

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 10

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From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

14. 08. 2019

The rain came down as though it had a grudge against the city, rattling roof tiles and slamming against windows. Even with his magic splitting the torrent above his head, Ral walked through a mist of ricocheting drops, and his coat was wet through by the time he arrived at New Prahv.

The Azorius guildhall was crawling with soldiers. Isperia had called out every reserve to provide security for the summit, and to hold back the crowds of curious citizens who had gathered in spite of the foul weather. That something important was happening had become an open secret in the city, and the square around the great triple tower was packed with a mass of humanity. White-armored Azorius soldiers struggled to keep a narrow lane open, through which the delegates could arrive.

Ral kept a wary eye on the mob. They seemed interested, rather than furious, at least so far, and he caught a wave of excited shouts as the Simic delegation arrived in a living carriage that pulled itself along with great purple tentacles. Ral himself slipped in behind them, acknowledged by the soldiers at the gate but ignored by the onlookers.

A nervous young woman guided him into one of the towers, and they ascended a polished marble staircase. Eventually she led him to a grand pair of double doors, inlaid with gold and silver filigree depicting the Azorius crest, so heavy a pair of burly servants had to push them open. Inside was one of the Senate's own debating chambers, a circular room with a raised marble bench running all the way around the perimeter. There was a dais at the far end for a speaker, in front of a massive, multi-paned window, which was streaked with rain. In the distance, lightning flashed among the clouds, and Ral felt his own power resonate in sympathy with every bolt.

He was not the first to arrive. Isperia occupied the dais, with Dovin Baan at her side, both absorbed in reading something. Hekara, who had left that morning to get final instructions from her superiors, sat on the marble bench, waving frantically to Ral.

More surprising was the cyclops sitting cross-legged behind the bench, head bent, only inches from grazing the ceiling. This had to be Borborygmus, the Gruul guildmaster. He had a bestial look, with a wild mane of red hair and two twisting horns, wearing only a few scraps of leather armor. In the polished serenity of the Azorius guildhall, the giant looked completely out of place.

But he's here. Niv-Mizzet had promised he would be, but Ral had to admit for once he'd doubted the Firemind. *I wonder what kind of favors he pulled in to make that happen?*

Borborygmus paid no attention Ral, but he looked up with a snort as the doors opened again, admitting the angelic form of Aurelia. She was trailed by several high-ranking Boros officers, including the female minotaur Ral had seen last time. The sight of their uniforms seemed to rile the cyclops, who made a low growling sound punctuated by a few angry barks.

"Ahem." The speaker was a small, green-skinned humanoid standing near Borborygmus's feet. The frog-faced creature wore a well-tailored dark suit and spoke with an erudite accent. "Guildmaster Borborygmus wishes to know how much longer he will be kept waiting with the running dogs of order."

The cyclops's single eye was fixed on Aurelia. Most of the guilds were rivals to one degree or another, but the animosity between the anarchic Gruul Clans and the Boros Legion was legendary. The angel glanced at the cyclops, then politely took her seat, but her minotaur companion growled back, "You should be grateful to even have a seat at this table."

Borborygmus boomed a laugh. His translator said, "The guildmaster wishes you to understand that he is only here in deference to long-standing obligations to the Firemind. He offers no respect to any lesser creature."

"Lesser creatures," the minotaur said. "He—"

"Please," Isperia said, with quiet authority. "Let's not have this meeting dissolve before it begins. The other delegations are arriving as we speak."

"I, for one, am eager to hear what Niv-Mizzet has to say." This was a new voice, made harsh and anonymous by a strange buzz, as though heard on the other side of thick wall. Ral looked across the room and saw a blurred, shifting figure, its humanoid shape covered in a cloak of illusion, so that it showed an every-changing arrangement of clothes and features. Ral had no idea when it had arrived.

"Lazav," Aurelia said with distaste. "You refuse to show yourself, even here?"

"Especially here, I should think." Lazav leaned back on the bench, dropping his blurred feet up on the rail.

"The Senate welcomes the Dimir guildmaster," Isperia said. Then, as the big doors opened again, she added, "And also the delegations from Simic and Selesnya."

Selesnya was represented by Emmara, in company with several other elves Ral didn't know. A party of four purple-robed magi from Simic were just behind them. Their leader was an older man with hard, pebbly skin and bulging, fishy eyes, and his companions were a similar mix of humanoid and ichthyoid. *Biomancers*, Ral thought, with an edge of distaste, as they bowed to Isperia and took their seats. He'd never been fully comfortable with the Simic's strange ideas about improving themselves.

