

# The Gathering Storm: Chapter 5

Django Wexler

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Ral Zarek had never been much for pets.

Once, in his much younger days, he and Elias had owned a puppy. This had been shortly after Ral had begun working for Bolas, and Elias's poetic career had begun to take off under the dragon's hidden patronage. Combined with the income from Ral's work, they had enough to move to apartments that weren't actually falling to pieces, and Elias had insisted on the dog. Having a small dog was the done thing at the time among the literary set, and ultimately Ral had never been able to refuse Elias anything.

He'd ended up doing most of the work, of course, feeding and cleaning up after the thing, and especially walking it, a task to which the frail Elias was constitutionally unsuited. More years had passed since that time than Ral cared to admit, but he could still remember the feeling of trying to proceed down the street with a modicum of dignity, while being pulled back and forth by the mad dashes of that half-crazed animal.

The *point* was that walking with Hekara was a very similar experience. While they weren't actually attached by a leash, Ral felt obliged to wait for her when she got distracted, which was constantly. As they walked toward Vitu-Ghazi, the great world-tree that was the center of the Selesnya's power, they passed onto a network of elevated roadways called the Grand Concourse. On holy days these would be lined with nature worshippers, but today they served as an impromptu market, where Selesnya adherents and outsiders could mingle, and guild members could sell their produce. Men and women knelt on blankets, with the wares spread out in front of them. Every ten feet, Hekara dashed off, spotting another strange fruit or unusual spice she simply had to examine.

*Maybe I should get her a leash.* Rakdos cultists had worn stranger things. And while the puppy had eventually gotten away from Elias's unreliable attention and escaped to greener pastures—much to Ral's relief—for the moment he couldn't afford for the same to happen to Hekara.

"See these?" she said, as he came up behind her. She gestured down at an arrangement of unusually shaped gourds. "You can dice them with peppers, an' some other stuffs, an' it comes out like *mmmmm*." She turned to him with a bright smile. "Also I once killed this one guy with one of 'em. The trick is, if you snap it off at the stem, it fits right—"

"Hekara," Ral said. "They're expecting me."

"Right." Hekara waved to the shocked-looking Selesnya woman behind the gourds, who seemed to be examining her merchandise in a new light. "Keen. Let's move!"

They started walking again. Vitu-Ghazi loomed over everything here, a mammoth tree nearly as tall as New Prahv. Buildings shaped from the living wood nestled in its huge, curving branches, connected by an intricate network of hanging bridges and ladder. Inside the main trunk, Ral knew, there was a cathedral to nature, every bit the size of the Orzhov's stone-and-glass version. The leaves of the overhanging tree kept the rain off, at least, the water funneling down through carefully designed gutters.

"Hekara an' Ral," Hekara said in a happy sing-song as they walked. "Partners! Mates! Comrades—"

"Hekara."

"What?"

"We are not partners." Ral blew out a breath. "I am doing my job, and you are here to observe. When we get inside, please *observe*, and don't contribute."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean *be quiet*."

After another few steps, he risked a glance over his shoulder. Hekara was still following, her eyes big and forlorn. The puppy had looked at him like that, he recalled. Usually when it had pissed somewhere it wasn't supposed to and he was trying to chastise it.

*I knew this was a bad idea.*

"Hey," she said, after another minute.

"*What?*" Ral growled.

"We're not inside yet, so can I contribute something?"

"If you must."

"Somebody's following us."

Ral glanced over his shoulder again.

"The woman in the black coat," Hekara said. "She's a ways back, but she's been there since we got to the Concourse." Her face brightened. "You want me to kill her?"

"No." Ral locked eyes with the figure in black, and got a nod. *Lavinia*. "I'll talk to her. Stay here."

"I should—"

"I said stay."

Hekara gave a huge sigh and wandered over to the blankets by the side of the street. Ral turned and walked back to where Lavinia stood, arms crossed under her dark coat. He spotted the gleam of metal at her side.

"I thought you didn't want to be seen with me," Ral said.

