

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 14

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The city of Grek'ospen was old, as places in the Undercity went. The domains of the Golgari were ever-shifting, ever-renewed, everything recycled and reborn through the cycle of rot. It was one of the things that made it so difficult for the surface-dwellers to attack them—no map of the Swarm's domains remained accurate for long.

But at Grek'ospen, the kraul had turned that cycle of decay to their own ends, and made a virtue of necessity. A river ran through the center of the huge cavern, and the air was heavy with moisture, which collected and dripped over innumerable stalagmites and stalactites. With the careful work of centuries, the kraul had coaxed these natural rock formations to grow according to their own plan, forming the bones of their massive hive towers. Fungal growths formed a part of the blueprints, too, huge shelf mushrooms serving as spongy floors, while colorful, decorative growths climbed up walls made of kraul resin.

Seeing Grek'ospen and cities like it had made Vraska first realize how much she admired the kraul. They embodied the true spirit of the Golgari, far more than the decadent devkarin. Individual kraul came and went, but the hive endured, growing bit by bit through every cycle of growth and decay.

And now we're going to demolish the work of centuries in a few hours, because Ral Zarek can't leave well enough alone.

"Your people are in place?" she said to Mazirek.

The huge black kraul stood on one side of her, opposite the small, sickly-looking white form of Xeddick. Mazirek dipped his forelegs in obeisance, but there was a hesitation that she didn't have to be an insect to interpret. *Xeddick's right. This one has grown too proud.*

"We are, Queen," he said. "Everything is waiting for your command."

The surface-dwellers are on the way, Xeddick said in her mind. The trolls are angry at being held back.

"They'll get their turn." *Almost certainly.* Vraska squared her shoulders and strode out into the open space that formed the center of the beautiful kraul city. *If Ral is as stubborn as I think he is.*

Once again, Ral found himself at the head of an army. These were not the armored, disciplined troops of the Boros Legion, however. The Orzhov forces were a teeming mass of black and gold, obedient but without the smooth precision of the professional soldiers. The majority of them were thrulls, scuttling things that were only vaguely humanoid, no two quite alike. They bore no weapons, only blank-faced masks of ancient coinage, but Ral had been on the receiving end of their mad fury in his assault on Orzhova and had no illusions about how dangerous they were.

Among them walked the knights, the Orzhov's elite killers, in black armor inlaid with gold and carrying a bewildering variety of weapons—bows, swords, pole-arms, flails, and even more exotic contraptions. There were even a few giants, helmeted and faceless.

Kaya walked beside him, apparently carefree, as they made their way down the long, winding path into the caverns. Scouts had cleared the way, of course, and reported no contact with Golgari forces. *Even so. She could have the decency to act a little nervous.* He certainly was.

"And this just goes on *forever*?" Kaya said, gesturing at the tunnel.

It was some ancient road, with the ruined walls of buildings still visible beside it, now buried beneath rock and debris by who-knew-what catastrophe. After ten thousand years, Ravnica was a city built on the ruins of itself, layer by layer.

"As far as anyone has been able to tell," Ral said. "There are oceans down here, if you dig far enough. The Simic zonots stretch down that far."

"Gods and monsters," Kaya said, shaking her head.

"Not much like where you grew up?" Ral said.

Kaya snorted. "I was born in a town with less than a hundred people. We have cities on my Plane, but not like this"

Ral tried to imagine that, living someplace where you could know *everyone*, with none of the casual anonymity of a packed street. His mind rebelled.

"Mind you, I've been around a bit since then," Kaya said. "Spent a lot of time in cities, in fact. They tend to get a lot of ghosts."

"Ghost hunting is a curious business," Ral said.

"Someday I'll tell you how I got started," Kaya said. "But it's a long story, and I think we're nearly there."

Ral nodded. Up ahead was a line of scouts, lightly armored Boros Legion goblins with crossbows slung over one shoulder. The road they were following passed through a half-collapsed brick archway into a larger space, and they'd stopped on the near side. Their lieutenant scurried over to Ral.