Orzhov was next to arrive. Kaya and Teysa came in together, followed by several priests in black and gold robes. *I'm going to have to get the full story from them at some point.* Last of all came the new queen of the Golgari, unaccompanied. Vraska wore a spectacular suit of scaled armor, gleaming with the iridescent colors of beetle scales, and the tendrils on her head lay flat and quiescent. Only when she saw Isperia did they shift, rising a fraction before she mastered herself and gave a shallow bow.

"Representatives and guildmasters," Isperia said, rising to her haunches. The sphinx's voice grew effortlessly louder until it dominated the room. "I thank you for coming. We face an unprecedented threat to Ravnica itself, and I am heartened by this evidence that the guilds can draw together in a crisis."

"Evidence is something we haven't seen much of," one of the Simic snapped in a nasal voice. "Zarek has proposed some wild theories about many worlds and interplanar threats. How do we know that any of this is real?"

"I believe him," Lazav said. "Nothing else fits the facts we have, limited as they are."

The Boros minotaur snorted. "Yes, let us rely on the word of a spy who's busy tearing apart his own guild."

"I found my guild in need of . . . cleansing," Lazav said. "And I will tell you now that I am not the one in this chamber you should mistrust." He turned to face Ral, and even through the illusion cloak Ral felt his gaze.

Slowly, Ral ran a hand through his hair, a tiny crackle restoring its customary frizz. He got to his feet, holding up his hands for silence.

"Honored representatives," he said, looking around the room. "I'm aware that simply being here, together, is nearly unprecedented. But if we are going to defend Ravnica, we are going to have to go much further than that. Nicol Bolas is real, and he is coming. None of us can stop him."

"So you assume," said the minotaur. "You underestimate the Legion."

Borborygmus grunted, and his translator said, "We welcome this Bolas, if he will test his might against the Gruul."

"Don't be a fool," Vraska snapped. "None of you know Bolas the way Ral and I do. He does not believe in half-measures. If he is coming to Ravnica, it is *because* we cannot stop him."

"That's certainly his reputation," Kaya said. Everyone looked at her, and she seemed almost embarrassed to have spoken. "Look. I'm not from around here, you all know that. But I've dealt with plenty of people who've gotten in Bolas's way, and they've all regretted it. Take that for what it's worth."

"His agents have already caused a great deal of harm," Emmara said. "The coup attempt at Selesnya was his doing, and it was nearly successful."

"Whether it was his doing is unclear," one of the elves near her said. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Precisely," the Simic leader said. "Who benefits from this cooperation? Obviously the Azorius, with their laws and committees. We sit in their very hall! Could it not be that they have manufactured this supposed crisis for their own advantage?"

"I have no love for the Senate," Vraska grated, "but that is simply idiocy."

"I apologize if the subtleties are too much for a sub-sentient mind to comprehend," the fish-eyed representative sneered.

"You should all listen to Ral," Hekara burst out, unexpectedly. When, again, everyone paused to look, she flushed slightly. "He's usually right, is all," she said. "And he's my mate. So you should pay attention."

The Simic representative's eyes rolled. "If we're *quite* finished hearing from—"

An enormous shadow darkened the hall.

The great glass windows folded themselves delicately, moving as though of their own accord, in the grips of an unstoppable magical force. The roar of the rain redoubled, layered over with distant thunder. Some drops splattered on the polished marble, but most were blocked by the huge, scaled shape that now blocked the opening, claws gripping the outside of the building, wings spread wide for balance.

Niv-Mizzet had arrived.

His head just about fit into the chamber, like some enormous snake, with its brightly-colored fins spread wide. Isperia stepped back slightly, giving the dragon center stage. When the Firemind spoke, his voice echoed inside the skull of everyone present.

“Vraska is right,” Niv-Mizzet said. “You do not understand what is coming for you. But I do.” His huge head shifted, staring at each representative in turn. “I am the *parun* of my guild. I have lived on Ravnica for more than fifteen thousand years, and I have defeated more challengers than any of you can possibly imagine. I have knowledge that no one else living possesses, sorceries that are otherwise gone to time, weapons whose making is lost. And I am telling you that *Nicol Bolas is more powerful than I.*”

There was a long silence.

“If his power is so irresistible,” Aurelia said eventually, “then why gather us here at all?”

“It is not irresistible. I have been working on a way to stop him.” The Firemind’s fins flexed. “It is a most dangerous and all-consuming ritual, but I believe it will grant me the power I need.”

“But that would violate the Guildpact,” Lazav said, in the tone of someone finally understanding. “So you want to use the fail-safe.”

The elves with Emmara looked at one another in confusion. Emmara cleared her throat. “What fail-safe?”