"You didn't give me much of a choice," Lavinia said. "I was making sure I was the only one on your tail."

"And?"

"You're clear, for the moment. The Selesnya have a surprisingly good counter-intelligence arm." She glanced at Hekara. "Who's your companion?"

Ral grimaced. "The emissary from Rakdos. The old monster insisted she accompany me so he can be sure we're not plotting against him."

"That sounds like Rakdos." Lavinia smiled slightly. "You're having greater success than I anticipated."

"So far." Ral nodded at the world-tree. "We'll see."

"I wanted to warn you. Bolas's people have something planned for Selesnya."

"Something meaning what?"

"I don't know. I can only intercept a fraction of their communications. But there have definitely been several messages related to something going on here, and soon. It may be timed to coincide with your visit."

"Wonderful. So I need to be careful, but you can't tell me how or what to do about it."

"Welcome to my world," Lavinia said. "They're clever, determined, and extremely well-funded. I'm doing the best I can."

The strain was obvious in her pale face, dark circles blooming under her eyes, and Ral felt an unexpected pang of sympathy. He'd always thought of Lavinia as the tireless enforcer of justice, an invincible pillar of the Azorius, but now she was operating outside her former guild and against a much more dangerous opponent.

"All right," he said, more gently. "I'll do my best. And you be careful, too."

"Of course." She pulled her coat tighter.

"Actually," he said. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"Vraska," he said. "The new queen of the Golgari. How much do you know about her?"

"She tried to kill Beleren once. Not much else off the top of my head. Why?"

"She wants to meet," Ral said. "I need to know what her position is now."

"I'll see what I can find out," Lavinia said. "Nothing's for certain."

"Of course." Ral inclined his head. "Thanks for the warning."

Lavinia turned and walked away, fading into the crowd. Up ahead, Hekara was in a shouting match with an elf girl over some delicate glass ornaments the Rakdos emissary had apparently broken by accident. Ral rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh.

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A centaur woman, clad in flexible wooden armor, greeted Ral and Hekara at the entrance and took them away from the main cathedral, toward the smaller buildings alongside the great tree. She moved at an easy walk, ascending a long, curving stair that was clearly designed with her race in mind.

"Don't ask," Ral said, when he saw Hekara staring at their escort.

"Why not?"

"Because asking a centaur if you can ride her is a good way to get your head kicked in," Ral said quietly.

"Trust me."

"Yeah? Keen, good advice." Hekara looked around curiously. "Lot of blades around, don't you think?"

"Mmm," Ral said noncommittally.

He'd noticed the heavy military presence himself. Soldiers in green-and-brown armor were everywhere, humans and elves for the most part, but also centaurs and elephant-headed loxodons. On his few previous visits to the world-tree, he didn't remember such heavy security. *Maybe they got wind of whatever Lavinia was worried about, too.*

Emmara Tandris was waiting for them outside a multi-story building wrapping in a spiral around an enormous branch. She was tall, slim, and graceful, with a mass of golden hair, wearing a shimmering green dress that made her look like a part of the tree herself. Hekara raised her eyebrows appreciatively.

"Remember," Ral hissed. "*Observe.*"

"Right."

A squad of soldiers flanked Emmara, led by a frowning sergeant, their hands on their weapons. She stepped forward to bow to Ral, and he returned the gesture, keeping his expression formal. He hadn't met Emmara since the Implicit Maze debacle, and while they hadn't been *precisely* enemies, she'd been close with Beleren and Ral doubted he'd made a good impression.

"Master Zarek," she said, in a musical voice. "Thank you for agreeing to see me. I know you must be busy."

"Of course," Ral said. "I'm hoping we can reach an agreement for your guild to participate in the summit."

"I would like that very much," Emmara said, and he caught a hint of frustration in her voice. "Why don't you come inside?"

The sergeant stepped forward and cleared his throat. "You'll have to surrender your weapons, sir."

