**The Terrors of Tin Street**  
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**The Terrors of Tin Street**  
by [ADashOfStarshine (ADashOfInsanity)](http://archiveofourown.org/users/ADashOfStarshine)

**Summary**

"She remembered her own young street rat years and grinned at the thought of how well the teenage her and the teenage Jace would have gotten along. *We'd have torn up the town, she thought with mirth. No bookshop would have been safe.*"

- Vraska in "The Flood"

When a fourteen year old Vraska finds a pathetic looking boy in the Rubblebelt, she expects him to pick a fight or her pocket. Instead, she finds a kindred spirit, and an unlikely union that could change the course of history.

Vraska and Jace meet as teenagers AU
Street Rats

It was dangerous staying this close to Gruul territory, but it was better than any cell. Sleeping round here meant you weren’t going to wake up in a set of Boros stocks or an Azorius cell. Sure, you could hope some Orzhov ministrant might come and pick you up and offer you a room for the night. However, in that case you’d better be ready to pay in blood. The fringes of the Rubblebelt suited Vraska just fine, especially after the Gruul had finished their fun and gone off elsewhere. There tended to be some ruins left to keep the wind off, and if you were lucky, there’d be goods about, maybe even a few coins.

This particular wreckage was ogre-made. You could tell because all the top stories of the buildings were levelled but they seemed to have got bored by the time they got to the ground floors. There was a promising amount of debris, not just rocks, but the fragments of carts and shop canopies. There had been a store here, perhaps multiple. Maybe with a cellar? She knew not to get her hopes up but at the very least she’d found somewhere to wait out the building storm.

Her choice was the ground floor of a building with an immense crack in the wall. The door had been buried, and there didn’t seem to be any discernible windows. The upper floors had been reduced to chunks of stone and splintered wood, but the ceiling seemed to be holding up fine. The crack was too small to let a fully-armoured guard through, but just about big enough to accommodate a skinny fourteen-year-old gorgon. She slipped inside just as thunder rolled overhead.

Vraska had intended to get inside, sit down in a corner, rewrap her shoes, maybe think about a fire, and then eat. She achieved the first part. Remarkably intact after its beating, this room was large enough to have multiple shadowy corners away from the crack. There were even a few broken shelves, perfect for firewood, and some bottles and jars littered across floor. Did they contain something edible? She planned to find out. However, as soon as she chose her corner, she came across a snag in her plan.

There was already someone in it.

A boy in a ragged blue tunic sat in the furthest reaches of the room, almost entirely obscured in the shadow of what might have once been a fireplace. He had a mess of dark hair that was more than a little matted, and his clothes were in tatters. He looked up at her as she got closer, peering curiously at him. He had Gruul tattoos over his face, but he didn’t look remotely Gruul. Your average goblin could probably eat this boy for breakfast. It wasn’t entirely surprising that someone had found this space first. Yet-

There was the faintest scuff of movement. Vraska whipped round just in time to grab the boy by the wrist. With a swift motion, she twisted it, thrusting a knee into his stomach, causing him to howl in pain and drop like a sack of bricks. The knife, no, letter opener, tinkled to the ground, sliding underneath the remnants of a counter. She grabbed the boy by the throat, just as the trick in the fireplace flickered once, twice, then faded.

“Mage!” she spat out. The boy in her grip was identical to the apparition. She met his gaze, eyes glowing a furious gold. Before she could petrify him, she was suddenly slammed backwards by a solid impact, not to the face, but the mind. She released him, almost toppling backwards as she clutched at her face, her hair writhing in pain. There was a sharp something pressing into her forehead. It was like someone was trying to force a knife through her skull. She glanced up through tears of agony to see the boy was still knelt on the floor. However, he had one hand extended and his eyes were glowing a mystical blue. Vraska let out a low hiss. She took a deep breath, wiping
away the tears with one arm. She took a deep breathe and glared at the mind-mage. She knew this magic. Filthy Azorius mages and skulking Dimir would extract answers from your mind with this hideous sort of invasion. She refused to break!

She balled her hands into fist as she pushed back at the intrusion, driving the mental blade back at the boy. The harder she pushed, the less pain she felt. The boy seemed taken aback by her resistance. As soon as she felt it lift, she surged forward, planting her fist straight into his etheareally-glowing face. He crumpled as blood began to gush from his nose. He rolled onto his side, clutching at his face. He looked utterly pathetic. Vraska spared him one last glance before taking the prime spot in the room – the shadowy fireplace where the illusion had once been. Because he looked so downtrodden, she wasn’t going to petrify him. However, if he made another move against her, well, then she’d reconsider.

It took some time for the boy to sit up. He wiped the last of the blood off on the tatters of his tunic, sat cross legged in the middle of the room. He stared at her position in the shadows as if he wanted the spot back. No chance.

“Are we done fighting?” Vraska asked him.

He slid back a little, as if in deference.

“No, I mean yes, no more fighting,” he replied, “I mean, there’s room for both of us.”

Vraska nodded.

There was a moment of silence. Vraska considered getting a start on her shoes, but she didn’t yet trust this stranger not to try and take her mind again. She kept an eye on him as he wiped more dry blood off his face. He kept glancing at her too. He was still afraid, which was wise, but that fear was slowly being overcome by something else.

Finally, he broke the silence.

“What are you?”

Vraska frowned. What did he want?

“I’m a gorgon. Never seen a gorgon before?”

The boy shrugged.

“I might have done, but I don’t remember. I don’t remember much of anything anymore.”

He’d lost his memories? That seemed odd for someone who was clearly a mind mage. Though, she had heard rumours about that sometimes the Dimir just wiped the minds of their members once they were no longer useful. This boy seemed far too young to be a Dimir agent, but you never knew with that guild.

“Are you Dimir?” she asked.

“Dimir?” he repeated, “Like the guild? No. Well I could be. I’ve been here about for a month and a half. That’s all I know. Why would I be Dimir?”

A month and a half? A month and a half in Gruul territory or a month and a half on Ravnica? What was left of the boy’s clothes were certainly outlandish, and he was undoubtedly powerful, if not handicapped.
“You’re a mind mage,” Vraska stated, “That’s a Dimir thing, well, sometimes it’s an Azorius or Izzet thing.”

“Yeah I think I am,” he ran a hand through his filthy hair, “A mind mage, I mean. But I’m not in a
guild. I don’t think…this is going to sound mad…I don’t think I’m from anywhere round here. My
name isn’t like any names from round here, neither is my accent, or my clothes…” He looked
down at what was left of them.

He was reasonably smart for someone with no memory.

“You’re probably from another world,” Vraska suggested, “You don’t sound or look like anyone
from a world I’ve been to, but only one of those had people on it.”

He looked up at her, eyes suddenly wide with wonder.

“You’ve been to other worlds? Can people do that here?”

Vraska shook her head.

“I think it’s really rare. Most people don’t know there is other worlds. According to a woman I
met on the world with people, we aren’t really supposed to tell anyone.”

He nodded as if somehow that made sense. It didn’t entirely make sense to Vraska, however it had
happened and she couldn’t deny it. The woman said it was a gift not to be wasted. More
importantly, she had given Vraska a hot meal, a new shirt and let her read one of the books she was
carrying with her. That was the best trip ever.

“Did you lose your memories when you moved worlds?” the boy asked her.

“No, I think that’s a you problem.”

“Oh.”

They lapsed into silence again. The sound of wind and rain replaced their voices, the storm
evidently having finally caught up with them. A puddle was forming near the crack in the wall, but
they were far enough away not to get damp. Vraska was dimly aware of lightning, striking
somewhere thankfully far in the distance, but the flash was enough to briefly illuminate the space
purple. She leaned back against the brick wall of the ex-hearth. Gods, she was tired. But could she
sleep with him here? He didn’t seem to want to stab her anymore, but she didn’t trust easily.

A gurgle echoed round the room that certainly didn’t come from the weather outside. The boy
visibly flinched and sighed; the silence finally broken. He both looked and sounded famished.
Vraska looked down at the small bag tied to her shirt. She didn’t have much but…well, perhaps
together they could find more?

She pulled the stolen pastry out the bag. It was falling apart slightly, and bits of fibre from the bag
was stuck to what had once been icing sugar. It took very little effort to pull it in two.

“Here.” She offered him half the pastry.

His eyes lit up.

“You got to help me find more tomorrow though,” she said, “This is all I got.”

“Sure,” he replied, hastening over to her. They both devoured their pastry halves in a matter of
seconds.

“What’s your name?” asked the boy.

“Vraska,” she replied, “What’s yours?” She recalled that wasn’t something he’d forgotten.

“Jace,” he replied, “Nice to meet you Vraska. Thank you for the food.”

This seemed like an odd time for niceties but she appreciated them, it made their weird fireplace
dining space seem rather civilised.

“Nice to meet you Jace.”

They sat for a moment listening to the storm outside. Hopefully it would abate by the morning,
otherwise it would be difficult to find a market worth stealing from. They were far less busy in bad
weather; you were all the more likely to get caught. She supposed with two of them, they could go
for some sort of distraction and grab it technique. Though, Jace had some rather unique talents.
Mind magic had to be some use on the streets, otherwise he wouldn’t have survived this long.

“Jace?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to work together?” Vraska suggested, “I mean, after we get food. We both have our
own…talents. But I think we’ll stand a better chance of surviving together than apart.”

“That sounds…that sounds really good,” he replied, “We can be a team. Look out for each other.”

Vraska nodded. It had been so long since she’d had anyone looking out for her, or anyone to look
out for. You never knew, this could work out.
Monsters

Chapter Summary

Vraska and Jace plan to find their next meal in the market stalls of Tin Street. However their venture ends up being more dangerous than either could anticipate.

Chapter Notes

AN: Thank you for the lovely comments on Chapter One! You've inspired me to take this story further than the five chapters I intended. I hope you continue to enjoy this story and please let me know if you do c:

Side note: If anyone reading this is going to Magicfest London on the 26th-28th of April, feel free to come and say hello. I will be cosplaying Vraska on the 26th and 27th, complete with Vraska-themed commander deck.