“I imagine Trostani keeps that to herself,” Lazav said.

“When Azor, in his wisdom, created the Guildpact,” Isperia said, “he created a means by which it could be amended. It merely requires the agreement of all ten guilds.”

“It was not supposed to be necessary,” Niv-Mizzet said, “because the Living Guildpact could perform the same function. But Jace Beleren is still missing, and may never return. We can no longer afford to wait.”

“In other words,” the Simic representative said, “you want us to grant you permission to become practically all powerful?” He snorted. “How is that not simply an invitation to Izzet hegemony?”

“I have led the Izzet for ten thousand years,” the Firemind said. “But I will leave them for this, and Ral Zarek will take my place. The new strictures of the Guildpact will still bind me, even with my new power. I will become a guardian of Ravnica itself, above the concerns of guild politics.”

“Is that even possible?” Kaya said.

Ral spoke up. “Niv-Mizzet has a deeper understanding of the Guildpact than anyone living.” He thought he saw Vraska roll her eyes, but she said nothing.

“Convenient,” said the Simic representative. “So we must simply take his word for it.”

“The Firemind may be the expert,” Isperia said, “but every guild has its own lawmages. I suggest we take a recess, to allow the representatives to consult them and get a better understanding of what Niv-Mizzet is asking. This conference will reconvene tomorrow morning, and we will make our decision then.”

Following proper diplomatic protocol, the Azorius stewards had scheduled Ravnica’s most awkward reception to take place after the meeting. Vraska took one look at the room, full of suspicious stares and cucumber sandwiches, and walked away. They’d all been assigned quarters somewhere in the tower, and she resolved to find them.

The tower. Being here, in the center of Azorius power, grated more than she thought it would. All these people—thousands of scribes, bookkeepers, legislators—just going about their daily routines, scribbling words on a page. *They have no idea what it costs.* What their decisions meant to people out in the rest

of the city. *The scratch of a pen sends someone to prison. A tick mark is a death sentence.* It made her want to scream.

“Vraska.”

She turned, reluctantly, to find Ral coming up behind her. Vraska put her hands on her hips, her tendrils shifting uneasily.

“What do you want, Zarek?”

“I . . .” He pulled up short, taking in her expression. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” Vraska spat. She straightened up, making an effort not to let her inner turmoil show on her face. “What is it?”

“I just wanted to thank you for your help. I’m not sure I got the chance, after we left the cathedral.”

Vraska waved a hand. “Your friend was bleeding to death. I imagine that was distracting.”

Ral paused, as though he’d realized something, then went on. “And I know coming here can’t be easy for you.”

You have no idea. Vraska suppressed a snarl, and gave a curt nod. “I only hope it’s not for nothing.”

“They’ll come together,” Ral said. “We’ve got them this far.”

We. He trusted her, Vraska realized. She wanted to laugh, or possibly cry. Instead, she went to turn away, then hesitated.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Ral said.

“What Niv-Mizzet said, about Jace. That he might be dead. Does he—do you think he knows something we don’t?”

Ral frowned. “It’s hard to say, with him. He doesn’t confide in me more than he has to.”

“Do *you* believe he’s coming back?”

“Beleren? Probably.” Ral shrugged. “He’s too annoying to stay gone.”

“I can agree with that,” Vraska said, forcing a smile. “I should go. There are things I need to attend to.”

“Of course.” Ral bowed. “Tomorrow, then.”

Tomorrow.

She found her quarters, a bland but comfortable apartment, and shooed away the liveried stewards who tried to make her more comfortable. Everything here was so *sterile*, locked away inside a giant column of stone and steel. In her own domain, she slept on a bed of living moss, surrounded by the subtly beautiful scents of decay. And before that, she’d grown used to the *Belligerent*, its ever-present sway and the salt smell of the sea. Lying on the bed here felt like trying to sleep in a tomb.

Not that sleep was a real possibility. She felt her mind racing like a small animal caught in a trap, searching for a way out. *Damn Ral and his trust. Damn Jace, for not being here when I need him. Damn, damn, damn . . .*

Slowly, ever so slowly, the sun went down. Vraska lay in the cool darkness, staring at nothing, trying not to think.

There was a rustle from the front door of her room. She rolled out of bed at once, heart slamming in her chest, tendrils wild and writhing. For a few moments, there was only silence.

Something was visible by the door. A folded piece of paper, shoved underneath. Vraska padded across the room and picked it up. In a neat copperplate hand, the note said only,

The conference chamber, now. No guards.