Ral glanced at Emmara, then shrugged. He undid the straps on his bracers and the accumulator, and handed them over to one of the soldiers.

"That's the latest model," Ral said. "Be careful with it."

"You'll get your gadgets back safe and sound," the sergeant said dismissively.

"I hope so," Ral said. "They've been known explode if they get knocked around."

The sergeant and his men exchanged a worried look, and Ral kept a straight face. It wasn't true, but the Izzet *did* have that reputation. Another soldier approached Hekara, nervously, and she spread her arms and twirled in a circle, bell tinkling in her hair.

"Nothing but me, yeah?" She grinned at him. "That's dangerous enough."

The soldiers seemed satisfied. They stood aside to let Ral and Hekara join Emmara, and together they walked through the open door into the building. Like all Selesnya structures, it had a curved, organic look, walls and partitions growing smoothly down from the floor and ceiling. Instead of glass windows, a dense screen of thin branches and leaves let in a soft, friendly light. In the intersection between two corridors, a small, organic fountain burbled quietly.

"I'm sorry about that," Emmara said. "Glademaster Garo has insisted on increased security."

"Any particular reason?" Ral said.

"It's . . . complicated." She went quiet as a group of soldiers passed by. "I'll explain in private." She glanced back at Hekara. "Who's your companion?"

"Oh." Ral took a deep breath. "This is Hekara, the emissary from Rakdos. Hekara, this is Emmara Tandris."

“Keen!” Hekara nodded enthusiastically, producing a gentle tinkling. “So you’re like, the head elf in these parts?”

“Not exactly,” Emmara said, with a quiet smile. “We don’t have much formal hierarchy in Selesnya. I have some influence, but . . .” She stopped again as a robed loxodon clomped heavily past, then pointed to a closed door. “In here.”

They’d climbed at least two stories up a curving ramp to reach this room, Ral guessed. It was a simple sitting room, with chairs woven from dried branches and a couple of spindly tables. A serving girl was cleaning when they arrived, but she bowed hurriedly to Emmara and rushed out, leaving them alone.

“Sorry,” Emmara said, when they were alone. “As I said, things are . . . complicated.”

“Evidently,” Ral murmured. “I’ve never heard of dissension in Selesnya.”

“The current situation is unprecedented,” Emmara motioned for them to sit. Ral did, while Hekara wandered over to the window and started trying to pry the weave of branches apart. After a moment, Emmara shrugged and took the seat next to Ral. “Ordinarily, the dryads interpret the will of *Mat’Selesnya*, the Worldsoul, and guide guild policy, with the Trostani at their head.”

“It’s a triumvirate, yes?” Ral said. “A council of three dryads who rule Selesnya.”

“Not exactly,” Emmara sighed. “It’s so hard to explain to outsiders. The Trostani are not three separate beings, but three aspects of the *same* being, a single entity that moves according to the world spirit’s desires. Their three aspects embody Life, Order, and Harmony. Sometimes the needs of one aspect clash with another, but it is never long until they regain consensus.”

“Until now?” Ral said.

“Until now,” Emmara said sorrowfully. “Harmony has withdrawn entirely, and Life and Order are at cross purposes. The dryads are paralyzed, and we have no way to know the will of Mat’Selesnya. It has thrown the guild into chaos.”

“Oh!” Hekara said from by the window. “Have you tried killing two of them? That might help.”

“I . . .” Emmara glanced at Ral, then shook her head. “I do not think that would be useful.”

“Really? Usually fixes *my* problems,” Hekara shrugged.

“While the deadlock continues,” Ral said, “who rules Selesnya?”

“As I said, no one *rules*,” Emmara pursed her lips. “I have . . . some influence. Many who believe the guild should be more involved in the affairs of Ravnica agree with my ideas. But Glademaster Garo also has his followers, and he thinks the most prudent course would be to retreat into our enclaves and defend our borders until the trouble has passed.”