Vraska enjoyed being a mentor.

“This is Tin Street,” she proclaimed from her favourite walk way above the markets. It was a thoroughfare for those who wished to cross the busy lane without pushing their way through the crowds - a sturdy bridge with ornate low stone walls on each side. The columns making up the walls were spaced just far apart enough for them to peek through, giving them the best view of the markets below.

“This is my favourite place to get food. You can find all sorts.”

“There’s a lot of people down there,” Jace replied, leaning a little closer through the gap in the wall. Vraska kept an eye on him to make sure he didn’t get his head stuck in the stonework. That would be funny but he didn’t need to get hurt.

“Tin Street is always busy, all day and night. Around dawn and dusk, one set of stalls will pack and go, and then next lot will set up,” she explained, “Don’t even try to grab anything at those times of day. Every merchant is very attentive of where their goods are as they’re packing up. There aren’t many customers around, so you can’t lose yourself in the bustle. You’ll get the best stuff when the street is heaving. The merchants can’t see you coming and the authorities can’t chase you through the crowds. It’s a bit different in the Undercity but we’ll go there another time.”

Jace nodded as she had imparted some sort of sage wisdom.

“I reckon we could try something now,” Vraska continued, “Where do you think we should try?”

Jace took a moment to scour the markets below. It was late morning, coming up to midday. Tin Street was a riot of noise and smells. They were poised high above a series of open-air grills, multiple goblins searing portions of unidentifiable meat below them. Beside them, a man with a wobbling wooden tower was selling iron work, strung over and hung from his precarious structure.
Glinting chains and gleaming knives were laid out for customers to browse, cutlery was hung on metal hoops like rings of keys. Opposite the tower, an elderly woman was selling wickerwork. Stacks of baskets, chairs and boxes towered over her and the stall nearby, where a grocer had multiple tables stacked with produce.

“There,” said Jace pointing to the greengrocer, “I reckon we could get something to eat over there.”

“Why him?” Vraska asked. He had a good eye for opportunity. A large stall with only a single vendor was perfect.

“He’d be really easy to distract,” said Jace, “He keeps trying to start conversations with his customers, but they don’t want to stick around. He’s also tried to talk to the basket seller next door, but she hasn’t got the time. If one of us got talking to him, the other could take one of those brown bags of fruit.”

She was very impressed.

“And,” Jace continued, “If I do the talking, I can keep him both in conversation, and magically impair his awareness. You can steal things whilst he’s distracted.”

“That’s genius,” Vraska murmured. Jace smiled, glowing a little at the praise.

“You’re definitely going to be great at this,” Vraska reassured him, “But the fruit bags are very fragile though, those paper bags fall apart like tissue. Those punnets over there are a lot more stable. If you are happy to distract the man, I can slip in between his stand and the one to the right.”

She pointed at the next stall along. It was an odd stand full of travelling supplies - tents, lanterns, warm clothing and various other provisions. Vraska knew for a fact that they sold a range of dried fruits and jerky. Where anyone was hiking in this district, she didn’t know, however she couldn’t complain at the chance to get meat.

“Can I wipe his memory when I’m done?” asked Jace, “So we can try it again and he still falls for it?”

“You can do that?” Vraska wondered how far Jace could go. His mind magic was already extraordinary with the attempted mind-reading and the illusions. He could wipe memories too? His magic would be incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands and a huge invasion of privacy in others. However, to keep them both from starving? And used on a wealthy old merchant who would just let his spare produce go to waste? She had no complaints.

“Yeah. It’s how I make people not follow me,” Jace sounded a little proud of himself in the face of her amazement.

“Definitely do that then.” Vraska was already feeling like this was going to be a very successful venture.

“We should decide where we’re coming in from and where we’ll go out,” she continued, “Do you see the alley down by the hat shop beside the man selling rotating chickens.”

Jace nodded. There was a man with a series of chickens on spits, roasting over a fire. He turned it like some kind of grim chicken ferris wheel, making sure each bird was getting cooked evenly.

“Chicken man is constantly high as a griffin, he won’t notice a thing,” Vraska explained, “I can easily slip in there and return there, it’s joined to another alley that runs right down the back,
through a few blocks and back towards where we slept last night. If you want to come from the front like you’re browsing the market, I’ll meet up with you back in that alley.”

“How will I know when you’re ready to go?” Jace asked. He had balled one hand into a fist and was looking determinately down at the greengrocer’s stall. It was good to know he was steeling himself for the task ahead.

“I’ll make a noise,” said Vraska, “Should be easy enough without anyone seeing me. She pressed her palm against her chin and pursed her lips. She gave an odd warbling whistle that made a nearby passing dog prick up its ears.

“That sounds like one of the white doves!” Jace proclaimed, “The ones in the fancy park with the Selesnyan Guards… Turns out you can’t sleep there.”

Vraska gave a grimace of agreement. She’d definitely tried that more than once. Turned out those wolves were really good at sniffing out intruders, no matter how many leaves you covered yourself in.

“The doves like to come pester the markets, usually in the afternoon, but they’re getting braver.” Vraska was rather pleased he recognised the noise.

“So, if you hear that, go towards the alley next to the chicken man. If it turns out to be an actual dove, well I’ll join you, we’ll try again somewhere else.”

They watched as a cluster of tall vedalken in bright Simic robes pushed their way through the crowds. One stopped at the ironmongers’ stand before being pulled along by their colleagues. They carried on, a solid splash of colour in the crowd.

“I have a question,” said Jace, watching them disappear from sight.

“What’s that?”

“How do I know what to talk to him about?” Jace asked, “I mean, once I get him talking its fine, but I need his attention.”

Vraska considered this for a moment. It occurred to her then that Jace was very much still covered in his own blood. That was her fault but maybe they could turn that to their own advantage.

“Why don’t you ask him for help?” she suggested, “Say that you don’t know how you got here, who should you go and talk to. He probably isn’t going to know but he really wants to talk to someone. Would that give you long enough?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Alright,” Vraska said as she stood up, “If it gets too much, just make it to the alley. No shame in making sure you’re safe. We can try again later.”

This crowded market was the closest thing to home that Vraska had, at least not for many years. She knew the ins and outs of the walkways, where sentry birds sat on the canopies, even memorising the rotating schedule of stalls. She knew which merchants were more violent than others, their rivalries, their romantic interests. She’d found every hand-hold on the walls, every wobbly tile on the rooftops. She knew even the goblins didn’t know, or care, what meat they were grilling. This was Tin Street and, according to many, it was the best place in Ravnica. Yet, for the first time in a very long time, she was nervous as she picked her way down to street level. She could spot two ‘undercover’ Boros guards. (You could tell because they just threw on cloaks over
their bulky armour.) They were however deep in conversation with the Rakdos street performer at the other end of the market. No, what was setting her on edge wasn’t her own chance of getting away, it was Jace’s. She’d worked alone almost her whole life, and one advantage of that is you only had to worry about yourself. However, she had chosen the location, she had decided to do this now, and if Jace ended up in prison or worse… She didn’t want to put him through that. He could probably planeswalk out but she hadn’t even asked him if he remembered how.

She placed herself in the alley behind a set of rusted old pipes. They had been there for goodness knows how long, at least as long as she’d known this market. She had an excellent view past the chicken man, who was contentedly humming to himself as he restocked his wheel. The greengrocer was directly in her line of sight, and only a moment later, so was Jace.

“Ex-Excuse me sir?” Jace’s posture was making him look a lot smaller, more child-like. He wasn’t very tall to begin with but now he was the perfect image of ‘little boy lost’. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder if he was doing that on purpose or whether he was just that frightened.

The greengrocer finished handing over a bag of onions to his only customer before turning his attention to Jace.

“What can I do for you young man?”

“I was on my way to school with my friends and these big men with claws for hands attacked us and I just woke up over there.” Jace pointed to a spot under the bridge they had just vacated.

“Could you tell me where I am? I-I want to go home…I’m scared.”

The greengrocer seemed to be giving Jace the once over. Vraska wasn’t close enough to see if Jace was doing anything particularly magical to distract him.

“You poor kid,” the greengrocer turned right then left, as if looking for someone, “They must have given you a nasty knock…that’s a lot of blood.”

Jace merely nodded.

“There’s a patrol that comes through here on the hour,” the greengrocer continued, “They’ll be a little while yet, but you stick here safe with me until they go by. Then you can tell them all about the men who attacked you.”

“Thank you sir. Do you think they will help find my friends?” Jace folded his hands in front of him like a good boy waiting in line.

“I’m sure they’ll give it a shot,” replied the grocer, “Those Boros lads are very good to us if we sneak them a bit of coin now and then. Back when I was your age, I wanted to be one of them wojeks in the shining armour. Made myself a shield out of an old pan with great big dent in it. I—”

Vraska didn’t need to hear anymore. Jace had got him passionately monologuing and that was all the distraction she needed. She slipped into the crowd, invisible among the throng of shoppers and merchants all hurrying about their business. A minute later, she reached the travel prep stall, where the minotaur in charge was deep in conversation with a customer about the quality of his leather goods. Vraska passed him by, sliding into the shadows between the two stalls, just as she heard:

“Oh stop being such a sycophant Miles. Those patrols aren’t real officers, they’re just roving hooligans with metal on!” The lady from the basket stall had accosted the greengrocer over his praise. She shook a fist at him as he gave a loud huff.
“You’re just paranoid Jemina. You see hooligans everywhere you look,” he replied.

“Don’t you call me paranoid young man,” retorted Jemina the basket seller, “I’m old enough to have seen real Boros officers! In my day, you didn’t get to wear the blazing fist unless you were a real certified hero. Not like those ruffians you see these days. No class! No honour!”

“Now that’s not fair!” Miles jabbed an angry finger at her and started on a tirade about modern times and modern standards. Vraska extricated her canvas bag from down her shirt and began slowly filling it with little wooden trays of grapes and berries. She grabbed a carrot as the basket-seller and grocer started trying to talk over each other, extolling both the virtues and sins of the local Boros officers. The carrots were somewhat bulky so she didn’t get many. She had to leave room for jerky.