"We're in the right place," she said. "Still no sign of the Golgari, but the cavern is as built-up as any neighborhood topside. Lots of places to hide."

"Wonderful," Ral said, glancing at Kaya. "This could get very ugly."

"Send the thrulls in," she said. "That's what they're for."

Ral nodded, but the scout spoke up.

"There's someone waiting in the center of the city, sir. Looks like they're waiting to speak to you. It's . . . well, it looks like Vraska herself."

"That has to be a trap," Kaya said.

"Or an opportunity," Ral said. "All right. I'll see what she wants. Bring the rest of our forces up behind, but try not to start any fights until you get my signal."

Kaya looked like she wanted to object, but she only frowned and nodded. Ral gestured for a couple of the scouts to follow and set off through the archway. Grek'ospen was as large as he'd been expecting, a vast, vaulted cavern, dimly lit by dozens of glowing green globes suspended high overhead. The architecture was alien, smooth rock and wet fungus layered over with papery stuff that put him in

mind of a beehive. The towering spires had entrances on many levels, connected by soaring bridges or simply opening into space. *All right, I suppose, if you've got wings.*

The lieutenant led him on a winding path, skirting the bases of several of the towers. Nothing seemed to move, not on the ground or overhead. *Vraska must have evacuated.* He took a deep breath. *If she offers to let us have the node, I have to take it and be thankful.* Eager as he might be to punish her betrayal, it could wait. *Completing the plan is all the matters, until Bolas is defeated.*

They reached the central clearing, where a half-dozen spires all opened onto a space that might have been a town square. A narrow river cut through it, burbling in its course, with a dozen small foot-bridges crossing it. In front of these stood Vraska, dressed in dark, segmented leather-and-mail armor with a saber at her side. The green tendrils that gorgons sported in place of hair stood out from her skull, making her look larger.

"Stay here," Ral said. "If she tries anything, get back to Kaya and order the attack."

The lieutenant nodded, and Ral set off alone across the square. Vraska waited, arms crossed, until he stopped about twenty paces away. She raised her voice and called to him.

"A bit far for pleasant conversation, surely."

"Given the results of the guild summit," Ral said, "you'll forgive me if I'm not eager to meet face to face."

"What a shame," Vraska said. "With that hair of yours, you'd make a wonderful addition to my sculpture garden."

Ral clenched his fists, feeling electricity crackle. His heart was beating hard. He knew first-hand how deadly Vraska could be, even if he hadn't seen what she'd done to someone as powerful as Isperia. *She has to be up close to use her petrification.* And a little research in the Izzet library had suggested that there was a moment's warning before the effect took hold, a glow in the gorgon's eyes that gave a prospective victim time to get out of the way. Even so, Ral wasn't eager to test his reflexes against Vraska.

"Well?" he said. "I assumed you were waiting here because you wanted me to come and talk. Here I am."

"Here you are, with your strange little army," Vraska said. "But why? Revenge?"

"It ought to be," Ral said. "How can you work for Bolas? Don't you know what he'll do to you—to *all* of us—if he wins?"

"And you're so confident Niv-Mizzet will be a benevolent despot, once we give him leave to turn himself into a god?" Vraska shook her head, tentacles squirming. "I don't have to explain myself to you, Zarek."

"You don't." Ral paused. "And we're not here for revenge. Someday, there may be a reckoning. But for now all we need is this place." He waved at the city around them. "Don't interfere, and none of your people will be harmed."

"That's all you need. One of the most ancient cities of the Golgari. So generous, you surface-dwellers."

"Then you plan to fight."

Vraska smiled, her teeth sharp and predatory. "I plan to *win*."

