

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 19

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The Beacon Tower was on the corner of an otherwise nondescript residential block, close enough to New Prahv that most of the residents were clerks and functionaries who worked in that massive complex. On an ordinary day, Ral might have seen vendors selling street food or newspapers, carriages transporting the wealthier residents, and a sea of pedestrians huddled under umbrellas against the autumn rains. The tower itself had been used by a nearby scriptorium as extra storage space until Ral's team had displaced their boxes of paper and replaced them with crystals and mizzium wire.

Today, of course, was anything but normal. By the time Ral reached the rendezvous, a block away from the tower, the battle between dragons was in full swing. Whatever attack Niv-Mizzet had unleashed against Bolas—a light so bright it had hurt the eyes, even through closed eyelids—had raised an enormous cloud of dust and debris, obscuring the horizon in that direction. The flashes and crackles of magic indicated the conflict was ongoing.

In the rest of the district, everyone seemed to have gone a little mad. Most ordinary citizens had bolted for their cellars, ignorant of the true importance of what was happening. Others had taken to the streets in mobs, demanding answer from the guilds or clashing with whoever they thought was the enemy. There were brawls and looting, all the more so because the Azorius forces who would normally be deployed against such chaos seemed to have completely vanished.

Boros Legion troops were deployed to push back against the panic, but they were spread thin, and the Gruul were making a bad situation worse. Bands of rampaging anarchs had boiled out of the rubble belts, attacking the Boros posts or slipping past to wreak havoc in the city. The rest of the guilds had tightened their defenses in response, leaving the city a collection of armed camps, while everyone watched the dragons slug it out and tried to imagine what might come of it.

What would they think if they knew it was just a distraction? Mighty Niv-Mizzet, hurling himself against the invader Nicol Bolas, all to buy time for Ral to climb a few stories and press a few keys on an incomprehensibly complex machine. *I wouldn't believe it either.*

But Dovin Baan clearly understood, or at least had received detailed instructions. Ral, standing in an alley between a cake shop and a haberdasher, peered around the corner and grimaced. The Azorius troops that were missing from the rest of the Tenth District were present in force here. Squads of arresters manned makeshift barricades all through the streets near the tower, hundreds of them, backed up by hussars on horseback and a swarm of thopters hovering overhead.

This, Ral thought, is not going to be easy.

On the horizon, there was a flash of light, followed a few seconds later by a dull boom fading to a roll of thunder. Ral glanced up at the clouds overhead, but though dark and heavy they showed no

inclination to add any natural pyrotechnics to the draconic maelstrom. He looked over his shoulder, found the alley still empty, and sourly went back to surveying the defenses.

"Hey," Kaya said, behind him.

Ral restrained himself with an effort. "Sneaking up on people is bad manners at the best of times. Right now it's a good way to get yourself electrocuted."

"Sorry," she said. "Force of habit. I got your note."

"That's something, anyway." Ral straightened and turned. Kaya was dressed in the practical fighting outfit he'd first encountered her in, without any Orzhov regalia, and her plain daggers hung at her sides. "Take a look at tell me what you think."

She leaned out into the street briefly, and gave a low whistle. "That's a lot of swords. What's in that tower, anyway?"

"Maybe our last chance." Ral glanced at the seething, flashing mass of smoke and cloud that was the ongoing battle. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Is it something we can steal?" Kaya said. "I could get into the tower through the buildings behind it, I think."

"Unfortunately, I have to get in there myself," Ral said. "And I'm sure there are guards in there, too."

"Then we have a problem," Kaya said.

"Any chance of reinforcements from Orzhov?"

"I brought everything I could pry loose at short notice," Kaya said. She pointed upward, and Ral craned his neck. The rooftops over the alley were thick with ugly, misshapen stone faces. *Gargoyles*. "They're quiet, and they obey orders. Anything else means having a debate with the hierophants, which I didn't think we had time for. Tomik said he would do his best."

Ral felt a pang, which he suppressed ruthlessly. *Time for that later*. "If they could cause enough confusion," he said, "we might be able to make it to the front doors, but—"

"My mates!"

A set of rapidly-approaching footsteps resolved in Hekara, moving at speed. Then Ral found himself being *hugged*, which was not an experience he was particularly interested in. He put one hand on Hekara's forehead to pry her away, and she happily transferred herself to Kaya, who bore the embrace with better humor.

"I see you got my note too," Ral said.