“The trouble isn’t going to just pass,” Ral said. “Not this time. This is *Nicol Bolas*. I know it’s hard to understand what that means, where he comes from, but—”

“That he’s a Planeswalker?” Emmara looked thoughtful. “The idea isn’t as disturbing as I thought it might be. It feels . . . familiar.” She shifted uncomfortably. “But Garo doesn’t see why we should risk working with the other guilds when we might not even be threatened.”

“Then I need to speak to Garo,” Ral said. “I’ll convince him otherwise.”

“I asked him to attend this meeting,” Emmara said unhappily. “But he refuses.”

Ral frowned. “The soldiers are his?”

"They serve the Conclave," Emmara said. "But yes, many of our more martial members count themselves as his adherents."

"Then it seems like he has the whip hand."

"What?" Emmara's brow wrinkled, and then she laughed. "Oh, no. Garo would not attempt to settle this by the blade. He is not a bad person, Master Zarek, please believe me. Only . . . somewhat more cautious than I would like, and firm in his convictions."

Ral let out a breath, fighting frustration. "All right. So what do we do?"

"I am hopeful that you can speak to a few influential people while you're here. It may serve to tip the balance—"

The door opened, quietly, and the serving girl re-entered, bearing a tray with a steaming pot of tea. Emmara looked up.

"That's not necessary," she said. "Please, leave us be."

"Sorry, Mistress Emmara." The girl came over and set the tray on one of the tables. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Emmara waved a hand, dismissively, and the girl turned to go. Turned—

And reached behind her back—

Ral moved fast, leaping out of his chair and throwing himself toward Emmara. The girl's hand emerged with a long, slim dagger, which she swung overhand in an arc that would bury it in Emmara's breast. Emmara herself was looking up, startled, as it came down.

His arm took her around the waist, pulling her down and knocking the lightweight chair out of the way. The assassin's dagger missed its target, slashing a line of red across Emmara's upper arm instead. Emmara hit the floor, eyes wide with shock, and Ral turned away from her to find the girl raising her blade for another strike. He brought his hand up, electricity crackling between his fingers, cursing the officious sergeant who'd taken his accumulator—

And then Hekara was standing behind the assassin, as casually as if she'd never moved at all. The Rakdos emissary raised a hand, and steel gleamed between her fingers. She brought the blade down and across in a single smooth motion. A moment later, a crimson line drew itself across the Selesnya girl's throat. The assassin clutched her neck, blood forcing its way between her fingers. She fell to her knees, then toppled, shuddering.

"Keen!" Hekara said. She tossed her bloody knife into the air, and it vanished before it came down.

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"Emmara!" Ral said.

"I'm all right," Emmara said through gritted teeth. She sat up, prodding her bleeding forearm. "It's not deep."

"Was she one of Garo's people?"

Emmara glanced at the dead servant and shook her head. "I told you, Garo would never do such a thing. He has been an honorable defender of the Conclave for years."

"Hekara?" Ral said. "Can you poke your head out and see if anything's going on?"

“Yessir!” Hekara said, with an exaggerated salute. She rushed to the door and peered out into the hall. “Lots of soldiers around. Not going anywhere, just sort of waiting. Nobody else.”

“This is a coup,” Ral said, shaking his head when Emmara started to object. “Maybe Garo’s not as honorable as you think he is, or maybe someone’s pulling his strings. Doesn’t matter. We need to get out of here—”

Hekara danced back from the door as it opened. An elven soldier in wooden armor came in, his eyes widening at the sight of the bloody mess on the floor. Another pair were close behind him, but Hekara threw herself at the door, slamming it shut in their faces. Ral rushed the man who’d gotten inside. The elf went for his sword, but Ral’s lightning was faster, arcing out from his hand to shimmer briefly across the man’s body. It was a light burst, toppling him to the floor and leaving him shuddering but conscious.

Emmara, who’d gotten to her feet, had torn a strip from her ethereal gown and tied it into a makeshift bandage around her wound. She came over to where the stricken soldier lay, and waved one hand, glowing a brilliant green. Wooden tendrils grew out of the floor, wrapping around the man’s wrists and ankles and fixing him in place.