She raised a hand. Ral brought his gauntlets up, readying for a sudden rush, but the Gorgon didn't move. Instead, far above, he heard the sound of distant thunder, and the floor of the cavern shook beneath his feet. Ral looked over his shoulder at the scouts, and found them stumbling and uncertain.

“What—” he called back to them, and then the roof fell on them.

Fireballs bloomed across Grek’ospen, along tower after tower.

Certain types of kraul resin, when properly treated, were highly explosive. The stuff was too heavy and unstable to make much of a weapon, but Vraska’s kraul engineers had had plenty of time to position it in advance, uncomplainingly turning their own ancient city into a carefully constructed deathtrap. The blasts sent washes of resin spurting from the spire doorways, followed by clouds of dust and choking black smoke. Then, slowly, the resin-and-fungus buildings began to collapse, their stone cores shattered.

Two of the largest fell across the archway the surface forces had used to enter the city, trapping many of them in the tunnel. If the trolls remembered their instructions, the blast was their signal, and Vraska had every hope that Ral’s rearguard would find itself beset by a mass of ravening, regenerating monstrosities. In the meantime, spires collapsed across the city, scattering shards of stone and fungus, blocking streets and separating the enemy forces into a hundred tiny pockets. Cut off from one another and from their leaders, they would be easy prey for the Gulgari troops swarming from every tunnel and crevasse.

And speaking of leaders . . . Vraska had kept her footing, and her engineers had arranged it so none of the spires would crush the central square. Dust and smoke filled the air, but she could see Ral retreating, in the company of one of his scouts. Vraska drew her saber with a fierce smile and set off after him.

The second scout, a goblin woman in Boros-silver armor, barred her way, and Vraska sidestepped a well-aimed arrow. The scout knocked another, and Vraska tensed to dodge, but before the Boros soldier could loose she staggered sideways. The bow fell from her hands as she clutched at her throat, face turning an ugly blue-black. With a choking gasp, she collapsed, legs kicking at the dirt. Mazirek stepped out of the smoke beside Vraska, his forelimbs still wreathed in flickering auras of death-magic. Xeddick came up on her other side, and she felt his concern press at her mind.

“I’m fine,” she growled. “Come on. We’re going after Zarek.”

Kraul droned through the air all around them as they pressed into the newly shattered city, flights of the big insects swooping and descending on the surface-dwellers wherever they found them. Crossbow bolts zipped upward, and magic boomed and crackled. Vraska heard the war cries of devkarin elves throwing themselves into battle, desperate to prove their loyalty to their new queen, and the dark intonations of Orzhov warrior-priests.

There was nothing she could do now, no control she could exert over the battle. That was fine, as far as she was concerned. She had never been a general, a leader.

What I am , she thought, as she stalked Ral through the rubble, *is an assassin.*

Enemy soldiers, cut off and confused, threw themselves at her. A dozen thrulls swarmed out of a broken doorway. Mazirek blasted several apart, and Vraska charged the rest, saber whirling around her in an exuberant dance of death. She left the inhuman creatures slashed and broken on the stone, their blood painting the wreckage, and went in search of more prey.

I was a fool.

An Orzhov knight confronted her, a huge man with a greatsword that left shining golden trails in the air. He was a slow, lumbering thing, but his heavy armor turned her saber in a shower of sparks, and he confidently pressed his attack, massive blade swinging back toward her.

A fool to believe Zarek. To trust Jace. To believe what he told me about myself.

Vraska ducked, letting the greatsword slice so close it clipped one of her tendrils. When it was past, she popped up inside the man's reach, and let the power build behind her eyes. The glow washed over him, and he stiffened into solid, lifeless gray. She spun away from him, laughing.

This is what I was made for. She stalked through the smoke and dust, leaving death in her wake. *This is who I am.*

Bolas knew that all along. I just . . . forgot myself.