"Yup!" Hekara let go of Kaya and turned back to him, beaming. "I was down there waiting on His Flamingosity when it turned up, and he told me to go help you out. So here I am!"

Hekara had been curiously absent the last few days, given her usual reluctance to leave Ral's side. Ral had refused to worry about her. *Worry more about whoever she happens to*. Still, he had to admit it was a relief to have her back under his eye.

"I heard we've got some smashing to do," Hekara said. "All those iron-brains over there, right?"

"More or less," Ral said. "We need to get to the tower. Do you have any ideas?"

"I have lots of ideas!" Hekara said. "Did I tell you the one about the funny duck who wears pants?"

"*Relevant* ideas," Ral amended, exchanging a glance with Kaya, who looked more amused than he was.

“Maaaaybe,” Hekara said. “A relevant is one of those big gray things with the ears like a giant loxodon, right?”

“Hekara,” Kaya said gently, as Ral ground his teeth. “How do we get past the guards?”

“Oh!” she said. “That. Just wait a minute.” She cupped a hand to her ear, listening, and in the stillness Ral heard a few discordant notes. “I brought some friends.”

At first it was just a sort of wheezing, gasping noise, as though someone were playing the accordion.

As it grew, it became clear that someone *was* playing the accordion, and that they weren’t very good at it. Then, as the level of sound grew louder, the listener perceived that not only was the accordion player not particularly skilled, but the instrument itself seemed to be mortally wounded discharging great *blats* of sound at semi-random intervals. It was quickly joined by a chorus of brass trumpets, no two in tune, and a phalanx of drummers, none of whom had shared their ideas concern what the beat should be.

It was, in short, a cacophony, but a very deliberate one, a wall of discordant noise that somehow combined to produce a weird, lurching melody. It was captivating in its awfulness, swelling and falling, nearly coming together and then collapsing back into its component parts.

A tiny man came around the corner, barely four feet high, dressed in an outlandish gold suit and juggling for all he was worth. A whirling galaxy of balls filled there air above him, interspersed with knives, axes, and rolling pins, and his hands were a blur as he expertly caught these objects and flung them back into the air on long, looping trajectories that were somehow in time with the timeless music playing behind him. The juggler was followed by a pair of tumbling girls in huge metal hoops, which wobbled down the street like spinning coins, their spangled occupants upside-down half the time. Behind them came a rank of drummers, six abreast, with three more standing on their shoulders.

Behind *that* came a platform nearly as wide as the street and as long as several carriages. It was carried by a row of large, burly creatures on each side, ogres, minotaurs, and any other species tall and broad enough, all decorated in glittering red and black and adorned with gold and silver ornaments. Atop the platform, a pair of goblins capered with the foreshadowed accordion, which it turned out was not so much damaged as heavily and inexpertly modified with a huge tube and extra set of bellows. Trumpet players in motley strolled in a circle around the moving stage, periodically turning to reverse direction with much comedic stumbling and whacking one another with their ungainly instruments. More jugglers dodged through the fray, tossing unlikely things to one another and slinging insults at the trumpeters as they nearly tripped them up.

More performers flanked the stage, jumping and tumbling, whirling long silk scarves, and blowing long goutts of fire into the air. Another rank of drummers brought up the rear, all of them larger creatures carrying deeper bass drums, providing a pounding underbeat. The heavy footfalls of the stage bearers merged with the deep booms to sound like an army on the march.

“What,” Ral said, raising his voice to be heard, “is that supposed to be, exactly?”

“Master Panjandrum’s Extraordinary Carnival of Delights!” Hekara said, bouncing excitedly. “His Rakkness told them to come give us a hand. Aren’t they great?”

“They’re certainly *loud*,” Ral said, as the stage went by.

“Sorry,” Kaya said, watching a provocatively costumed woman bend in an unlikely direction and blow kisses made of colored smoke. “I don’t think I’m keeping up. These are our reinforcements? A circus?”

“With Rakdos, a circus is never just a circus,” Ral said. “Come on, let’s stay close. Can your gargoyles deal with the thopters?”

Kaya nodded and shouted something up to the rooftops. A moment later, the flock of gargoyles took flight, circling the tower.

“They’ll wait for us to start,” Kaya said, jogging to keep up with Ral. “Whatever it is we’re doing.”

“Just watch,” Ral said. “And get ready to run.”

Hekara bounced along beside him, clapping her hands completely out of time with the music.