“What in the name of the Worldsoul is going on?” she demanded. “By whose authority are you here? What do you know about this?”

“I—” The elf shook his head frantically. “You were—we were told—”

“What were you told?” Ral said, electricity crackling dangerous between his fingers. “And by whom?”

“Glademaster Garo said that Mistress Emmara had been murdered!” the elf said. His eyes went to Ral. “By, um, you, Master Zarek.”

“Clearly I have *not* been murdered,” Emmara said, rubbing her arm, “although it was a near thing. Where is Garo now?”

“Upstairs, in the council room.”

Emmara got to her feet. “I will go and see him.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Ral said. He grabbed her uninjured arm and pulled her away from the bound soldiers. “He’s already tried to kill you once. If you walk in there, I guarantee you’re not going to walk out again.”

“And if I flee?” Emmara said. “What then? Civil war? I will not have it.” She shook her head, and Ral saw tears at the corners of her eyes. “I will confront him *now*, while we can still stop this.”

“Ah, Ral?” Hekara said.

“One moment,” Ral growled.

“I know I’m supposed to observe,” she said, “but these guys are *really* interested in getting through this door. So if you don’t want ’em to get in here, it’d be keen if you helped me out?”

Ral turned. Hekara was leaning against the door with all her weight, and it shook and shuddered under repeated blows from the other side. Her boots scraped up splinters from the floor as she was pushed slowly back.

“At least,” Ral hissed, “let me get my equipment back before you confront him. Then I can defend you.”

"I can defend myself." Emmara made a half-circle in the air, and the wood of the walls flowed down and around the door, locking it in place. Hekara stepped back with a sigh of relief and stuck her tongue out at the soldiers beyond. "But your assistance would be welcome. The security office is on the first floor."

"How do we get there?" Ral said.

"Out the window?!" Hekara said, bouncing with excitement. "Right?! Keen!"

Emmara nodded. Another gesture sent the branches that sealed off the window bending away, leaving a clear space. The Rakdos emissary ran happily over, doing an impromptu cartwheel in a storm of jingling bells, and threw herself outside.

"I . . . was going to offer to grow us some handholds," Emmara said, looking after her.

"She'll be fine." Ral looked out at the drop, which was considerable—three stories of building, and hundreds of feet more through the branches of the tree to the city below. "But I'll take you up on it."

Fortunately, the wood of the world-tree was as easily molded as clay, at least in Emmara's hands, and so the climb down the outside of the building was not particularly difficult. Hekara managed by producing small blades and jamming them into the wood as she went, which made Emmara wince every time. They bypassed the second-floor windows, working their way around the opposite side of the spiraling building from the front entrance. The grounds, Ral could see, were swarming with soldiers.

On the first floor, Emmara found a window that led to an unoccupied corridor and let them in. Hekara was still bouncing in excitement.

"Where's the security office?" Ral said.

"Around that corner," Emmara said. "But there will be guards."

Ral looked at his hands, feeling the coiled power within them. "I can handle one or two. Hekara?"

"Hmmm?" She grinned at him. "Can I help somehow?"

"How many of those little knives have you got?" He frowned. "Where were you keeping them, anyway?"

Hekara blinked. "I'm a razorwitch. I didn't tell you?"

She held up an empty hand, twisted it with a flourish, and was suddenly holding a double-ended, diamond-shaped blade by the tip. Another flourish, and there was a second one beside it, then a third and a fourth. She opened her hand, and the steel had vanished before it hit the ground.

"That's handy," Ral muttered. The blades were sharp on both sides, he noted, and up close he could see her fingers were thickly cross-hatched with tiny cuts. *All Rakdos are mad.* "All right. Try not to kill anyone if you don't have to. We don't know who is actually working with Garo and who's just doing their jobs."

"Sigh," Hekara said aloud. "Buzzkill."

"Come on." He beckoned to Emmara, and the three of them went around the corner.