The argument was getting steadily more heated as she checked out the travel prep stand. The shopkeep was still talking about leather bags, no distraction needed. She pocketed a pouch of jerky. The pouch itself could come in handy. The minotaur looked like he was finally coming to an agreement with his customer so she swiftly departed back into the crowd. The shopkeepers were still arguing about the Boros, drawing the attention of many other vendors around them. It proved very easy to get back to the alley. There she swiftly made her bird call, once, then again, this time louder to be heard over the shouting.

A few minutes later, Jace was with her safe and sound.

“I wiped his memory,” he murmured as he joined her in the shadows of the pipes, “They’re still arguing though.”

“Did you make the woman join in?” Vraska asked, gesturing for him to join her deeper in the alley.

“No, she did that all by herself,” said Jace, “But I did look at the grocer’s mind and saw he was really nostalgic. So I encouraged him a bit. Also, I found something interesting.”

“Oh?” Vraska was always up for learning new things happening in the area. Maybe something exploitable?

“He’s cheating on his wife,” said Jace. Vraska stared at him in shock.

“With the street dancer at the end of the road,” Jace continued, speaking a little faster in his excitement to share, “He goes to the Rakdos hotel round the corner and I saw a bit of what he does there and I didn’t wish to see anymore.”

“Wow.” Vraska knew the man had a wife, she’d seen her at the stall a few times. She didn’t have any particular feelings about the woman, but no one deserved to live in a dishonest relationship.

“Would it be mean to blackmail him so soon after we robbed him?” asked Jace, “I mean, any money he gives to us is less money he can use to bribe the police.”

They turned a corner towards the long back-alley that would lead them back to their shelter.

“No, we should do that,” Vraska replied, “We’d have to find a way to subtly get in contact, write a letter or something, but yes, we can certainly get him with this. He can afford it!”

Vraska threw a hand out to make sure he didn’t step into a sink hole. These back routes were always in a state of disrepair. It was easy to miss things when you were excited, and they were both elated with a job well done. Vraska almost couldn’t believe it. They had food, with a chance they could pull off the same heist twice, and a chance to make some money?
“I wish my magic was more like yours,” she told Jace, “It’s so cool.”

Jace went a bit pink at the praise. She meant it. Jace’s magic seemed a lot more discrete than the mind magic she’d witnessed in the past. Plus, he hadn’t damaged anyone. If used justly, to exploit those who would exploit others, or to get revenge on those people, mind magic was a valuable tool. She appreciated a way of dealing with people that didn’t end up in a murder investigation.

“I’m not as strong and sneaky as you,” Jace replied, “Even I didn’t see you. You were so fast. It was amazing.”

It was her turn to feel slightly flustered.

“And you can do magic as well?” Jace continued, “What magic do you do?

“Not much, just a bit of gorgon stuff. We have our own magic, it’s not as impressive as yours though.”

“Will you show me?”

Vraska was ready to come up with several excuses as to why that was a bad idea. Just as she opened her mouth to give the first, her priorities were suddenly changed. There were people in the back routes with them, multiple people, blocking the road ahead.

She and Jace halted in their tracks. With stone walls on either side, they were heading straight towards the gang blocking their way. Vraska stepped forwards, shielding Jace behind her. They could turn and sprint back the way they came, but they had probably already accounted for that.

“Oh, what’s this?” The tallest of the teenagers stepped forwards. He was a towering brute with a streak of red face paint slapped on like an eye mask. Vraska hissed, her hair uncoiling to its fullest length.

“Go fuck yourself on a spike Cyril.”

“You know these people?” murmured Jace. He had one hand in her cape, as if attempting to pull her back the direction they’d come.

“Yes,” Vraska replied, not taking her eyes off the gang. “They’re school bullies who like to play with their parents’ face-paints. They then go out and pick on the weak to satisfy their fragile egos.”

Cyril didn’t seem impressed with her entirely-factual description of them. He too took a step forwards. His gang, all larger and older than Vraska and Jace, watched on with delight. They were painted up like a troop of clowns but most of them were still in their school uniforms, having thrown various bits of chain jewellery over the top.

“Big words for a little snake,” Cyril jeered, “I’m not letting you off so easy this time. Not until I see you writhing and screaming on your belly.”

These were bad odds but Vraska refused to let herself be intimidated.

“How’s Erik these days? Did his parents appreciate their new garden ornament?”

There was a rumble of murmurs from the gang. A few of them didn’t look so smug anymore.

“Why don’t you boys just hurry back to your mummies and daddies? Then we won’t be making them a new rock garden.”
“We don’t take threats from monsters,” Cyril growled, “Why don’t you crawl back into your hole and leave that bag of yours with us?”

“So you can steal from the homeless and then kick us whilst we’re down? Fuck that.” Vraska passed her bag to the now very nervous Jace. He took it in trembling hands.

“Shouldn’t we try and run?” he asked her. Cyril guffawed at that.

“Oi, pipsqueak,” he called, talking past Vraska entirely now, “Give us that and we’ll let you go. Or, if you want to be smart, come over here. You don’t need to hang out with that beast. It’s got tits sure, bu-ghlgh!”

His sentence was abruptly ended by a knife to the throat. Staggering backwards, he clutched at his own neck, dislodging the blade as blood bubbled forth from his mouth and throat. There were a few cries from the onlooking gang members before thud, a second blade struck Cyril in the chest and he went down like a sack of rocks.

“I’m right here arsehole.” Before anyone could approach, Vraska darted forwards, grabbing her first knife and adopting a protective stance between the gang and Jace. Cyril choked and spluttered on the ground, blood filling his airways as he tried to remove the second dagger from his rib cage.

With their leader down, the gang didn’t seem to know what to do with themselves. A few stepped back whilst others raised their fists, readying for a fight. There didn’t seem to be a single weapon between them, unless you counted their spiked wrist bands. Vraska didn’t.

“Leave. Unless you want to join him.”

There was a moment of indecision before the gang suddenly splintered. Several members ran for it, disappearing off down side alleys and jumping over fences. Others however, opted to charge.

They were still severely outnumbered. Vraska focussed her rage into a hot ball of power, welling in her chest like a bubble ready to burst. Her eyes glowing a brilliant gold as the stampede drew closer. She met eyes with the closest gang member, a muscular boy with diamonds painted on his cheeks.

“Stay back!”

She shot off her spell just as Jace let out a shout. Diamond-cheek boy was instantly turned to stone but his companions all suddenly froze in their tracks. There was a series of loud groans, and a few sobs, as the bullies stopped to grasp their heads, shaking as their eyes filled with tears. A few dropped to their knees in pain. Vraska glanced back at Jace. Bag under one arm, he had the other out-stretched, a familiar gesture, his eyes glowing the same ethereal blue.

“Vraska…do what you need to do. I’m not going to be able to hold them for very long.”

“Right.” It was an amazing feat of magic but there wasn’t time to comment on it. She grabbed her other knife from the floor and leapt into action. On previous encounters with this gang she’d been patient enough to leave most of them intact. They usually fled after a few injuries or a single petrification. She wasn’t the only one they picked on of course. They would loiter around Tin Street after school, causing trouble for trouble’s sake and mugging innocent shoppers. She’d also seen them harassing the home for the elderly next to the Selesnian park. Enough was enough. The longer she let them get away with this, the longer they would continue to harm the innocent.

She’d show them a monster.
Five school satchels came out unscathed through the carnage. Three unfortunately ended up as solid stone, their contents lost forever, and others were torn up so badly their contents were now strewn across the bloody floor. Their fruit was unfortunately also mushed into the tangle of limbs and stonework. Some of the ex-bullies had doubled back round and approached Jace from behind. Grabbed, he’d let go of the bag in his efforts to squirm free. His concentration on the spell keeping their opponents immobilised also dropped. Vraska, who had been saving her spells for that precise moment, petrified the remaining three boys in quick succession before hearing Jace cry out in pain. Now they stood surrounded by dead teenagers, some flesh, some stone. Jace was bent double, panting hard from being punched in the gut. Vraska leant against one wall, eying the wreckage of human life. She gave herself a moment to breathe before starting to salvage what she could.

Their hard-earned fruit and vegetables were gone. However, the jerky had survived, safe in its pouch. She scooped that up, shaking a little of the blood off. Practice had taught her to cut the bags and belts off people before she petrified them. Sometimes losses were unavoidable, but in this case, several bags had spilled their contents across the floor, and others remained on bodies. She picked up the nearest intact satchel and began to cram it with lost possessions. Books, stationary, a few toys, these thugs really must have been on the way home from school. However, there were a few good finds to be had. In addition to the jewellery, she found two leather wallets, filled with allowances from rich parents no doubt. She found a few less impressive coin purses, but this could certainly last them a while. She found a flip-knife on Cyril, as well as large bag of sweets. The gang must have come here after raiding a store because they had a huge variety of snacks on them. Boiled sweets, chocolate, candied fruit, more jerky, a few cans of drink. There was enough loot to fill her bag and three full satchels. Carrying all three was going to be very impractical. They were going to need to sell some of this soon.

“Vraska, I-“ She turned from her packing to see Jace approach. He gingerly placed one hand on a nearby statue, feeling the cold stone shoulder of what had once been a living person. He was covered in blood. Vraska knew she probably wasn’t much better.

“Vraska,” Jace tried again, “They aren’t going to come back, are they?”

“Probably not,” she replied, “Though we should probably move. They might have gone and got the authorities.”

She couldn’t look at him. She wanted to but she just couldn’t. There was something about standing in a massacre of your own creation, something about standing, covered in blood, surrounded by death, that meant she couldn’t meet his gaze. She had done this. He had helped, but it had mostly been her. He had set her loose on them and look at what she’d done. She’d killed them all.

“Vraska,” Jace said for a third time, “About, about what they said.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve been feuding for a while, they were just-“ For the first time, Jace interrupted her.

“No. That’s not what I meant,” he insisted, “I don’t know what’s going on in your head, I promise. I wouldn’t go in there without your permission. But I can read your face. You’re not a monster. They were just idiots. Complete stupid idiots with sponges for brains! I can’t believe they would treat you like you weren’t even a person!”

