around them dissolved. Vraska remained seated in her chair, but now sat in a grove of bamboo taller than the masts of her ship. Jace sat in his chair, eyes aglow, and began an illusory summary of his last forty days. Vraska watched as bamboo changed to pristine sand. Rain sprinkled down on an imaginary fire and a very dead fish. She watched him learn to hunt and scavenge, build and survive. The gorgon sipped her tea and marveled at both the beauty of Jace’s island and the plethora of things Jace had learned while he was there. He smiled as he showed her what he had learned and built. He clearly delighted in filling the empty gaps in his knowledge, and his enthusiasm was contagious. It was incredible that he constructed fish hooks, a platform, a raft. Vraska finished her tea by the end of the tour, and the island faded back to the familiar wood of the galley.

Jace's magic receded. Vraska found herself shaking her head. Of course he of all people would *enjoy* being marooned on an island with no memory. But this series of illusions did not answer how he had ended up here in the first place.

"You really don't remember anything, do you?" she asked.

He gave Vraska a bittersweet look and echoed her own words: "My past is part of who I am, but it is not who I am today."

Jace had rediscovered the illusion-casting talents he possessed, but none of the truly frightening ones. It was unsettling. On this plane, she alone knew what he was capable of.

She looked at the tea in her hand and sighed. She would keep him alive. His talents would be of use to her, for now. Naivety was not a warrant for death, especially under an assassin's code. But this case was different . . .

The man in front of her wasn't Jace. Not really. The Guildpact as she knew him was gone.

If I am not paid to do so, I do not kill strangers.

Her mind was set.

"We'll prepare a hammock for you in the forecastle," Vraska said. "When we arrive at our next harbor, we'll leave you to your own devices."

Jace nodded and set his empty mug down by his feet.

Look at the state of him, Vraska thought. *He's helpless. Am I making a mistake by letting him live?*

"Did you say something?" Jace asked.

Vraska's heart caught in her chest; she shook her head, and Jace frowned.

"Strange," he muttered, "must have been the ship."



Sorcerous Spyglass | Art by Kieran Yanner

Jace had spent eight days aboard the ship and was having a difficult time acting as a guest on *The Belligerent*.

Though the ship's physician had ordered him to rest below deck, Jace had earned a reputation for being unable to stay in one place for long.

On one windless day, Vraska watched as he disassembled and reassembled a telescope.

The entire process took about fifteen minutes.

He began by studying the outside of the thing, finding its crevices, then using a borrowed tool to gently dismantle it. He was knolling the pieces as he went, organizing the bits in a meticulous grid on the deck of the ship. Once it was apart, he worked backward, putting each piece back together in the reverse of order he had taken it apart.

A small crowd gathered to watch in fascination. Vraska hung in the back, as impressed as she was perturbed. She whispered in the ear of her transfixed quartermaster, who hastily apologized and snapped at the crew to get back to work.

Jace stood, embarrassed, and handed the reassembled telescope to Vraska.

"I'll be in the galley. Sir." His eyes were downcast with apology.

Vraska turned the telescope over in her hand. She looked back at Jace and yelled to get his attention.

"Oi!"

He looked up. Vraska tossed him a second telescope. Jace caught it, and looked back, confused. He walked over to her. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Can you fix mine, too?" Vraska asked.

Jace grinned and clapped Vraska on the back.

"DON'T!" she yelled with a hard flinch.

Jace froze. Amelia strode over on long, thick legs and looked down at the mind mage with her best quartermaster glare. "No one touches the captain!" she growled.

"It's fine," Vraska said, trying to ease her own nerves. "He didn't know, Amelia."

Vraska's heart was racing with panic, and she took a deep breath to ease away the alarm. She had not physically touched anyone in years. The crew didn't need to know why. She hid those old prison scars for a reason.

"Captain, I'm sorry," Jace said, eyes on his own shoes.

"Don't be sorry," Vraska said, an edge to her voice. "Just don't do it again."

The sky outside was overcast, and the air felt thick with the threat of rain. The wind was steady and vigorous; Malcolm had estimated they would make landfall at High and Dry within the next day. Most of the crew was below decks, eating their meals and passing the time.

The crewman in the crow's nest called out, and Malcolm flew up to meet them. He paused atop the mast and flew into the sky far above. He returned in a swift dive, landing immediately next to Vraska.

He whispered sharply. "Ship just over the horizon. She bears black sails."

Vraska set her mouth in a firm line. *The Legion of Dusk*.