A single door led into the security office, with an armored soldier standing on either side of it. Ral strode up to the first one in a business-like fashion, and before he could bark out a warning Ral slapped a palm against his chest, giving him a sharp jolt of electricity that had him flopping like a landed fish. Emmara gestured sharply at the other, and the wood of the wall reached out and wrapped around his hand as he went for his sword. Ral ignored his shout of alarm and kicked the door.



Two more men sat on either side of a desk in the office, already drawing their weapons. Ral raised his hand, but instead of a lightning bolt only a weak spark crackled between his fingers. He swore and threw himself sideways as the soldier lunged. There was a rapid *thunk-thunk-thunk* sound, knives biting into wood. Emmara grabbed the man who'd attacked by the wrist and used his own momentum against him, tossing him over her shoulder to land in the corner with a clatter. At a gesture, wood rose around him, sealing him in place. When Ral got up, he could see the other soldier was pinned to the opposite wall by a blade thrown into the palm of his hand, and two more bracketed his head. His eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Don't mind us," Hekara said gayly.

Ral spotted his accumulator and bracers in the corner and snatched them up. Slinging the thing across his back felt like a drink of cold water after a long, thirsty run. He felt his hair rising into its customary frizz, and power crackled over the bracer's mizzium studs as he strapped them on. Emmara raised a questioning eyebrow.

"All right," Ral said. "Now we can go and find Garo."

There were more soldiers in the hall outside, but Emmara held up her hands before they could attack. Their leader, the sergeant Ral had seen earlier, hesitated.

"I don't know what you've been told," Emmara said, "but there has been a terrible misunderstanding. I am going upstairs at this moment to confer with Glademaster Garo."

"What about them?" the sergeant said. "I've got orders to arrest them."

"For my murder?" Emmara said.

"I . . ." The sergeant frowned.

"They will be coming with me. Everyone else, please remain at your posts."

She swept up the ramp, dress trailing dramatically behind her. Ral found himself smiling as he hurried along in her wake. *I can always appreciate a good sense of drama.* Two floors up, there was a similar scene, and again the soldiers fell back at Emmara's command. *Maybe she's right. Maybe just the one girl was paid off, and this isn't a full-scale coup.*

On the top floor, a double door led into a wide circular chamber with a large table growing out of the floor in the center of it. At one end of the table was a mess of maps, and a man and a woman stood looking down at them. The man wore living wooden armor, more elaborate than most of the Selesnya soldiers. This, Ral assumed, was Glademaster Garo. The woman beside him was a human in a green robe, red curls spilling out from her head as she leaned over the table. Behind the pair, two heavily armored soldiers waited.

"Garo!" Emmara said.

Garo looked up. It was hard to judge ages, with elves, but his face was more heavily lined than most Ral had seen, and his long white hair was pulled back in a neat queue. For a moment, their gazes met, and Ral felt something deeply *wrong* in the man's eyes. There was something dead there, as though his skull had been hollowed out and replaced with something vile.

"Emmara," he said. "I had hoped my reports were wrong. Thank goodness you're all right."

"What is going on?" Emmara said. "Someone tried to kill me!"

"I know," Garo said. "Ral Zarek. Thankfully, we have him close to hand."

"What?" Emmara's eyes narrowed. "You . . ."

The red-haired woman gestured, and the doors slammed behind them, wood flowing across them. Garo nodded in their direction.

“Since you’ve so conveniently brought yourself to my doorstep,” he said, “we can dispense with the pleasantries. Kill them all, please. Although I’d prefer Zarek’s body be reasonably intact, for display.”

Emmara gave a shout of rage and raised her hand, circles of green energy shimmering into life around her. The wooden table groaned and began to twist out of shape, long tendrils winding over and around one another, building up a crude simulacrum of the human form. The red-haired mage made a similar gesture, and another elemental began taking shape in front of her, the two hulking shapes rising up simultaneously.