“Welcome to Ravnica,” Vraska quipped. She didn’t want to take her frustrations out on Jace but she wasn’t feeling her best right now.

“No,” Jace’s voice was full of fierce determination, “No, just because they think so, just because stupid people think so, doesn’t mean its true. I’ve only known you for two days, but I know you
are not a monster. You’ve shown me so many sides of yourself. You’re kind, patient, you protected me against all odds when you could have climbed up those walls and escaped.”

Vraska still couldn’t look at him. He was right. Of course he was too smart not to have noticed. She could have got out of there but for some reason, she just couldn’t leave him behind.

“And you’re really clever, not to mention strong and your magic…” Jace gestured about at all the statues, “You can turn people into stone. That’s so cool!”

Vraska whipped round. She’d been expecting the complete opposite. She’d been expecting Jace to run, to hide from her after seeing what she could do. This was so unexpected. She was in shock.

“You’re not scared of me?”

Jace shook his head, staring at her in awe.

“Of course not! You’re really talented! How does it work? Can you tell me?”

Vraska wasn’t entirely sure how to react to that. She opened her mouth, closed it again, repeated the motion before staring down at the cluster of satchels in her arms.

“If you’re a monster, then I’m definitely a monster too,” Jace stated. Vraska frowned at him.

“You’re human.”

“Yes, but I can invade people’s minds, alter their memories, make people see things that don’t exist, I can even paralyse people with their own thoughts. You saw what I did. If someone saw that they would certainly think I’m a monster.”

“You’re not a monster,” Vraska insisted, “Why would you think-“ Once again, she was interrupted.

“Well if I’m not a monster, then neither are you.” He spoke as if he had solved some great problem, pride creeping into his voice as blood dripped off his hair.

Vraska didn’t know how to argue this. She didn’t see his logic but he seemed so sure that she wished she could share in his certainty.

“Well, whatever we are, we should get out of here before the authorities come,” she concluded, “Do you…do you mind taking one of these?”

Jace immediately took the largest satchel and slung it over his shoulder.

“Are we going back to the Rubblebelt?”

Vraska grimaced at the thought of giving up their cosy little room.

“I don’t think we can show our faces round here for a while. Besides, I know somewhere we can barter off some of this.” She gestured to the stuffed bags.

“We’ll be able to get a bath, and maybe some new clothes there.”

“Where’s that?” Jace asked, checking both directions of the alley in case they were being watched.

“It’s in the Undercity, I’ll explain when we get there.”

She hadn’t intended to take Jace down there so soon, but desperate times called for desperate
measures. Besides, there were few safe places up here where you could walk about covered in blood. Luckily for them, her entrance of choice was in Rakdos territory. Gods, she was looking forward to that bath.

“Shall we?” Without thinking, she offered her hand to Jace, surprising even herself. He took it, gently, and squeezed. Maybe there was some sort of bond that came with defeating a murderous street gang. Whatever it was, Vraska knew she wasn’t letting it go any time soon.
Scavengers

Chapter Summary

Vraska and Jace go to the Undercity, where Jace discovers more about who his new companion deems friend and foe.

(Warnings for mentions of police brutality, Vraska's backstory is described in detail.)

Chapter Notes

I didn't think I'd get another chapter out so soon but the War of the Spark novel happened and I got the urge to write. Please let me know if you've been enjoying the story so far!

Side note: If you're going to be at Magicfest London this weekend, feel free to come and say hi! I will be dressed as Vraska on the Friday and Saturday so will be easy to spot.

Vraska kept a tight grip on Jace’s hand as they hurried around the edge of a Rakdos open-air theatre. Torrents of flame occasionally spouted over the roof tops from the stage, the cheers and gasps of the audience momentarily drowning out the performance. The streets were thankfully empty, except for a single bored looking woman in a booth by the theatre entrance. She paid them no mind as Vraska led them towards a metal arch at the end of the road.

“That’s the Golgari symbol,” Jace pointed up at the familiar insectile emblem which stood at the arch’s peak.

“It’s an entrance to the Undercity,” Vraska explained, “It’s Golgari territory but the two guilds seem to have to an agreement about this area. Performers go and up down from here all the time. It’s also right near the chutes.”

“Chutes?” Jace repeated as another torrent of flame roared overhead.

“Corpse chutes,” Vraska replied, “For disposing of the dead. Useful this close to so many theatres.”

“I see.” He didn’t sound very sure of that.

Reaching the archway, they were greeted by a dimly lit staircase, lined with flickering lamps. The path ahead was clean, but the darkness at the edges of their vision would certainly be foreboding to the inexperienced. They were far enough from Tin Street to take it slow, but she didn’t like being so exposed out in the open.

“Are you ready?” she asked Jace who was looking rather daunted. He was eyeing the descent into darkness with an understandable trepidation.
“How much time have you spent in the Undercity?” he said, “Is it safer down there?” His free hand was gripped on the strap of his satchel. The blood on his face had dried to a flaky layer. He looked like he’d gone through the theatres not just round them.

“I grew up there,” Vraska informed him, “I mean, not in this specific part. I lived in The Dredgefold Docks until I was eight. And I’ve gone back down tons of times. It’s just more city down there, it’s no more difficult or dangerous than up here, but I know people. Friendly people, so it’s probably safer.”

“And we’re going to see someone you know?” Jace pressed, as if seeking out utmost certainty that they weren’t wandering into a death pit.

“Yes, he was friends with my mother,” Vraska replied, “And I visit him every few months. He’s trustworthy, I promise.”

Jace swallowed heavily before turning back to the dark staircase. After a moment of silence between them, punctuated by whoops from the theatre, he nodded.

“Alright…I’ll follow you.”

They descended into the dark, one slow step at a time. It was a little awkward with all their bags, plus the fact they were still holding hands. The Izzet lighting carried on, meaning the path was always illuminated a dozen or so steps ahead. The walls were pasted with the remnants of posters, new and old, proclaiming new attractions both above and under ground. Between the advertisements, old faded parchment signs detailed laws that had long smudged and blurred with age. The brightest flier they passed offered cash for gold at the nearby basilica, whilst the second proclaimed that ceratok racing was finally back in the Tenth District. Vraska noticed Jace’s eyes darting everywhere, trying to read as many scraps of paper as possible. She’d sheltered on these stairs too many times to find them interesting anymore. She could tell you where there had been carnivals twenty-five years ago, or where the Azorius anniversary banquet was last decade. None of this information was remotely useful, but if it made him feel better, she let him read as they carefully made their way downstairs.

The stair led out through another wrought iron gate. This one however was coated in a thick layer of vines, reaching up and about the metalwork towards the phosphorescent glow overhead. The wall now behind them was covered in thick shelves of mushrooms, casting dappled light over the surrounding alley. The collage of different fungi left a haze of different colours, pinks and blues, oranges and greens, purples and reds. Jace stared up at the towering living mural. Each of this fungi had been placed here on purpose, creating a beautiful scene of figures emerging into the sunlight above.

“It’s all mushrooms,” he gasped, “And they light up. I’ve never seen a mushroom glow before.”

“Well if you like glowing fungi, you’ll love it down here,” Vraska replied, unable to hide her amusement.

“There’s more?” Jace asked eagerly. Vraska merely pointed up.

There was no sky down here, and therefore no daylight. Instead, giant mushrooms, greater in size that most trees, towered over the city. The ceiling of the cavernous space was blanketed in a thick canopy of fungi, stalks glowing vaguely in the distance. The mottled caps issued more than enough light to illuminate the streets ahead. Not as bright as daylight, but it suited the Undercity residents just fine. To Jace however, it must seem like another world entirely.
He gasped and gawked a lot as she led him through the Undercity. He was constantly stopping to look at things. Interesting mushrooms, street lights, shop windows, stained glass, street sweeper beetles, he must have seen all these things in some form or another. However down here it all seemed alien again. Then there were the people. Jace had never seen a gorgon before her, so it made sense he’d never seen a lot of races that tended to live below ground. Whilst everyone expected tourists, Vraska didn’t really want to draw too much attention to two blood-soaked teenagers walking through the chute precinct. So she kept Jace close.

“What is that?” Jace whispered to her suddenly, almost making her jump. She followed her gaze.

“That’s a kraul. Don’t point, they find it rude.”

“Vraska, what’s-“

She pre-empted him this time, following his gaze to a string of fungal drudges shambling up the street, pulling an empty rot-farm cart.

“Those are zombies. Undead.”

She got a moment of quiet before

“What’s that?” Jace was peering up this time.

“That’s more kraul, just very far away,” she paused a moment as what he was looking at lumbered into sight, “That’s a Longlegs, they’re used as transport like a wagon.”

“All the insects are so huge down here,” Jace commented, watching the Longlegs pass with an expression of awe on his face.

“The Golgari work well with them. They, like the guild, represent the cycle of life and death, working in harmony. Insects are part of Golgari culture.”

Jace was about to say something, no doubt about insects, when suddenly his attention was drawn elsewhere, again.

“That’s a Simic hybrid,” Vraska said, before he could point, “Probably once a merfolk but now they’re part crab. The Simic like to blend different races together.”

The hybrid seemed to weird Jace out enough that he stayed silent for most of their remaining journey. Vraska could see their destination at the end of the street, when Jace suddenly whispered

“Vraska, there’s another gorgon watching us.”

She stopped dead in her tracks, not daring to move.

“Where is she?” she whispered.

Jace seemed to sense her alarm and also dropped his voice down to a whisper.

“On the rooftop to your left. She’s been following us down the road. Do you know her?”

Vraska still wasn’t looking. She probably didn’t know this strange gorgon so there was no point checking.

“What’s she wearing?”
“Er,” Jace glanced over his shoulder briefly, “A black leather dress of some kind with a brown frilled neck piece, and a dark green cape with a hood. She’s got a knife on her belt in a black sheath.”

“Ok,” Vraska took a deep breath, “We’re going to carry on going like we haven’t seen her, and not look at her anymore. She’s probably not here for us but she sounds like she’s Ochran.”