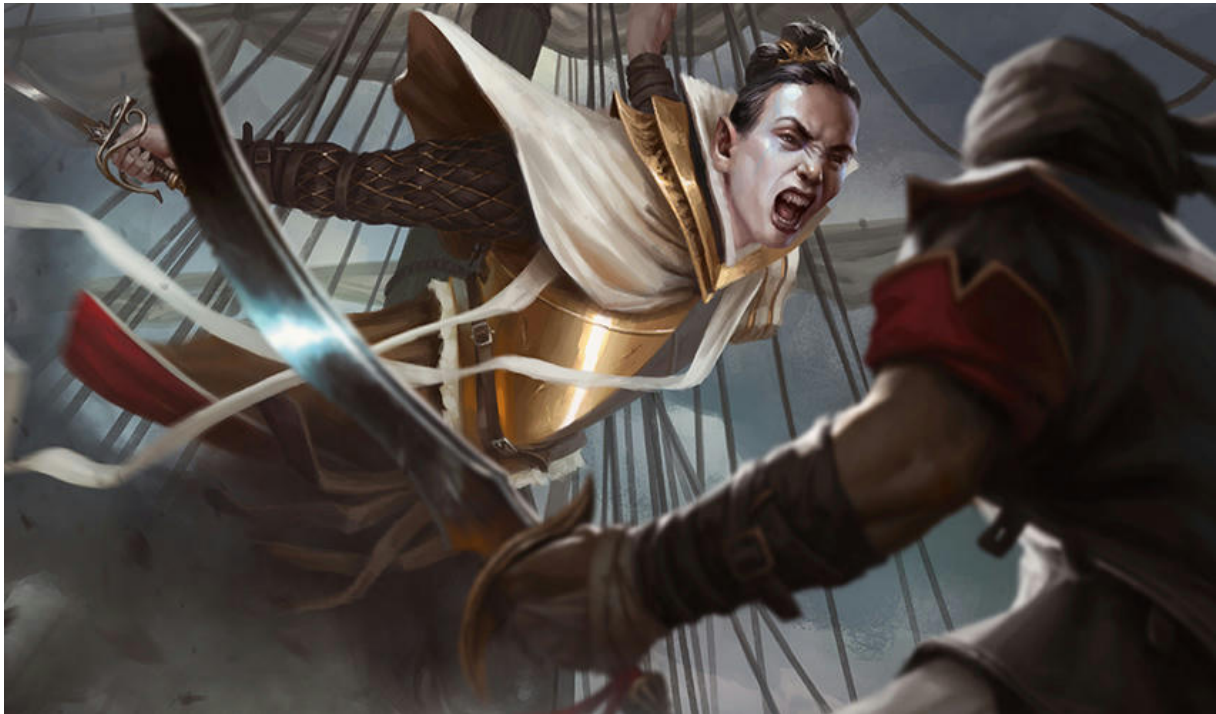


Dusk Legion Dreadnought | Art by Titus Lunter

The enemy ship was beginning to crest the horizon, emerging slowly from a dark fog of magic. Its sides were of dense, dark wood, weathered by time and travel. The ship's sails were as dark as the smoke that followed it and its cabin as large and imposing as a cathedral.

Vraska had survived worse.

She remembered the first run-in she had had with the vampires of the Legion of Dusk. It was within the first few weeks of her ownership of *The Belligerent*, and her crew was as unfamiliar with each other as she was with her foe. The vampire's approach turned noon into evening, and the ship had been enveloped with a dark cloud. Vraska was initially confused as to why a larger ship would overtake their own, but it was clear that her crew, not their loot, was the objective. The conquistadors did not need to use their weapons. They cried out to their saints and feasted with a fierceness Vraska had never seen before. She lost four crewmates that day, all drained in pious fervor before she could petrify their killers.



Skyblade of the Legion | Art by Daarken

Malcolm was there that day. “They were breaking their Blood Fast,” he said. The Legion of Dusk justified their bloodlust by only killing sinful criminals. It was no accident they saw the Brazen Coalition as an alliance of sinners.

She remembered, too, how Amelia had told her what the vampires were after. “They seek an end to their vampirism,” she had said. “They crave eternal life without needing blood. The Immortal Sun was stolen from their monasteries, and so they ventured to the sea to reclaim it. They took our ancestral lands on Torrezon, and they take all homes in the end.”



Duskborne Skymarcher | Art by Seb McKinnon

Vraska brought herself back to the present moment.