The two armored soldiers split up, moving around the table in opposite directions. Ral gestured Hekara to the right, and took the other man for himself. The elf closed in, drawing his sword, and Ral sent a bolt of lightning slamming out from one bracer. It connected them in an arc of coruscating electricity, but the blue-white tendrils spun and danced on a sphere centered on the soldier, not quite reaching him.

*Warded.* Ral permitted himself a tight smile. *But they weren’t prepared for me.* Ral poured power into the blast, making the hissing, spitting line of power twitch and writhe like a frantic snake, and he felt the elf’s protections start to crumble. With an almighty *bang*, the shield collapsed, and the concussion blew the soldier across the room. He hit the wall beside Garo and slumped motionless to the floor, gouts of smoke rising from gaps in his armor.

Across the room, Hekara was dancing around the second Selesnya soldier, avoiding his long blade and slicing nimbly at the joints in his armor with her knives. A steady patter of blood already coated the floor beneath him. In the center of the room, the two elementals thrashed, huge wooden limbs ripping and tearing at one another. Emmara and the red-haired mage stood on opposite sides, leaning in as though physically pressed against one another, green energy flaring.

That left Garo. The glademaster frowned and drew his sword, a wooden blade as thin as a razor and etched with glowing runes. Ral aimed a lightning bolt at his head, but he intercepted with his blade, the energy crackling harmlessly over the weapon before dissipating.

“Ral Zarek.” Garo closed, and Ral’s bracers rippled with power. “I should have known you’d cause trouble.”

“I’m sorry,” Ral said. “Have we met?”

“Oh, yes.” Garo smiled. “You don’t remember?”

The elf attacked, smooth and fast. Ral backed away from the first slash and took the second on a bracer, lightning thrashing over the elf’s sword arm. He slashed his hand, and Garo had to duck a wave of lightning and retreat a step. The elf began to circle.

“I think I would recall,” Ral said. “Give it up. You’re finished.”

“Far from it. I’ve only just begun.”

Garo came at him again, a slashing, vicious assault that forced Ral to give ground, blocking with his bracers and countering with slashing waves of plasma. The elf’s attacks grew ever more wild, until he finally left a clear opening, swinging his blade wide and letting Ral slam a shoulder into him and knock him off balance. Before Garo could recover, Ral struck, white-hot power tearing through his wooden armor. Garo let his blade clatter to the ground, sagging against Ral. He coughed, and then smiled, teeth stained crimson.

"You still owe me, Ral Zarek. Oh, yes." The dying elf coughed again. "And you're going to pay. One way . . . or the other . . ."

The voice was different. But the tone, the cadence, were all the same. Ral went still.

"Bolas," he breathed.

"Not quite," Garo said. "But . . . the next best thing." Blood poured from his mouth, staining Ral's shoulder, and he fell to his knees. "See you . . . *soon*."

Garo collapsed. Ral raised his head, shakily, and saw that the fight was over. One of the elementals had been torn to splinters, and Emmara and her own creature stood over the red-haired mage, who had fallen to her knees, gasping for breath. The second armored soldier was down, too, in a pool of blood. Hekara prodded him, idly, like a cat toying with a dead mouse.

"This . . ." Emmara looked at Ral, then down at Garo. "This is a tragedy."

"It would have been more of a tragedy if he'd succeeded," Ral said. *Kill Emmara, blame me for it, and you'd derail the entire summit. Exactly what Bolas would want.*

*See you soon . . .*

"I agree," Emmara said. She was breathing hard, but there was a hard, wild look in her eyes. "Clearly we have some . . . housekeeping to do. But rest assured, Master Zarek, Selesnya will be at your summit."

"Good." Ral leaned against the wall and ran one hand through his hair with a static crackle, restoring its frizz. "Now we're getting somewhere."

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linebreak "This is ridiculous," Kaya said. "I look ridiculous."

"Would you be quiet?" Tomik said, fiddling with his glasses. "The gray sisters don't talk."

"The gray sisters are withered corpses," Kaya said. "Someone is going to notice that I'm still, you know. Plump."