They started walking, very careful not to look at the gorgon.

“What’s Ochran?” Jace whispered.

“Assassins,” Vraska replied, “A Golgari-affiliated organisation of assassins. My mother was one before she had me. They’re dangerous.”

“Your mother was an assassin?” Jace was back to sounding awed again.

“Yes,” Vraska replied a little impatiently, “You don’t get many other career options as a gorgon. Ochran assassins are the best there is.”

“Would you become an assassin?” asked Jace, “You’d probably be very good at it.”

“My Mother would’ve liked that. They don’t exactly have a base you can just walk into and sign up.”

Jace was clearly resisting the urge to look back at the gorgon on the rooftops. Vraska sped up a little to a brisk pace that had them jogging towards the large building at the end of the road.

This was the Chute Precinct for the Tenth. Nearly everyone here had some sort of occupation relating to the disposal, re-purposing and distribution of corpses. If you weren’t actively moving corpses around, you were assisting the people that did. There were multiple chute precincts all across Ravnica, each taking the dead of the overcity down to where they could fertilise the food that would be then sent back up. Vraska preferred this one because this particular precinct contained Sven. Sven and the Corpse Lily Bathhouse.

The bathhouse was a feat of Golgari ingenuity mixed with Izzet technology. As they drew closer they could hear the methodical thumps and whines of the pumping system that drew water from deep underground, filtering it, heating it, before depositing it in one of the premise’s many baths. Between each thud was a high pitched whistle and the occasional gust of steam from six large metal chimneys, stuck precariously on top of a side building, ringed by a iron chain link fence. A procession of carts were lined up round the side, all full, awaiting to offload their cargo. These carts did not contain bodies, though perhaps they did at one point. No, the Corpse Lily had another function besides providing relaxing baths to hardworking chute labourers. The carts were piled high with clothing, pulled off dead bodies, ready to be bought by the Corpse Lily. They would then launder them, work out which clothing was in good enough shape to sell or fix up, before peddling them to the Undercity masses. It was a simple and efficient way of keeping the Undercity supplied with affordable clothing, especially for those who had to travel above ground and needed to mimic their fashion.

A change of clothes was exactly what they both needed. Also a bath. Vraska was getting tired of the dried blood flaking off her face. Usually, she wouldn’t be able to afford something like this. In fact, there was a large wooden sign on the door that proclaimed ‘WE ACCEPT COIN ONLY’. However she had a connection here. The last remaining survivor of Dredgefold Docks, apart from herself. Here, with his wife, lived Sven.
A tinkling bell announced their arrival at the bath house. Vraska finally felt safe enough to let go of Jace’s hand. He glanced back at the door, as if checking to see if the gorgon had followed them. She was thankfully nowhere to be seen, so instead he focused on all the signs around them explaining options and services.

“Do we have enough money for this?” he asked her. He started to rummage around in his satchel for one of the leather wallets.

“We’re bartering,” Vraska replied, before he could produce any zinos. Jace was about to point out the “only coin” sign again, when there were loud footsteps from behind the counter, loud enough to rattle the signs on the walls.

“Welcome to the Corpse Lily Bathhouse,” droned a voice that spoke of a long day of customer service, “Your place to relax after-“ He cut himself off at the sight of them.

“Vraska? Is that you?!”

“Sven!” She hurried, reaching up onto her tip toes in the hopes of addressing him properly. Sven was a giant of a man. Not a literal giant, he was human, but there was definitely some ogre in his bloodline somewhere.

Sven almost broke the counter hatch in his eagerness to get to her. He crouched down so they could talk face to face.

“Vraska! By rot its good to see you. It’s been months since you’ve come by. Eva and I were wondering whether you were still kicking.”

“Still very much kicking,” she replied, smiling back at his large toothy grin, “And better than ever. Been making my living cheating out surface idiots.”

Sven chuckled, it was a deep rumbling noise that Vraska couldn’t help but associate with home.

“Well I’m glad to see you’ve been doing well for yourself. Even though you come into my business covered in muck and gore. What have you been up to? Swimming in a Rakdos pool? Look at the state of you both!”

He shuffled back a little and acknowledged Jace for the first time.

“Made a friend Vraska?”

Jace took a nervous step forward and presented his least bloody hand to Sven.

“I’m Jace, nice to meet you Mr Sven.”

He very carefully took it and shook.

“We’re working together now,” Vraska informed him, “Jace is a mage. So together we’re twice as strong. Not as strong as Mother but one day!”

“You know what,” Sven said, looking between them both, “I think you might, one day. Your mother was one hell of a woman. Never seen anything like her. Owe her my life a hundred times over, my Ma’s life too, neither of us would still be kicking if not for her. If you've survived this long by yourself, you’re certainly her daughter Vraska, I’ll give you that.”

Vraska couldn’t help but feel a little proud.
“So, what you two here for?” Sven continued, “Bath I’m guessing? New clothes too?”

They both nodded.

“We got things to barter,” Jace added.

Sven raised an eye at him.

“Have you now? Well, as you’re Vraska’s new friend I think I can allow that. Let me get you both some stools and we’ll see what you’ve got.”

He fetched two barstools and placed them in front of the counter. They clambered up as he went back behind the counter and pulled out a set of weighing scales and a measuring tape.

“Ok, what you got for me this time?”

Vraska opened the first satchel, the one she’d filled with school supplies and began to unload it onto the table. Sven didn’t seem particular impressed by most the stationary, but when a set of pens came out, his eyes lit up.

“Looks like you two robbed some rich kids,” said Sven. He pulled out a magnifying glass from somewhere under the counter and peered down at the pens, which looked tiny on his palm.

“They attacked us first,” Jace objected.

“They did,” Vraska backed him up. Sven merely laughed.

“Don’t really care how you got them. These are real nice, they’re Scribe’s Writ branded fountain pens, don’t get these in anything but the high-end Azorius stores. Refillable and everything… Shame this one has been chewed but the others are in pretty good condition.”

He put them to one side and started to look through the rest of the educational detritus.

“Mathematics sets, nice,” he said, putting those to one side too, “What have we got here?”

Vraska had put three textbooks on the counter. He began to rifle through them, running a practiced eye over the contents.

“These look barely used.”

“The Rakdos bullies didn’t look like the studious sort,” Jace commented. Sven glanced up at him then back at the books.

“Got anymore of these?”

Vraska pulled out four more books. Their satchels were considerably lighter now. In fact they now had a spare. She put that on the counter too.

“Mathematics, Mathematics, History, Geography,” Sven piled them up to one side.

“I know some families who’ll fight over these,” he concluded, “Getting that above-ground education is something parents will murder over. Literally… I’ll tell you what.”
He put the pens and maths sets on top of the text books.

“You give me the pens, these sets, the books and that spare bag of yours. I’ll let you go out back and pick yourself out a nice set of clothes. Top, bottom, cloak, boots, underwear. We’ve got some durable stuff in right now. Whilst you’re doing that, I’ll get someone to set you up a bath. You’ll have to go private if that’s ok. People don’t really like sharing with a gorgon, sorry darling.”

“I’m used to it,” Vraska replied. She was too excited over the prospect of getting an entirely new outfit. Finally some shoes she didn’t have to constantly bandage to her feet! And finally she could wash all this blood off! Seeing her easerness, Sven opened up the hatch and let them through. They slipped past him and were pointed in the direction of a set of double doors. They took a door each and pushed.

Vraska had never seen so many clothes.

There were rails everywhere, some free-standing, others on great rotating wheels that you turn to see even more clothing. There were washing lines full of cloaks, whole bookcases packed with shoes, an entire row just for hats. Everything from the simple garb of a guildless labourour to beautiful Selesnyan gowns and gaudy Orzhov robes. There were tunics for people with more than two arms, gloves to cover claws, capes with wing-holes and trousers that accommodated for tails. Just looking at all this reminded Vraska that in the end, everyone ended up in the same place. Everyone’s bodies were collected by the Golgari and buried together no matter of race or rank. And in a way, this room was exactly the same. Everyone’s clothes had ended up in this room, no matter where they had been worn in life. Now these clothes would find new owners, find new life so speak. How very circular.

“Look at all these cloaks…Oh crap!”

She had lost Jace in the maze of clothing. Following his voice, she found him covered in fabric where a stack of cloaks had fallen on him. He dug himself out, looking at the wreckage.

“I’ll tidy them up,” he promised, “Though, do you think I could wear a mage cloak?” He held up a white cloak with a green trim that was far too big for him, before folding it up neatly and putting it back on the pile.

“Well, you are a mage,” Vraska replied, “If you want to look like one, now’s your chance.”

He couldn’t get up to too much trouble in here. She trusted that Sven wouldn’t let anyone disturb them, so it safe to leave him to his own devices for a bit. She went and investigated the shoes, trying to find herself a sturdy yet quiet pair of boots that would last the winter.

By the time Sven came back for them, they had each assembled a small pile of clothing. Jace had found himself some trousers he insisted he would grow into. Sven let him take a belt to keep them up for now. Alongside the dark grey trousers, he’d found a pair of tall brown boots and a blue tunic much more in the Ravnican style than his current bloody one. He’d also found himself a blue mage cloak, with a white satin trim, Vraska assumed he’d found himself some underwear but she wasn’t going to ask. He probably felt the same.

As for herself, she’d chosen a pair of black leggings that looked brand new. Over that, she planned to put a long green tunic dress with black detailing that looked like it had come off some rich devkarin’s daughter. They were both a little too big, but not enough to need a belt. She was going to grow after all. She’d picked out a black cape with a hood, not nearly as fancy as Jace’s, but it had pockets on the inside which would undoubtedly prove useful. Her boots, also black, looked like they had seen better days but the leather was very sturdy.
“You kids done looking about?” asked Sven. They both nodded.

“Alright, we’ll put them aside in a basket for you whilst you have your bath. Follow me.”

They followed him away from the clothing room and back into the main reception of the Corpse Lily. There, they took a right through another door with a bell and ended up in a long wood-panelled corridor. Sven led them to the end of the corridor, talking all the while about how he wished that Vraska’s mother had lived to see this place. He was very proud, he told them, to have worked so hard and got so far.