Forgot yourself? Jace's voice floated up from her memory. *Or discovered you had a choice?*

Shut. Up. Vraska's grin turned into a fixed snarl, and she pushed forward, dismembering another pack of thrulls and lashing the priest that accompanied them into bloody chunks. *I never should have listened to you. Never should have . . .*

Boom. Something shook the ground, again. *More charges?*

She pulled up short at a gap in the wall of a fallen tower. From here, through gaps in the drifting smoke, she could see most of the city, including the archway where the surface-dwellers had entered. It was solidly blocked by chunks of stone and fungal debris, but as she watched a bit piece of rock hurtled away from the blockage, landing with a *crunch* and a plume of dust. Another followed, and another. *Something's clearing the way.*

What stepped through, when the gap was big enough, was bigger than a giant, walking on seven spindly legs, with two massive arms ending in enormous fists and a third that projected some kind of tube. It twisted this last to aim near its feet, and a wash of flame burst out, running over the shattered stones like liquid. On the thing's head, smaller shapes danced and capered with glee.

It wasn't a creature, Vraska realized. It was a *thing*, a construct, mizzium and steel assembled into a titanic killing machine in some mad chemister's workshop. And it wasn't the only one. As soon as it cleared the entrance, another huge vehicle came through, this one rumbling over the ground on overlapping treads. A third, bipedal, staggered after it, its upper portion already ablaze, to the consternation of its goblin crew. Then another, and another . . .

Vraska snarl grew broader. She lowered her gaze and saw Zarek, standing on a hunk of broken rock, watching the arrival of his reinforcements with a look of smug satisfaction.

I'll wipe that look off your face. Banishing the memory of Jace to the bottom of her mind, Vraska hurled herself forward.

The war-constructs of Nivix came through the gap, on legs and wheel and treads. Ral had emptied the laboratories of everything that could possibly serve as a weapon, every doomsday project and hidden secret. They were a motley group, not working together in the slightest, and several of them had already broken down, caught fire, or exploded. But those that remained were devastating, belching flame over the advancing Golgari hordes, sweeping them aside with vast limbs, or slashing them to pieces with a hundred rotating blades.

At least one thing going according to plan. He hadn't expected Vraska to blow up her own city, just to throw his forces into confusion. He coughed at the smoke-choked air and wiped his forehead—a splinter of rock had nicked him, sending a steady trickle of blood down from his hairline and threatening to get into his eyes.

What was supposed to have been an organized battle had fragmented into a hundred tiny melees, and there was no way to tell who was winning and who was losing. Ral concluded he had better get

himself back to the tunnel—*Maybe I can find Kaya*—when he heard approaching footsteps. He spun, just in time.

Vraska. She was *fast*, faster than she had any right to be, springing off a broken stone wall and coming at him at a dead run, tendrils trailing behind her. Ral raised one palm, and lightning crackled out, snapping at her like a vicious dog. She dodged, then sprang backward as he sent another bolt after her.

“Mazirek!” she shouted. “Now!”

Something moved in the rubble. A humanoid—no, a *former* humanoid, the corpse of a person now rotted down to scraps of skin and bones. Fungal growths held the thing together, and it shambled forward in a parody of life, disintegrating even as it came on. *Rot zombie*. Ral flicked his fingers and blasted the slow-moving thing to burning cinders, but two more had already emerged, climbing up and over the broken rocks and bits of house-sized fungus. He burned those as well, and took a step back as a half-dozen of the things came into view.

“The thing is, Ral, I know you.” Vraska’s voice came from somewhere he couldn’t see, among the rubble. “I know your strengths, and I know your weakness. We’re a long way from the sky, down here. No power for you to draw on. And you’ve got that accumulator on your back, but . . .” She gave a grim chuckle. “How long will it last?”

“Long enough,” Ral snarled, as his lightning played across the line of undead. *I hope*.

Kaya twisted away from the troll’s swinging fist, her daggers drawing lines of green blood from its forearm. It roared and spun to follow her, the wound already healing. Kaya swore under her breath and backpedaled, waiting for an opportunity.