The Azorius soldiers, arrayed behind their barricades, could scarcely have missed the approach of the moving stage and its phalanx of performers. Apparently, though, they weren’t clear in their own mind what to do about it, because there was a great deal of running about and consultation before an officer hurried down the street, waving his arms.

“Gentlemen!” he shouted. “This area is under the direct control of the Senate, in accordance with Resolution 3842, concerning emergencies and appropriate conduct. Furthermore, your . . . entertainment ought to have been registered in advance with the Bureau of Street Use, and all relevant officials would have been notified. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to disperse.”

“Oh, dear.”

A man Ral hadn’t noticed before unfolded himself from the front of the stage. “Unfolded” was exactly the right word—Ral had never seen a human so elongated. He was head and shoulders taller than Ral himself, but skeletally thin, with limbs that looked like dry sticks. A formal suit hung off him as though it were on a washing line, looking ridiculous, and a too-small hat sat absurdly on his bulging skull. His face was painted dead white, with lips and eyes outlined in brilliant crimson.

“That’s Master Panjandrum,” Hekara confided.

Master Panjandrum stepped off the edge of the stage, foot coming down smoothly on the back of a tumbler who contorted herself to make a stool. Even at ground level, Panjandrum towered over the Azorius officer. Beside him, the little juggler was still in full swing, miscellaneous objects whirling above him in an endless loop.

“It’s really too bad,” the circus master said. “The lads will be so disappointed. What do you think, lads?” He raised his voice. “They say we have to go home!”

The music came to an abrupt, discordant halt. The drummers stopped, the trumpeters froze mid-note, and the accordion went quiet after one last discordant *blat*. There was a moment of silence, and then a hundred voices shouted in chorus.

“The show must go on!”

“Well,” Panjandrum said, as the music started up again. “There you have it.”

“W—what?” The arrester narrowed his eyes. “Now see here—”

Then he stopped, because one of the objects from the juggler’s whirling collection—a metal ball about the size of a fist—had gotten away from him and fallen from a considerable height to land square on the officer’s head. The man toppled bonelessly to the cobbles.

“Oops,” Panjandrum said. His painted smile drew up into a huge grin.

Hekara, still bouncing, elbowed Ral in the ribs. “This is where it gets good.”

“Captain!” someone shouted, from back in the Azorius ranks. A uniformed woman rose from cover, stepping forward, only to fall back with a butcher knife embedded in her eye. The little jester became a blur, objects spinning out of his hands into the ranks of Azorius troops. Knives, plates whose rims turned out to be sharp as razors, beanbags that burst into swarms of tiny silver darts, and even more unlikely weapons rained down.

As one, the front rank of drummers smashed their instruments over their knees, revealing long, bladed whips stored inside. Those standing on the shoulders of the others jumped down, their new weapons swinging in wide, deadly arcs. Behind them, the trumpeters raised their instruments to their shoulders and pulled hidden triggers, causing them to spit steel-headed crossbow bolts.

“Fire!” someone shouted, at the base of the tower. “Return fire!”

Crossbows *zinged*, sending a rain of quarrels into the travelling circus and sending performers crashing to the cobblestones. One man, struck in the midst of spitting fire, exploded in a spectacular ball of flame. A bolt hit one of the tumbling women as she hurtled through the air, and she spun with its momentum, executing a perfect landing with arms outstretched before taking a long bow and then falling over dead.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Master Panjandrum muttered, ducking amidst the hail of fire. “Show ’em what we do to critics, lads!”

The Rakdos performers gave a roar and surged forward, letting the portable stage fall to the ground. Azorius arresters rose from cover to meet them, swords drawn, and battle was joined.

Kaya looked on in disbelief, then turned to Hekara. “Are all your circuses like this?”

“Not *all*,” Hekara said, pondering. “Sometimes they have tigers!”

“Remind me to skip that one,” Kaya said, drawing her daggers. Overhead, gargoyles swooped and dove, tangling with the hovering thopters. “Shall we?”

The square was chaos. Tumbling acrobats with bladed fingers slashed and spun, jugglers hurled their weapons, and a squad of ogres in clown makeup laid into the Azorius troopers in a way that suggested they were not at all amused. A group of hussars charged, sabers slashing. One of them cut a juggler’s head clean off, only for the decapitated performer to pop back up a moment later and reveal himself to be two goblins in a long overcoat.