Finally they reached the end of the corridor and were presented with a key for the door to the right. Inside was another wood-lined room with a pair of benches, a set of baskets, and a couple of soft cream-coloured towels.

“Try not to drown yourselves,” Sven told them as he closed the door, “You’ve got an hour and a half until we’ve got another booking. Holler if you need anything.”

“Thank you Mr Sven,” Jace replied. Vraska merely smiled, feeling no need to repeat him.

Once the door closed, and they had deposited their new clothes in a basket, they were left with a dilemma. Vraska became very aware that this was going to be a joint bathing experience, and that meant not wearing any clothes whilst Jace was there. Jace seemed to have come to same realisation. They stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“How about, err, you look at the wall and I’ll get undressed and go in,” Jace suggested, “And then you can get undressed and I’ll look at a wall and you can go in.”

Quite frankly she didn’t really want to think about it, so she was going with his idea.

“Sure.” She turned to face the door and stayed there as she heard him change.

Jace held up his end of the deal and turned to look away when she got in, and only looked back when she said she could.

Being in this much warm water was glorious. Vraska felt like she was melting, but in the best way. The tension in her muscles seemed to lift. Her whole body felt lighter as her hair relaxed out of its coils and trailed down her shoulders. She sighed, closing her eyes and let herself inhale the scent of oils that drifted off the water. She never really complained about getting dirty, bloody maybe, but life on the street meant you couldn’t be fussy. However, there was something to be said about feeling clean. Without a layer of grime, she felt a bit more like a person. Since everyone else didn’t think she was, she relished the sensation.

She could feel ripples passing across her shoulders and opened one eye. Jace was bobbing up and down in the water, seemingly trying to float. She let him have his fun. After a little while, the novelty seemed to have worn off, for he settled down and the water went still.

“So Mr Sven was friends with your mother?” Jace asked, sitting neck-deep in the foamy water. Vraska opened her eyes.

“Yes, he and his Ma lived in the room next to ours,” she said. Being this warm had relaxed her hair so much it was in danger of obscuring her view. She gently tucked a few tendrils back.

“They were with a human couple who worked at the docks, and we shared our room with a three-armed kraul named Bez and his dog. I don’t know what happened to any of them. I think Bez got taken away with me.”
“That’s a lot of people in one room,” Jace commented, “What do you mean ‘taken away’?”

Vraska gave him a long look. He stared innocently back. The part of her that wished she could look so endearing was somewhat jealous. What she wouldn’t give not to have known it all.

“You don’t need to listen to my complaining,” she told him, “Dredgefold Depths wasn’t a nice place to live. Even Mother thought so.”

“But what if I want to listen?” Jace insisted, “What we experienced when we are little, it shapes who we are today. I...don’t remember anything that happened over a month ago. But I want to know what it’s like to grow up here, in Ravnica. I want to know how you became the great person you are.”

Once again, Vraska found herself unable to deal with his praise. She wasn’t a particularly great person and she didn’t think her childhood had helped her one bit.

“My upbringing isn’t typical of Ravnica. I’m a gorgon. I grew up in the Undercity. Normal childhoods are up there.” She waved a hand vaguely up at the ceiling to indicate above ground.

Jace sank a little into the foam and his next words came out half as bubbles.

“But I want to know more about you,” he said, “Like how you learned to fight, where you got all those scars.”

Vraska suddenly felt very aware that they were naked right now. She too sank a little lower, up to her chin in the water.

“Please?” Jace tried.

Vraska gave a huff. He sounded really pathetic and for some reason she couldn’t resist pathetic Jace.

“Fine, but when or if you get your memories back, you’ve got to tell me about your tragic childhood.”

“I promise!” Jace exclaimed.

She folded her arms before realising they were under the water and her authoritative gesture was ruined.

“As I said, I grew up in Dredgefold Docks. It was a place where people even the Golgari didn’t want got packed away. The old and sick who refused to die, the monstrous, those who couldn’t give back enough to society. My whole world was a single room. Mother was scared people would hurt me out of fear if I went into the streets.”

She hadn’t spoken about this to anyone. Why was Jace becoming such an exception?

“When I was four, the Azorius raids started to happen. Mother said that they came to the docks because we were easy pickings. They had rules, laws, that they had to arrest a certain number of people each week. If they were running low on numbers, they just picked up a load of impoverished Undercity dwellers, and charged them with the crime of being Golgari. She said that the head of the Azorius hated us. That the Guildmaster made a law that anyone in the Undercity that looked suspicious could be jailed without trial. But to the Azorius, every Undercity dweller looks suspicious. So they rounded us up. If you resisted, they killed you. No one cared. No one tried to stop them. We were nothing so we could be thrown away like nothing.”
Jace was looking at her with even wider eyes. This was why she hadn’t wanted to tell him. Ravnica must be scary enough for a newcomer. Especially after the encounter with Cyril and his gang, she didn’t want to frighten him further.

“People in the docks tried to stand up for themselves, protect each other. Mother protected our building, our little rooms. She would fight the guards coming to take us away. She was so powerful, she could petrify an entire troop with a single glare. I’d help carry bits of stone limbs to barricade the door with. She kept us safe for so many years. That’s why Sven believes he owes her a debt. She saved his life so many times, just like she saved mine. And then, one day, when I was seven, the Azorius decided they’d had enough.”

“They came for her?” Jace asked in a voice barely above a whisper. Vraska nodded.

“Dozens of them, with law mages in toe. They raided our building. Mother buried me in old cloth, furniture, rags, in the cupboard so they couldn’t find me. She told me to stay quiet and then she left the room. I never saw her again. I saw the statues she left behind, so many statues, and the blood. It was probably her blood.”

“I’m really sorry,” Jace said, “I can’t believe the law would allow such a thing.”

“They aren’t doing anything wrong if you don’t count us as people,” Vraska murmured “Most people don’t. We’re monsters. Maybe that’s why they came back for me.”

“They-“

Vraska didn’t really want to hear his sympathy. It was too weird, too alien, for her to get her head around. She hadn’t told her story to anyone and now she was given the chance, she desperately wanted to keep going.

“The authorities left our little rooms alone for a year, maybe they’d thought they’d cleared out. Then, one day, there was the biggest raid of all. Enforcers everywhere, turning over buildings, knocking down doors, up-ending carts and boats in case anyone had tried to hide. They took all of us, even the children, the ill and the elderly. They chained us all together. They put a hard metal band over my eyes, so I couldn’t even think of fighting back.”

“Vraska I-“

She couldn’t stop. It was spilling out like some filthy confession she’d been hiding all these years.

“They dragged us up to the surface to a maximum-security prison. They crammed us in cells a third the size of our little room. Dozens of people, packed into cages like animals ready for the slaughter. I couldn’t move. I could barely breathe. There were bodies pressing everywhere. People sobbed. People choked. People died around me and I could do nothing. I couldn’t even see.”

She found herself choking up a little but she ploughed on.

“They hurt us. We had done nothing wrong. We hadn’t broken any laws. I-I didn’t understand why. They would whip us through the bars, use us as targets for rocks, slings, even arrows, all for their own amusement. They would drag those who’d never seen sunlight out into the yard. We could hear the screams from our cell as-as they burnt. The Azorius delighted in our suffering. Our cells would flood. Those that didn’t starve lived surrounded by human waste and decaying bodies. And still they packed more of us in. Until one day... some of the newer prisoners tried to get out.”

Jace had stopped speaking and was now simply watching her with horror in his gaze.
“They saw that I was a gorgon and tried to use me a weapon. They grabbed me, their hands were everywhere…” Vraska shook a little, feeling the ghosts of claws and fingernails on her skin.

“They wrestled my blindfold off and pushed me at a guard, trying to get me to use my magic. The guard seized me and wrestled me to the ground. With his all his weight holding me down, he began to slam my-my head against the stone floor.” Almost-subconsciously, Vraska reached up to the left side of her head. Gently coiling back her hair, she exposed a thick knotted scar and the stump of what might have once been a tendril.

“I couldn’t think. There was so-so much pain. He just kept hitting me against the rock and I thought I would die. Then, just as everything started going black, it stopped. I wasn’t in the prison anymore. I wasn’t in Ravnica. I was in a place full of grey pillars and walls. I lay there, dazed and bleeding... It took me a while to realise I was in yet another prison. There were no people there, just walls, just stone, it was a labyrinth. I wandered, concussed and delirious. I didn’t know how long it took me but eventually, I worked out how to walk back. And when I came home, there was no Dredgefold Docks anymore. Just officials and construction workers building new on top of the old. I was left on the streets and well, here I am.”

She sank a little lower into the water, tears dripping into the bubbles. Now it had all been said, she felt oddly drained. Like she could fall asleep right there and then.

“Vraska, I-“ Jace was drawing closer. He looked like he wanted to hug her, or hold her hand, or something.

“Please…I’m not sure I can do touching right now.”

Jace respectfully withdrew.

The rest of their time in the baths wasn’t nearly as relaxing. Jace taught her how to blow bubbles in the water in an attempt to make her feel better. It did, momentarily, but exhaustion was setting in. They had done so much running and fighting today. She needed to sleep. They both did.

Leaving in their new clothes, they waved goodbye to Sven, promising they would come back soon. Vraska knew that Sven would let them sleep in his little flat over the bathhouse, but his wife certainly wouldn’t. Instead, they opted for a sheltered copse of mushrooms in a nearby park. Hidden from anyone who might pass by, they took it in turn to dose. Vraska first, on Jace’s insistence, and then it was his turn. Whilst the other slept, they flicked through their last remaining textbook. It was a history book, heavily revised and edited by whoever made these things to contain only the most glorious parts of the ‘civilised’ guilds and the worst parts of others. It made Vraska sigh and stow it away. Instead, she opted to look through the stalks, out into the park. She thought, maybe for a moment, that she saw another gorgon. But she wasn’t there long enough for her to tell.