It came when the troll lunged forward, both arms outstretched to wrap her in a deadly bear hug. Kaya stepped sideways, phasing through the troll’s left arm, and planted one of her daggers in its shoulder. Using the blade as a handhold, she vaulted atop the ugly creature, grabbing the mane of matted hair at the back of its thick neck. She used the leverage to lean forward and drive her other dagger to the hilt in its eye.

The troll bucked and roared, and for a moment she thought it would survive even this, but eventually it got the message that it was dead and slumped forward to the rocky ground. Kaya dismounted, retrieved her daggers, and looked around.

There was a distressing lack of friendly forces anywhere nearby, she discovered. She’d had a pair of knights and a squadron of thrulls escorting her, but the troll had left their broken corpses scattered across the shattered alley. On the other hand, there were no enemies immediately apparent either. The main battle seemed to be centering on the tunnel entrance, where the Izzet constructs were tearing into the Gulgari horde, but there were scattered detachments of Orzhov soldiers, flying kraul, and who knew what else fighting desperate skirmishes throughout the city. Kaya saw lightning flashing from a rock outcrop some distance off, which probably meant Ral, and she’d decided to head in that direction for lack of any better options when someone called out to her.

“Guildmaster!” A woman in the colors of an Orzhov priest dropped from a half-destroyed wall. “Are you hurt?”

“Just a few scratches,” Kaya said, give her daggers a twirl and sheathing them. “I’m pretty thoroughly lost, though. Where are the other commanders?”

“The Knight of Despair sent me to find you,” the priest said, with a bow. “He took command when you were cut off.”

“Good for him,” Kaya said.

“We should get back as soon as we can.” The priest gestured at a gap in the rocks. “This way. We can stay clear of enemy forces.”

Kaya nodded. The priest straightened up as she came forward—

And shouldn't she be leading the way, not waving me onward like a palace flunky?

Nasty, suspicious thoughts like these had played an important role in keeping Kaya alive all these years, and they proved their worth again, because she was already twisting aside when steel gleamed in the priest's hands. She was too close to evade the blow entirely, but what was intended to be a stab in the kidney turned into a shallow cut along her ribs, bleeding freely but not seriously.

Kaya danced backward, snatching her own daggers from their sheathes. The priest flipped the small knife to her left hand and drew a larger blade with her right, dropping into a fighting crouch. They watched each other for a long, wary moment.

“I don't suppose I can convince you this is a bad idea,” Kaya muttered.

“You are a blight on the Orzhov,” the woman hissed. “You must be removed.”

“Didn't think so.”

Kaya charged, taking her opponent off-guard. Even so, the woman was good, offering her larger blade as a feint while aiming to strike Kaya's flank with the smaller weapon. Kaya spun out of the way, circling, but the priest backed off with a slash that would have opened Kaya's guts if she'd pushed too far forward. They squared off again, knives gleaming.

I haven't got time for this, Kaya thought. The wound in her side hurt like hell, and her shirt was matted with blood. All around them, krael buzzed through the air, arrows flew, and magic crackled and boomed.

She charged again, and this time, when the priest lashed out with her long blade, Kaya phased right through it. Her body, glowing with purple energy, passed through the other woman's like the ghosts that were Kaya's prey, and once she was past she rematerialized and dropped into a spinning low kick that scythed the priest's legs out from under her and sent her sprawling. Kaya rolled on top of her, one boot coming down hard on the woman's hand where she still held her small knife, one of Kaya's blades pressed tight across her opponent's throat.

“Now,” Kaya said. “Who are you working for? Which of my oh-so-loyal guildmates wants me dead?”

“Does it matter?” the priest spat back, her eyes defiant. “When we kill you, we will capture your spirit, and keep it in our dungeons to torture until there is nothing left of you but madness and pain—”

The woman's eyes bulged, and her back arched. A moment later, blood welled from her mouth and eyes, and she sagged limply to the rock. Kaya felt a lingering trace of death-magic waft away on the breeze.