Ral, Kaya, and Hekara worked their way through the press, heading for the front door of the tower. For the most part, the Azorius troops ignored them in favor of more obvious threats. Hekara capered delightedly, conjuring her long, thin blades out of nothing and hurling them in every direction, finding eyes, throats, and gaps in armor. Kaya took the lead, daggers out, and when an arrester came at her she simply let him pass through in a burst of purple light, then planted a knife in his back while he tried to work out what happened.

Bits of thopter were raining down, gears and smashed crystals dropping steadily around them. The flying machines fought back, with spinning drills and electric sparks, and the occasional broken gargoyle fell as well, breaking apart and coming down as a rain of gravel. Ral looked up, not at the aerial melee, but at the flashes and glows in the clouds farther off, trying to gauge how that much larger fight was going. It was impossible to see anything from here, other than that it was still in progress. *We’re not out of time yet.*

In front of the tower door, a rank of disciplined arresters with heavy shields stood in front of a robed mage, who shouted commands that mostly went unheard. They caught sight of Ral and the others, and raised their shields in time to deflect a rain of knives from Hekara.

“Out of the way,” Ral snarled, raising his hands. Lightning crackled and spat from his fingers.

“This tower is off limits,” the mage shouted, raising his hands. White light rose around him in neat concentric circles. “You are forbidden to cross the threshold, by order of the Senate!”

Glyphs glowed and spun, giving the lawmage’s words the force of magic. Ral sent a bolt of lightning at him, but it broke against the ward. He set his jaw.

“We haven’t got time for this,” he said. “Hekara, can one of your friend—”

“I’ll handle it,” Kaya said. “Hold their attention.”

“Right!” Hekara said. She capered forward, summoning more blades. Kaya took a deep breath, then sank into the earth with a purple flash.

Ral shrugged, and sent another bolt at the lawmage. The man twisted his hands, reinforcing his ward. Another bolt, and another, achieved just as little, and Ral saw the mage’s confidence growing. He gestured his soldiers forward.

Ral was the only one who saw Kaya step out of the ground, gasping for breath. Before the mage knew she was there, she was reaching around him, bringing her dagger across his throat. He fell in a tide of blood, and the spell shivered and vanished. Ral raised his hands and felt power flowing from his accumulator, gathering for a moment in his gauntlets before leaping out to play across the entire rank of Azorius soldiers. They collapsed like dominoes, and Ral and Hekara hopped lightly over the line of armored bodies.

The door rattled when Ral tried it, but didn’t move. He frowned, and glanced over his shoulder. The square was still full of Rakdos performers locked in combat with Azorius troops, but that wouldn’t last forever—reinforcements were almost certainly on the way.

“Stand back,” he said, raising his hands.

“Hang on a minute,” Kaya said. She stepped up to the door, stuck her arm straight through it, and fumbled around for a moment. A heavy *thump* indicated she’d dislodged the bar from the other side, and she pulled it open. “Much easier.”

“That’s handy!” Hekara said. “Hey, what would happen if you put your head through, right, and then someone tried to open the door, and—”

“I try not to think about it.” Kaya stepped into the dark space beyond. “This place looks empty.”

“The beacon is at the top,” Ral said.

He gestured Hekara inside, and closed and barred the door behind them. The tower was, in fact, largely empty, with a single broad staircase winding around its outer rim. It had once possessed more internal floors—the stone supports for the wooden floorboards were still there—but the Izzet engineers had ripped them out to make it easier to lift components up to the top with cranes. Looking straight up, Ral could see the underside of a complicated mass of machinery, interlocking gears, great hanging loops of mizzium cable, and crackling crystal accumulators.

“I mean, I would have thought they’d have guards in here too,” Kaya said. “If it’s so important.”

“They may be waiting for us at the top as well,” Ral said. “Be careful.”

“We gotta walk? Didn’t you say there was one of those lifter things?” Hekara said.

“It was more of a catapult, if I recall correctly,” Ral said. “I think they took it back to Nivix when they finished the work.”

“Awww,” Hekara said. “That sounds *awesome*.”

They started up the stairs, Kaya taking the lead with daggers drawn. Halfway up the first turn, Ral held up a hand, staring at the curving staircase ahead of them.

“Something moved,” he said, concentrating. “Watch closely.”

A ball of fizzing electricity appeared above his hand, and Ral blew on it gently. It drifted forward, expanding into a field of power, not strong enough to do anything more than raise the hairs on someone’s skin. But it *did* outline everything in front of them with a brief crackling aura—the walls, the stairs, a loop of hanging coil—

—and a dozen strange, spindly, six-legged *things*.