They spent just over a week in the Undercity. Vraska gave Jace a tour of all her favourite places in the precinct for food, for shelter, even for games. They skinned stones across the river and watched enormous fish glide by, just beneath the surface. She found Jace a flier about mushrooms outside what looked like a small museum. Next time they rested in the park, he pointed every different type out to her, including a few she didn’t know. After a week, they started to run out of food again. The snacks they had looted were satisfying but not filling in any shape or form. The momentary buzz of a sugar high did nothing when they were trying to run. They spent some of their coin to buy fresh food, and replaced one of Vraska’s knives which had bent in the fight against Cyril’s gang. However their money was running out. It turns out even the allowances were just that – enough to buy sweets and candied fruit.
Vraska however had an idea. Around this time of year, there would often be fairs travelling round the Undercity. They would travel the surface in the summer, when everyone was enjoying the sunshine. When autumn came about, they went underground to bring some much-needed colour and cheer. She and Jace followed a trail of bright green posters to another large park and were delighted to see not a Rakdos carnival, but a Golgari run fairground.

The entire park was packed. A ferris wheel as tall as the surrounding fungi escorted whooping children up into the air, whilst their parents watched on, snacking on various foodstuffs on sticks. Vraska took a deep breath, taking in the smell of deep fried ball-mushroom and candied insect leg. Fairs were so good for scavengers like them. Drunken revellers would drop their snacks, food stalls would over stock and dump their waste, sympathetic fair-folk would occasionally let you go down a slide for free. As food went, they were currently well-stocked, but they were down to the last dregs of their purses. However food wasn’t all you could find at a fair. As was the nature of mechanics, things broke all the time. Rides fell apart, litter accumulated, and all manner of rubbish was collected in great metal vessels beside the fairground. This is what they were here for. Vraska pointed them out as Jace took in the spinning beetle ride.

“We can find all sorts in there,” she gestured at the skips again, “Basically if its lost or broken, it gets chucked in there. I found jewellery last time I went digging. Plus scrap metal is worth a lot.”

Jace look at the large containers.

“I think I’m going to need help getting up,” he replied, “I don’t see a ladder.”

That was because the fair owners wanted people not to do precisely this.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you a boost.”

They approached the large metal structures, twice their height and already groaning with refuse. Thankfully this was the industrial kind and not the food kind. That went in separate bins to be taken back for composting. Still…

“Be careful, it might be sharp in there,” Vraska called as Jace heaved himself off her shoulders and into the skip. She made sure he was clear before giving it a running leap, gripping onto the rusty edge before pulling herself up. Perfect! The skip was full of lost property, as well as bent and broken scaffolding. There was a definite absence of broken machine parts but it looked like someone had dumped an entire tent in here.

What she wasn’t expecting to find however, was company.

“Er, Vraska,” said Jace. He was pointing at the other side of the skip. She turned.

“Oi!” said the boy, knee-deep in scrap metal, “I was here first!”

Perhaps a year or two older than they were, the stranger was dressed like a topsider. Ragged red clothing and a somewhat mechanical looking backpack made him look like something the Izzet had thrown out. He had a series of metal bands up his arms, intertwined with sparking wires and a circular dial – it looked very homemade and equally unsafe. Vraska scowled at him. What was an Izzet leftover doing down here? This was Golgari territory! She had more right to this heap than he did.

“What do you want?” demanded the boy.

“We’re doing what you’re doing,” stated Jace, “Scavenging. There’s plenty to go round.”
His attempt was appreciated, but Vraska didn’t hold much hope for it.

“I was here first,” the boy repeated, firmer this time, “I need this, so piss off.”

“And you think we don’t?” Vraska retorted, “Scrap metal on the surface not good enough for you?”

“Well down here its free,” the teenager retorted, “And easy pickings, until you idiots came along.”

“Well, there’s two of us and one of you,” Vraska stated, “So why don’t you scram.”

The boy scowled at them both. He seemed to be sizing them up. Vraska summoned just enough magic to make her eyes flash gold. He flinched. The device on his arm suddenly crackled with electricity. Izzet leftover indeed.

“We don’t have to fight,” Jace proclaimed, making an uneasy step forwards, “It’s clear we’re all just trying to get by and...there’s enough for all of us. You take what you need. We’ll take what we need. Neither of us can carry everything in here away.”

“I don’t care,” replied the boy, “You don’t get to drop in here and tell me what to do. No one tells me what to do! So back off before I electrify this whole dump up!”

“Are you crazy?” Jace cried, “This is all metal!”

Vraska decided he probably was crazy. The boy’s improvised arm band thing was sparking more violently now. Sparks were sizzling against the scaffolding, turning the metal red hot. This was bad, this was really bad. If that boy lost control of his stupid device then they were all fried. The boy grit his teeth and suddenly there was a flash of purple lightning. Too dangerous! They had to go! But could they climb out of here before –

The entire container suddenly lit up.

“Jace, hold my hand,” Vraska suddenly ordered as she smelt burning metal. He did so, unthinkingly.

“Can you see the place I’m picturing in my mind,” she continued, voice garbled in her haste.

“Am I allowed?” he responded. Now wasn’t the time that!

“This time, yes,” she replied.

There was a flash of blue beside her as she heard a distinct crackling all around them.

“I can picture it. These are you memories?”

“Yes,” she replied, “Now, follow me. Imagine you’re stepping into that scene. Picture it with everything you’ve got, then walk with me.”

“Walk with-“ It was too late. He was already picturing it. There was a brilliant flash of blue followed by a swirl of shadow. They were surrounded by sheer darkness on both sides, before landing, with a thud, staring up at a pink and orange sky.

Back on Ravnica, Ral Zarek was standing in an electrical field of his own creation. The lightning bouncing harmless off him as by design. One moment there had been a gorgon and human there, next, there was no trace.
“Seriously?” he groaned, before going back to his digging.
Jace is inspired. Vraska realises that there's so much more they can be.

There were no people in the realm with a pink and orange sky. It was one of the many places Vraska had flung herself to as she deliriously tried to make her way back to Ravnica. The lack of people meant that it was a great get-away spot. Also, it was a safe place to sleep. Travelling between planes was exhausting, she only did it if she absolutely had to. Being electrified in a metal kill pit was certainly a ‘had to’ situation. Gods, teenagers could be so stupid sometimes! Yes, she was a teenager too, but she hadn’t made the best decisions herself. Like revealing her past to Jace after knowing him for only a few days. Even a year would’ve been too soon.

Regardless, their three-week anniversary was coming up soon. She’d managed to keep him in one piece for that long. She’d lost everyone else, except Sven, but she’d managed to keep Jace around and he didn’t seem to be terrified of her yet. The pink sky realm had certainly taken him off guard. He’d evidently not planeswalked since he’d got to Ravnica. They had lain in the grass for a long time, staring up at the sky – pink, with orange clouds, the space between studded with stars. Neither spoke as they contemplated the alien view above them. Vraska found herself struggling to stay awake, slipping in and out of a doze. She wasn’t sure why she was trying to stay awake. Jace hadn’t spoken for some time. Seeing him was impossible through the tall grass, but she could hear him breathing close by. He was usually so full of questions at all hours of the day. His silence was strange but not unwelcome.

Vraska took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Exhaustion was getting the better of her. Nothing on this plane had ever hurt her but she wasn’t just watching her own back now. Jace was being very quiet. Maybe he’d fallen asleep. She let out a small sigh before shifting into a more comfortable position in the grass.

“Vraska?”

She must have been asleep for all of five minutes when she was abruptly brought back to consciousness.

“Hm?” she replied, blearily fixing her gaze skywards once more.

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of things,” Jace stated. Well, that did explain why he was so quiet. Was it now time for questions? How about a nap first?

“What about?” she asked, against her own better judgement.

“I don’t think I have the energy to be scared anymore.”

Vraska frowned and rolled over onto her side, trying to look at him through the grass. That was a very odd conclusion to something that had taken so much thought. However, she knew that feeling. Knew it so well.

“I’ve been to two new worlds,” Jace continued, “Almost died multiple times. Been saved both
those times by amazing magic.” He yawned loudly. Vraska also knew that feeling.

“I think we’re special.” Jace managed through his yawn.

“We did just go to another world,” she murmured. Please Jace. She was bone tired from the effort of pulling both of them through the empty space between worlds. Could they maybe nap first before discussing their existences?

“That’s part of it yeah.” There was a rustle of grass and Jace’s head appeared, then the rest of him. He lay down next to her and then fixed his gaze skywards.

“But more than that. I don’t think ordinary folk would have survived anything we did over the last few weeks.”

She agreed, mainly because of the whole moving between worlds thing.

“I know there are more mind mages on Ravnica,” Jace reasoned, “But…have you met those other mind mages?”

Vraska yawned loudly and nodded.

“Were they like me?” Jace asked. He had his hood up to stop the grass tickling his face. The stars above shone in his eyes, blue like his magic. He was very blue, Vraska noted.

“No,” she told him, “They were bastards. And, and they couldn’t do nearly as much with their magic as you can.”

“And you, you’re exceptional with your weapons and magic,” Jace continued, “I haven’t met any other gorgons yet, but I would bet that you’re better at it than they are.”

“I don’t know, the Ochran gorgons are probably superior,” Vraska reasoned, “Though I haven’t met any except my mother.”

“I think we’re something else,” Jace stated, “I think our ability to go to new worlds did something to us. We’re stronger than we ought to be.”

“Is that what you’ve been so deep in thought about?”

Jace nodded. Vraska wondered how far his musing had gone. Was he treating this as some sort of puzzle to solve? Yes, they had something special in their lives that no one else seemed to have. Yet, it hadn’t done Vraska any good, except the occasional lucky get away.

Their attention returned back to the sky where a pair of silvery moons were slowly fading into view. The sky was still pink. Was this dusk? Was this night? Vraska had no idea. It was nice whatever it was. There was a cool breeze here, off-setting the warmth of the ground.

“I was thinking about the greengrocer,” Jace said suddenly, disturbing her moment of exhausted tranquility.

“What about him?” she replied.

“We were going to blackmail him,” Jace reminded her, “Because he’s cheating on his wife.”