There was a long silence. Slowly, Vraska crushed the paper into a ball. `linebreak`

`linebreak` The door to the conference chamber stood half-open. Vraska slipped through, her boots clicking softly on the marble. The big windows were closed, and rain drummed against them in a steady rhythm. Beyond, the city was mostly dark, the downpour having driven all but the most dedicated from the streets. Only a few lights burned, echoed in the sky by distant flashes of lightning. As the note had promised, no guards waited by the door.

Isperia sat where she had during the conference, propped on her leonine haunches. She was reading something and making notes, her big paws handling paper and pen with surprising delicacy. She tipped her head as Vraska entered, making note of the gorgon's presence, but didn't look up until Vraska cleared her throat.

"Guildmaster," Isperia said. "I would have thought you'd be asleep by now."

"Just feeling restless," Vraska said, walking across the room. She was calm, her tendrils flat and placid. "You?"

"I require little sleep," Isperia said. "And my duties never cease. Even in the midst of such great events, the business of the Senate continues."

"Yes," Vraska said. "It does, doesn't it?"

Isperia reached the end of a page and carefully set down her pen. She looked up, her pale eyes knowing.

"There is something you wish to say," the sphinx said.

"How much do you know about me?" Vraska said.

"Enough," Isperia said. "You were an assassin for the Golgari. Given recent revelations, it is safe to assume that you are a Planeswalker."

"Do you want to know how I found out I was a Planeswalker?"

"I admit to some curiosity on anything concerning the subject."

"I was born here on Ravnica," Vraska started pacing back and forth, Isperia's placid eyes following her. "In the depths, of course, but I was never a member of the Golgari. I wasn't . . . political, and they would have wanted me to be their tool." She touched her tendrils, gently. "I just wanted to be true to my nature. To hunt, alone and free."

"I was seventeen when the Senate decided that the Golgari had grown too powerful, too numerous. They needed to be pushed out of certain areas they'd claimed. The other guilds stood by as Azorius soldiers descended into the depths and rounded up peaceful rot farmers, kraul, whoever they could find. They didn't care whether we were guild members or not. They took me because of what I was, not what I believed, and tossed me in prison with the rest."

"And what a prison it was." Vraska turned sharply to face Isperia. "Your scribes are good at laws and principles, but not so talented when it comes to basic logistics, are they? We were packed in five, six,

seven to a cell. It was bound to boil over, and when it did the crackdown was vicious. They started hauling us away to improvised cells across the city. I was stuck in some dirty basement with half a hundred others.

"They kept us there for hours. Days. No one in the Senate knew what to do. We were starving, filthy with our own waste, and all the guards could tell us was that we had to wait until they got new instructions. Eventually someone snapped. The guards hit back.

"I wasn't even fighting." Vraska looked down at her hands. "I hadn't dealt with surface-dwellers much, then, but I knew they were waiting for an excuse. A gorgon is dangerous. We can't *help* but be dangerous, can we? If I fought, or talked back, they would have had every reason to kill me. So I stayed in the corner, with my hands over my eyes." She took a deep breath. "And when it was finished, they dragged me over and beat me anyway. I remember the moment I realized they weren't going to stop, that I was going to die in this stinking basement, for no damned reason at all. I couldn't stand that. So I just . . . left."

"You planeswalked," Isperia said.

"That's one way of putting it," Vraska agreed. "Another way is saying I woke up in a swamp, with half my ribs broken and no idea where I was."

"According to the information Niv-Mizzet has shared," Isperia said, "traumatic experiences are a common trigger for the ignition of a Planeswalker's spark."

"So I understand," Vraska murmured. She stopped walking, directly in front of the sphinx. "I suppose I have you to thank, then, for mine." Her tendrils shifted. "Not the Azorius. You. It was your name on the arrest order."

"I know," Isperia said. "I was supreme judge at the time. I remember the riots you describe."

"Regrettable, I'm sure," Vraska said. "That's how the Azorius described them. 'Regrettable.'"

"Yes."

Vraska took a step forward. "*Do you regret it? Signing the order?*"

"No," Isperia said mildly. "Mistakes were made in the execution, but the principle was sound. The Golgari *had* grown dangerous, and the balance was threatened. The Senate has to act in the best interests of Ravnica."

"You'd do it again."

"If necessary."

"I thought so." Vraska sighed. "Jace told me *I* should act in the best interests of Ravnica. For a while, I thought he was right. Aboard my ship, with my own crew, I could believe it." She shook her head. "Coming back here, though . . ."

"And yet you came to this council," Isperia said. "You put Ravnica's interest first."

"I did."

I'm sorry, Jace. It had all seemed so simple, aboard the Belligerent. You were wrong about me.