"Just keep your head down. Next time you can climb up the outside of the tower again."

Kaya snorted, but stayed quiet. They were back in Orzhova, climbing toward the high cell where Teysa was held. Bringing Kaya through in disguise had been Tomik's idea. The gray sisters were robed nuns who handled all the menial chores in the cathedral, and could therefore come and go as they pleased. Unfortunately, they were exclusively recruited from deceased worshippers. The robe they'd stolen hadn't been cleaned since it was last used, Kaya was certain. The smell seemed to be getting worse by the minute.

"Last guard," Tomik muttered.

Kaya kept her head down, saying nothing as Tomik exchanged greetings with the armored soldier. The man let them pass with barely a grunt. As Teysa's personal secretary, Tomik was the only one allowed in to see her. "Mostly," he'd told Kaya downstairs, "because I'm too unimportant to bother anyone."

Teysa was waiting when they entered, drumming her fingers impatiently on the table. She jumped up as Tomik closed the door. Kaya concentrated for a moment and stepped out through the robe, letting the filthy thing fall to the floor.

"You're late," Teysa said.

"Sorry," Tomik said. "They've increased security since last time."

“So what’s so important that we need to risk a meeting?” Kaya said. “I thought you didn’t want me in here until you were ready.”

“I would like to know that as well,” Teysa said, looking at Tomik. “You’re the one who suggested this.”

“You are?” Kaya looked at the secretary, who gave an uncomfortable shrug.

“I have . . . an idea. A plan, maybe. I don’t like it, but I can’t think of anything better.” He took a deep breath. “I might be able to get us the distraction we need to give Kaya a shot at the Ghost Council.”

“And keep me alive in the process?” Teysa said. “I’m listening.”

“I would prefer to remain alive, too,” Kaya said. “If that’s important to your planning. What’s your distraction?”

A pained look passed over Tomik’s face. “Ral Zarek.”

Teysa frowned. “The Izzet guildmage?”

“Yes.” Tomik’s cheeks flushed. “He and I are . . . close.”

“Close?” Teysa said.

“He means they’re sleeping together,” Kaya advised her, in a stage whisper.

Tomik’s blushed deepened further, but he nodded. “Ral has a position of considerable authority at the Izzet. If he were to arrange for an attack on the cathedral, that would certainly give us the opening we’re looking for.”

“And potentially start a guild war,” Teysa said.

“Not if you become guildmaster afterward,” Tomik said.

“Question,” Kaya said, raising her hand. “Is this Zarek so desperately in love with you that he’d commit guild forces to this just because you asked him to?”

“I . . . doubt it.” Tomik shook his head. “We have to offer him something.”

“Gold?” Teysa said.

“He doesn’t care about gold. But he’s arranging a guild summit, and he needs all ten guilds to participate. I know the Obzedat has rejected his invitation outright. If you were to promise to accept it . . .”

“Then he’d have every incentive to help us,” Kaya finished. “I like it. Everyone wins.”

“Except Grandfather.” Teysa grinned. “What’s the subject of the summit?”

“Ral believes that Ravnica will soon be under attack by an ancient dragon named Nicol Bolas,” Tomik said. “He wants to organize a common defense of some kind.” He shrugged nervously. “At least, that’s the word on the street.”

Kaya felt as though someone had removed a wall she’d been leaning against, leaving her stumbling forward. *An attack by Bolas? He’s coming here?* She exchanged a look with Teysa, but the Orzhov heir had more practice concealing her emotions. Her face was unreadable.

“I’m certain that’s a topic that’s worthy of . . . discussion,” she said. “As long as Kaya is amenable?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Kaya shook her head. *I need to think about this.* “Sounds fine to me.”

“All right.” Tomik pushed nervously at his glasses. “I’ll ask him, then.”

“Would you rather I do it?” Kaya said. She could tell this wasn’t easy for the secretary. *He’s braver than he looks.* “No,” Tomik said, a little sadly. “Ral trusts me.”