She narrowed her eyes and assessed her options.

She could try to outrun the ship and resupply at High and Dry . . . or she could avoid draining the ship's coffers and steal from the conquistadors instead.

Vraska decided to go with the fun option.

"All hands on deck!" she cried to her crew below.

They immediately answered her call, rapidly ascending the ladder from the crew's quarters and leaping to their duties as Vraska called them out.

Her heart raced with excitement to command.

She assessed the skies above. The clouds were heavy with impending rain, and *The Belligerent* was tacking. The other ship's sails were down, and if Vraska attacked quickly, they would be able to take advantage of their upwind position.

"Battle stations! Bear away and raise colors!"

As Vraska yelled orders, she heard her crew echo the commands throughout the ship. Malcolm flew to the tiller and moved it hard to one side as the crew shifted the stays far above. Amelia and Edgar stood back to back and raised both main and mizzenmast with a sharp burst of magic. The ship began turning sharply to the starboard side, its sails filling with a brief summoned breeze.

Jace emerged onto the deck, in awe of the commotion and visibly unsure of where he ought to be.

A moment of inspiration struck Vraska.

"Jace! Up here!" She called to him from the quarterdeck and beckoned him up the small ladder to where she and the quartermaster stood. His eyes were wide with excitement and unease.

Vraska looked to him. "Jace, we mean to board that ship and capture supplies. Can you camouflage *The Belligerent*'s approach?"

A smile tugged at Jace's lips, but he quickly smoothed it out into a look of determination. "Yes, Captain."

Vraska nodded. "Then proceed."

Jace looked skyward, his eyes aglow, and like water pouring over a curved surface, his magic flowed down around *The Belligerent*, seemingly wiping it from existence as it went.

The crew could see each other and the ship below. Jace maintained concentration, and nodded briskly at the captain. Vraska grinned and turned to her shipmates.

"Crew! We'll proceed silently until the ship is positioned for immediate boarding! Once we're within range, Jace will drop the camouflage, and we board. Retrieve supplies and food *only*."

Several members of the crew audibly groaned.

"I'm kidding, dear friends," Vraska smiled, "take what you like from those bloodsucking magpies."

The crew cheered and set about adjusting the rigging to hasten their approach.

Jace looked to Vraska. "What do you mean 'silently'?"

"It's a specialty of our ship." Vraska approached the ship's bell and pulled a bundle of small flags from a box near the rail. "I haven't landed on a good name for this tactic yet."

She held one of the small flags aloft so the trained crew would know what was coming next, and held up a hand to begin her spell.

She made a series of subtle gestures, and the volume of the ship's busywork began to fade into silence. It was an old assassin's enchantment she had learned while working for the Golgari, and she had used it on countless assignments since. The spell itself was soundless, invisible, and its effect was immediate. Even if she yelled at the top of her lungs, the spell would stifle her cry.

The Belligerent was now imperceptible to any outside its rails.

Vraska used her signal flags to communicate her orders to the crew in the absence of sound. At her command, the ship curved wide around the path of the enemy vessel. The Legion of Dusk had certainly spotted them on the horizon before *The Belligerent* had vanished, but they were now sailing in a misguided direction, their target lost from view.

Vraska grinned at Jace and turned back toward the ship. *Excellent work*, she thought.

Jace smiled and replied a reflexive "Thank you, Captain," its volume cancelled by the spell of silence.

Vraska made a quiet mental note to be more careful. She did not want him to be consciously aware of his more frightening abilities yet.

The Legion of Dusk dropped their sails. Vraska held up two flags at once, and *The Belligerent* turned sharply on its approach to the stalled vessel.

The Belligerent closed to a ship's length away from the Legion of Dusk. Vraska tapped Jace's shoulder and held up a hand as a conductor would to an orchestra. He understood her meaning and nodded, maintaining the illusion that cloaked the ship from view.

Vraska simultaneously closed the hand facing Jace and lifted a black flag with the other.

All at once, the spell of silence lifted, the ship became visible, and a third of the crew yelled out a battle cry as they swung on grappling lines toward the deck of the conquistadors' ship.

The vampires were caught completely off guard.



Swashbuckling | Art by Josu Hernaiz

The silence erupted into chaos and noise as *The Belligerent* 's crew swung onto the Legion of Dusk's ship. The crew of the vampire ship jolted in surprise at the onslaught. Most crewmates were easily subdued, their eyes wide and guards down as the pirates bore down on their ship. Some were smart enough to pull out their weapons, and they scrambled to maintain their composure as Vraska's crew attacked. The clang of steel-on-steel rang through the air, and the deck became a busy wash of panic and pirates.