“Wonderful,” she said aloud, rolling wearily off the corpse. She clambered to her feet, sheathed her daggers, and started walking in the direction of the near-continuous lightning flashes. “Just wonderful.”

linebreak The last wave of rot-zombies got closer than any of the others, clawed hands scrabbling at Ral's clothes as they backed him against a tumbled rock, new decayed faces pressing in as he burned one after another. Lightning crackled around him like the bars in a cage, sprayed in gouts from his hands, and the dead crumpled and combusted under the forces of it. Eyes boiled and burst, skin black-

ened, rotten bones shattered. But still they came on, and he could feel the power in his accumulator running low, like a sick feeling in his gut.

“That’s enough, I think,” Vraska said. The curtain of rot-zombies parted, and the gorgon strode forward, hands on her hips, the big black kraul on her right and the smaller white one on her left. “Well, Zarek? Feel like surrendering? I can be merciful, you know.”

Ral fought for breath, a painful stitch in his side, and raised his hands again. Power crackled across them, but weakly. An arc of energy connected him to Vraska, and she flinched for a moment, then shrugged as it faded away.

“As I thought.” The gorgon stepped forward. “I think I *will* add you to my collection.”

Her eyes began to glow.

“You will do no such thing, traitor!”

The voice thundered down from above, and Vraska sprang backward, drawing her saber. A moment later, Aurelia hit the earth in front of Ral, the force of her dive blasting out in a shockwave that cracked the stone and made Ral’s teeth buzz. The angel stood, facing the gorgon, and held out her hand. A long blade made of pure light took shape.

“I had my differences with Ispéria,” Aurelia said. “I cannot deny it. But I also cannot deny her commitment to the common good, to the defense of Ravnica, in spite of any philosophical arguments that might have divided us. She trusted you, and invited you to our meeting in good faith. You turned that trust against her.” The angel levelled her blade at Vraska. “For that, I cannot forgive you.”

“The common good,” Vraska snarled. “What a comfort that is to everyone who was tossed into a cage and beaten on her orders.”

Aurelia spread her wings, and closed the distance between them with a single mighty beat. Vraska stood her ground, her steel blade intercepting the angel’s magical one with a sound like nails on glass. Vraska’s skill with her saber with evident, but Aurelia was far stronger, and step by step the gorgon was driven back. The angel fought with a calm efficiency that belied the fury of her words, hammering at Vraska’s defense, darting back out of range whenever the gorgon’s eyes lit up with her petrifying gaze.

In the end, it was the saber in Vraska’s hand that could take no more. She parried, cross-wise, and the weapon shattered, fragments of steel pinging off the surrounding rocks. Vraska stumbled backward, wide-eyed, her tendrils writhing, a long cut on one cheek bleeding green.

“Mazirek!” she shouted, back-pedaling as Aurelia advanced.

But it was the albino kraul who appeared, cutting in between the gorgon and the angel. Ral felt the thing’s voice echo in his mind, loud enough to send him to his knees in pain.

NO! the kraul telepath blasted out. *Run, friend-Vraska!* *linebreak* “Xeddick!” Vraska screamed, hands clapped over her ears in a useless attempt to keep out the telepathic scream.

Aurelia alone withstood the mental assault, leaning forward like someone walking into the teeth of a storm. She took one step forward, then another, wings fully outstretched. The white kraul focused on her, redoubling his attack, and for a moment the angel halted.

Run , the mental voice command. *Please.* *linebreak* Vraska swore violently and threw herself over the nearest rocky barrier, vanishing from view just as Aurelia took another step forward. Her blade of light came down, carving the white kraul’s head in two in an explosion of ichor. The insect collapsed,

and the mental pressure vanished all at once, leaving Ral panting for breath. His vision went gray for a moment. When it cleared, Aurelia stood in front of him, stretching out a hand.