Kaya tensed as the creatures stood up. They weren’t invisible, exactly, just expertly camouflaged, their flat metal surfaces shifting color and hue to blend in with the stone behind them. They had long, asymmetrical bodies, with lean, stilt-like legs that twisted and hooked weirdly.

“Here are your guards,” Ral said.

“What are they?” Hekara said.

“Constructs,” Ral muttered.

Hekara cocked her head. “I thought those were all big and covered in gears. These are sort of cute.”

“These are Tezzeret’s creations,” Ral said.

“Whatever they are,” Kaya said, “we have to get past them, don’t we?” She dropped into a crouch. “Let’s get on with it.”

The leading construct came forward, legs clicking on the stone. Kaya ran at it, daggers extended, and it raised a limb to spear her on the needle-like point. By the time the blow came, though, she was gone, twisting sideways and phasing through one of the thing’s other limbs to attack the next machine in line. Her daggers plunged into its side, points slipping through its steel skin with a flare of purple light to wreak havoc on its interior workings.

Hekara put on the mad grin she reserved for hurting people or breaking things and conjured a brace of daggers from the air. The first pair simply bounced off the construct’s tough outer covering, so the razorwitch created another pair, sharp and narrow as ice picks, and darted forward. She ducked under the lead construct, stabbing upward and driving her weapons into its belly.

Ral followed her example. A lightning bolt would just slide over the things’ metal skins, so he concentrated his energy in his gauntlets, holding a ball of plasma above his palm until it glowed white-hot. When a construct lurched toward him, he dodged its slash and slammed the concentrated energy against it. What passed for its head burst apart in a shower of superheated metal, and the thing stumbled drunkenly sideways off the stair, hitting the floor of the tower far below and bursting into a mass of twisted metal.

Up ahead, Kaya was dismantling another machine with her daggers, and Hekara was keeping one occupied by punching it full of tiny holes. When her picks broke in her hands, she simply summoned new ones and kept at it, staying away from the construct’s counter-strokes with contemptuous ease. Ral came in from behind and fried the thing with a touch, leaping over its collapsing body to intercept

another before it could skewer Hekara from behind. Another construct fell off the stairs, four of its six legs detached already. In a few more moments of frantic action, the way was clear.

“Nothing like a good fight with your mates, yeah?” Hekara looked at her two companions with a broad grin.

“It can certainly be invigorating,” Kaya allowed, with a small smile.

“That can’t be the last of them,” Ral said. He looked up and shook his head. “Something’s waiting for us up there.”

“Then we’ll take ‘em out, too!” Hekara said. “Come on.”

linebreak The last curve of the stairs was within the machinery of the beacon, so they were flanked by banks of coils and accumulators, control panels and hanging loops of wire. None of it *looked* damaged—Ral knew the core of the beacon was well protected, but he still worried Bolas’s forces might have attempted to disable it. *Apparently not. Their attention must be elsewhere.* linebreak Where the stone tower ended, the stairs emerged onto a flat deck that formed the base of a broad copper dome. The machinery of the beacon was concentrated in the center of the room, arrayed around a single vast resonating crystal. That was the heart of the thing, the technology Ral had salvaged from Project Lightning Bug, vastly scaled up and inverted. When the proper current was applied, it would become a blazing torch, shining forth into the Multiverse. At least in theory, *every* Planeswalker would be able to see it, and find their way to Ravnica.

In front of the core was a keyboard, like a piano’s, complete with ivory keys. *The security lockdown.* That was the final safeguard. If Ral keyed in the sequence he’d chosen, what felt like a hundred years ago, then the beacon would activate. And that activation was designed to be irrevocable—it would burn until its fuel ran out. *Almost there.* linebreak Unfortunately, the rest of the room wasn’t empty. Steel pillars stood at regular intervals, supporting a complicated mesh of wires, conduits, and elaborate gear-trains. Some of the equipment passed through grates in the floor to connect with things down below; other wires reached for the walls, exiting through other grates that gave a dim view of the darkened sky outside.

In the midst of this jungle, between them and the security keyboard, two women stood side by side. Lavinia had traded her hooded cloak for a bright set of blue and gold Azorius armor, and stood with one hand on her sword. Beside her, Vraska was all in black, her tendrils already writhing. The gorgon looked over the three of them with a toothy, contemptuous smile.

“Well,” she said, “it took you long enough.”