Skulduggery | Art by Deruchenko Alexander

The vampires emerged from below deck. Their armor was shining and brilliant, meticulously clean and of higher quality than that worn by the ship's crew. These conquistadors were the stuff of legend and myth, sophisticated yet savage, eternally cursed. Their light eyes peered from underneath golden helms, and their teeth flashed in the light of the sun.

"What sort of vampires are they?" Jace asked, yelling above the crowd.

Vraska looked at him with an are-you-kidding-me glance. "You remember vampires but you don't remember your own name?"

"I remember things that matter," he replied with the hint of a grin.

From their vantage point Vraska could hear one calling above the rest.

"Saint Elenda! Grant me the will to purge this sea of sinners!"

She's not listening, Vraska mused to herself. *But I am.*

She ran down the side of the quarterdeck and barreled across the gangplank, slicing her way past vampires and human alike, wielding a cutlass, the tendrils of her hair coiling in excitement. Jace leapt into battle after her, summoning several copies of himself to run rampant through the crowd of confused Legion of Dusk conquistadors.

The illusions distracted and dodged, distracting the vampires just long enough for the pirates to subdue them.

After cutting her way through several attacking vampires, she yelled above the chaos, “Bring me the captain!”

Her call was answered by the emergence a glittering, golden-armored vampire. His armor was elaborate and cloying, an affront to the tropical climate around them. He locked eyes with Vraska and charged, sword drawn and teeth bared. The gorgon smiled.

Vraska dodged the vampire’s sword and began gathering the magical energy required to petrify. She stalled for time by swinging at the captain with her own cutlass.

The man hissed and spat, meeting each blow of Vraska’s sword with a clang of his own.

Vraska jolted in surprise as Jace appeared on her left, and then also on her right, the twin illusions misleading the vampire captain long enough for Vraska to land a strike. One of the Jaces managed to land a punch, and Vraska realized that he was *physically alongside her*.

The vampire was dodging, parrying, and striking with a zealot’s prayer on his lips, all the while watching each of the Jace clones with a close eye, visibly trying to discern which was the physical version.

Jace’s voice cried out in the air, and vampire grabbed hold of his physical neck. The other vanished in a flash while the real Jace screwed his eyes shut and tried to claw his way free. The vampire opened his mouth just as Vraska grabbed hold him. She shoved herself between him and Jace, locking eyes with the captain as she released her hold on the magic she had been building.

The vampire’s skin and clothes turned to stone in her grip.



Vraska’s Contempt | Art by Clint Cearley

She lowered her gaze to the ground for a moment, avoiding the eyes of her crew as the last of her magic receded, then she looked to Jace.

He had scrambled out of the grip of the petrified vampire, and now met her gaze with a look of surprise. Vraska felt tossed off-balance, not because she had let herself be seen for what she was, but because what looked back at her was not a face contorted in horror, but one lit up with awe.

Jace was not afraid. He was amazed.

The surviving vampires knelt in submission under the watchful eyes of Malcolm and Amelia, who were working quickly to magically bind them with rope and torn sails.

“Clear their storage, sink all weapons, and carry this one over to *The Belligerent*,” she called, kicking the stone captain with her foot. “I think we could use a figurehead.”

The crew laughed, and Vraska briefly smiled. She turned and began to make her way back to the deck of her own ship as the crew began to pack up their spoils.

The mind mage had proven himself absurdly useful.

She walked across the gangplank that straddled the two ships, and Jace followed. On the privacy of their own ship, he approached her.

“I didn’t know you could do that!” he remarked.

“Well . . . surprise,” Vraska said with a shrug.

“Vraska,” Jace said in earnest. “I was in trouble, and you saved me. Thank you.”

The gorgon looked back in confusion. “You weren’t frightened?”

Jace shook his head.

“I think you’re talented.”

Vraska didn’t know what to say to that.

Compliments to her were as foreign as flying.

Jace was absurdly useful. Perhaps it would be best if she kept him around to make use of his skills.

And so, Vraska spoke with certainty. “I once thought we would make a good team, Beleren, and it appears I was right. Would you like to stay with my crew and help me with my mission?”

Jace’s smile reached his eyes, a grin emboldened with a voyager’s curiosity. “I would love to.”



Jace, Cunning Castaway | Art by Kieran Yanner