Vraska looked up, and her eyes filled with golden light.

linebreak This time, the delegates arrived in a mass, milling outside the double doors. Ral watched the Simic representatives talking in a tight huddle, as Emmara argued with her fellow elves and Borborygmors, hunched over in the corridor, gave an exasperated grunt. Dovin Baan talked quietly with the two Azorius soldiers outside the door, until a steward hurried over, bearing a long iron key.

“Apologies,” Dovin said. “Apparently the door was locked last night, for some reason.”

He turned the key, and the soldiers pushed the doors wide. Ral took a step forward, then froze.

The conference room looked much as it had the previous day. The great window was open, and rain had sprayed across the marble and darkened the pure white curtains. Sitting at the head of the conference circle, where she had been the previous night, was Ispيريا. She was in the act of rearing up, her back paws flat on the floor, her calm face caught in an expression of frozen surprise. And, from nose to tail, she was nothing but gray stone, like an exquisitely detailed statue.

It took Ral a moment to process what he was seeing, and another moment to draw breath. Before he could speak, the hallway erupted into pandemonium.

“Assassination!” bellowed the minotaur, stepping in front of Aurelia.

“The gorgon!” one of the elves snapped. “Where is she?”

Ral realized that Vraska was not among the crowd of ambassadors at the same time everyone else did, and the babble of voices rose to a higher pitch.

“It’s a trap!” rasped the fish-eyed Simic representative. “She’s lured us to the slaughter!”

Only Dovin Baan seemed able to retain his calm. He stepped into the room, staring at the petrified guildleader, then turned back to the Azorius soldiers in the corridor.

“Establish a perimeter, Captain. I want this building searched at once. Extra security here, on the double.”

“I will coordinate my forces to assist,” Aurelia said. Her wings snapped open as she sprinted across the room and hurled herself out the open window.

“Everyone, remain calm,” Dovin said, turning around. “You are all under our protection—”

“We see what your protection is worth!” the Simic representative snapped. “I for one am leaving at once.”

The argument among the elves reached a crescendo as the purple-robed Simic magi stalked toward the exit. The others who’d come with Emmara turned to follow them, and Emmara herself gave Ral a helpless look and shook her head before hurrying to catch up.

Ral looked at Dovin desperately. “Perhaps if we went somewhere to wait—”

“Fish-face is right,” Kaya said. “We should get out of here until we know it’s safe. If Vraska has turned on us, there’s no telling what else she’s got planned.”

“But—”

“Sorry.” Kaya tapped Teysa on the shoulder, got a nod, and the two of them walked away.

With that, a consensus seemed to have been reached. Hekara drifted to Ral’s side as the other delegates fled, leaving apologies in their wake. Ral stared after them, still stunned, not quite able to believe how quickly things had changed.

We were so close. He felt the old anger boiling up inside him. *So damned close.* And *Vraska . . .* linebreak
“Now what?” Hekara said, hesitantly.

Borborygmus gave an angry roar before turning to shuffle awkwardly down the corridor. His frog-like translator gave Ral a bow.

“The guildmaster instructs me to say that he sacrificed much to be here, at Niv-Mizzet’s behest. Much respect and honor amongst his people. Now he will face challenges, for certain. He wishes you to know that you have his animus.”

“What’s animus?” Hekara said, as the translator bowed again and turned to leave.

“A polite way to say he’s going to pull my head off the next time he sees me,” Ral muttered. He turned to find Lazav at his shoulder, wrapped in his flickering cloak of illusion. “You’re leaving too, I suppose?”

“Only for the moment,” Lazav said. “The Dimir remain at your disposal, should you find a way to proceed. But I would like to take this moment to remind you of my warning.”

“Which warning was that?”

“That *I* was not the one you should mistrust.” Lazav gave a blurred, flickering bow and melted away.

That’s it. Ral felt like he’d been hollowed out. *It’s over.* linebreak He’d thought this time would be different. He’d put his trust in Hekara, in Kaya. In *Vraska . Why on Ravnica did I think that was going to work out well?* linebreak *And now . . .* linebreak He closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids, he could see the maps of the Implicit Maze he’d compiled for Niv-Mizzet, back before the contest that had produced the Living Guildpact. The paths led through every guild’s territory, the complex network of magic that maintained the basic underpinnings of Ravnica. To change it required the consent of every guild, because the magic touched every guild.

Unless . . . linebreak He felt something bubbling up at the back of his mind. Plans and blueprints, a machine that would stretch across the Tenth District.

A way forward. linebreak His eyes opened.

“Ral?” Hekara said.

“We’re *not* finished.” Ral ran a hand through his hair, an electric crackle returning it to its frizzy peak. “Not yet.”