Oh yeah, they were. That had been such a good idea.

“When we go back we can do that,” Vraska said, thinking about how they were going to do that,
“We can use the leftover stationary from those bullies.”

Jace propped himself up on his elbows and turned to look at her.

“Why stop there?” he asked, “Just at the greengrocer.”

She frowned. What was he up to?

“There’s so many terrible people in Ravnica. I’m starting to think people don’t get rich without hurting someone else. Those people, anyone who thinks they deserve to live in a big cathedral or a golden tower, have plenty of wealth to share with those who have no homes, no food, nothing… like us.”

It was a lovely sentiment, but that was just how society was. The rich didn’t care about the poor and it beyond both of them to change that.

“They aren’t going to help us with their money, so we should help ourselves with their money. Using our special powers, we can get everything we need without risking death so much.”

Vraska sat up. The action was a struggle and her back protested painfully at the action.

“You want to start blackmailing the rich?” She questioned. That seemed the logical conclusion and it wasn’t one she was averse to.

“Yes,” Jace replied confidently, “They get punished and we get to eat. It’s a win-win situation. I bet there are a ton of very rich Azorius senators with secrets to hide. We’ll be able to have baths whenever we want!”

She wanted that so badly. Not just the regular baths and food, but to punish the disgusting men and women who sat on high and regarded the rest of the world as playthings. She wanted to petrify each and every one of them, watch their terrified expressions as they calcified right in front of her eyes. She’d start with the guard who had beat her. Hold him down, beat his head and then at the last moment, immortalise his pain in stone. She’d work her way up, first the prison guards, then their officers, their managers, the officials, the senators, everyone who had been involved in this injustice, right up the Guildmaster herself. Maybe she had been using her skills too sparingly. Maybe she should lean into them. She didn’t have to just survive. No, she could thrive off the terror of her tormentors!

“Let’s do it,” her voice hissed a little in her excitement, “Let’s punish them and live like we’re their equals.”

He beamed at her and she couldn’t help but smile back. Jace was clearly inspired.

“We are their equals, but we have gifts,” he continued, “Gifts we can use to be safe and warm and clothed! We’re not street rats, we’re not monsters. We don’t have to nearly die rooting around in other people’s rubbish. We’re people too, and we can take control of our own lives.”

This went against everything she’d believed about herself, but the sheer confidence in those star-strewn eyes was enough to light a fire in her heart. She liked this confidence in Jace. This resolve suited him better than fear. It was as if travelling to another plane had unlocked something inside him, something that had realised the magnitude of what he was. His power was exceptional, she had thought that for as long as she’d know him. Now he seemed ready to use it. He’d found his footing. They could be exceptional.

They would be exceptional, together.
They slept deeply on the mysterious pink plane before heading straight back to Ravnica. None of their food had survived the journey so they immediately had to go about finding something to eat. Once again, the trip took a lot out of them so Vraska decided to take on this mission alone. Jace rested whilst she slipped into the shadows of Tin Street and found what they needed. They ate a meal of stolen bread and smoked fish, rested a little more, before beginning to concoct their plan.

They started with the greengrocer. Jace delved back into his mind to make sure he was still being unfaithful. There he discovered that Miles the grocer in fact had plans to meet the street artist in their regular meeting place, the Rakdos hotel, that very night. He recounted to Vraska all the salacious things he’d witnessed them doing, getting incredibly redder in the face as he did. Vraska wasn’t surprised, but she was extremely uncomfortable and decided to stop him halfway through his explanation. She didn’t need to know everything, just that they had enough information to extract money out of the man.

Their plan was simple. Firstly, they would write a letter with their stolen stationary. They’d detail some of the things that Miles the grocer had got up to behind his wife’s back and threaten to send all the details to his wife. Vraska knew that she worked round the corner, so if their attempt at blackmail failed, they would be able to make good on their threat. Jace would deliver the letter, with an illusionary disguise that made him look like a messenger from the post office. Vraska would watch his reaction from the alley behind the chicken man. If the grocer wanted their silence, he would place his money in the metal pipes in the alley as he was packing up for the day. If he didn’t, he would go and meet his lover in the Rakdos hotel, where Jace would have already left another letter for him with greater demands. Once again, he would have to place money in the pipes, or the following morning, Jace would go deliver a message to his wife.

They chose midday as their moment. Vraska ensconced herself in the alley as the chicken man whistled to himself, bleary eyes completely oblivious to anyone entering or leaving the passage behind him. The perfect view of the grocer was occasionally obscured by a passing gaggle of people, but it wasn’t long until she saw Jace in his post-boy disguise. The black and blue uniform would be recognisable to anyone in Ravnica, however Jace had gone further and made sure his face would be unrecognisable as well. He was currently a short freckled boy with his black hair in a low ponytail. He was wearing lopsided spectacles over his now-brown eyes and the school satchel had been transformed into a postman’s bag.

Vraska kept her gaze on Jace as he weaved his way through the crowds. He hurried up to the grocer, waited until he finished serving a customer, and then presented him with an envelope. Miles took it and pocketed it immediately in his apron. Vraska felt a little disappointed that he hadn’t read it, but he was currently busy. Jace bid him good day and then made a beeline for the alley. Fairly sure he was safe now, Vraska cast her gaze about the rest of the market, looking for any oddities, or perhaps a chance at a meal. Just as she turned away from the grills, she spotted something that made her cease all movement.

There was a gorgon, watching her. She was standing in the shadows of a clothing stall, seeming admiring a rack of scarves. Yet it wasn’t just any gorgon, it was the exact same woman Jace had described. She had a long black leather dress, slit up the sides for ease of movement. A brown ruffled neckpiece was clasped round her neck like a choker, just visible beneath her deep green cloak, which she wore hood up. Her eyes met Vraska’s. They were a bright fiery orange. She smiled at Vraska before disappearing into the shadows behind the stall. Vraska suddenly felt very cold. Why was she here? Why had she been watching them twice? Were they being followed? This surely couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I did it,” whispered Jace, as he joined her in the alley. Vraska stared straight past him at the spot the gorgon had vacated.
“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“That gorgon,” she replied in a murmur, “The one you saw in the Undercity. I think she’s following us.”

Jace immediately looked alarmed.

“She’s here?”

Vraska nodded.

“I think I saw her in the park too, the one in the Undercity. She doesn’t seem hostile, and she knows that I’ve seen her. But…I don’t like it.”

Jace frowned.

“She hasn’t hurt us yet, but that’s really weird. Do you think she’d turn us into the authorities?”

“No,” Vraska muttered, “No, I don’t think the authorities would even listen to her. She seems to be trying to be as stealthy as we are. She doesn’t seem interested in what we’re currently doing.”

On that note, they made themselves comfortable in the alley. The grocer had until nightfall to pay them and at least one of them had to be there to collect the money. Jace amused himself reading their remaining textbook as Vraska kept an eye on the stall. Miles served a steady stream of customers and to her mounting frustration, the letter remained firmly in his apron. After a few hours, she had to stretch her legs, so went and found them something to eat. When she returned, Jace had finished with the textbook and they ate the rest of their bread, as well as two frosted buns Vraska had managed to swipe from the bakers.

As the sky darkened, the market became less crowded. Wagons and carts turned up to take away the day stalls and get ready for the night ones. They watched as the grocer packed up his produce into crates and finally, finally, took the letter out of his pocket. Vraska found herself gripping her knees in anticipation as she sat, waiting for his reaction.

Miles opened the letter. At first, his face was impassive, but his expression became progressively less so as he read on. By the end, he looked rather pale. Looking left and right, he seemed to think someone might be watching. Whilst he was right, they blended into the shadows too well to be seen. He scrunched up the piece of paper and stuffed it back into his apron. Hastily packing up, he left the market very swiftly with his goods.

“To the hotel,” Vraska whispered.

Jace nodded and set off at once.

Hours later, Vraska was getting very bored of this particular alley. She was beginning to get the sinking feeling that their scheme was going to end in failure. As she sat, she thought of everything she knew about the other vendors here. They were probably going to need a new target and a rich one too. It was getting increasingly colder. Autumnal nights were definitely turning into winter ones, and staying outside too long could be dangerous for many more reasons than in other times of the year.

She wrapped herself up in her cloak and waited for Jace to return. To her surprise, he came back with an arm of packages wrapped in brown paper.

“They wanted me to send their post,” he explained, sitting down next to her, “I wasn’t going to tell
them I wasn’t a real postman so…do you want to see what’s inside?”

“Yes!”

They spent a happy half an hour going through the hotel’s post. The packages mostly included lost property. There were a few books, one of which was definitely erotica. A black silk dressing gown-like garment, a single bloody shoe and a bottle of shampoo made up another parcel. The most exciting package was definitely the large unopened box of chocolates and the pack of playing cards. They eagerly pocketed those items, anticipating the chocolate feast to come.

They were just discussing where they could sell these items, when they heard footfalls at the entrance of the alley. Vraska stepped back into the shadows as Jace threw an illusion over them both. They waited with baited breath as a familiar figure entered the alley. It was Miles the grocer, and he had a large canvas bag with him. They watched, silently, as he tried to fit the bag into one of the rusted old pipes. The bag made a lot of very exciting clinking noises as he tried to force it in the hole. Unfortunately it was too wide. He gave an anxious sigh, looking left and right as he instead tucked the bag behind the pipes – Vraska’s favourite vantage point. With that, he gave one more glance about before swiftly retreating.

As soon as his footsteps were gone, Vraska darted out of their hiding place. There was a chance he would’ve brought back-up, or alerted the authorities, so she couldn’t be sure this wasn’t a trap. She reached the bag and tentatively picked it up. It was a completely normal bag. She readied a knife and carefully opened it on the ground. It was full of coins…coins, and nothing else. They’d done it! She ran back to show the contents to Jace.

Thus began the best winter of Vraska’s life.

“The best winter so far,” Jace commented when she expressed this.

Their success at blackmailing the grocer signalled the start of a new phase in both their lives. Emboldened by their victory, they gave careful thought to what they could accomplish going forward. Vraska’s experience with the ins and outs of Tin Street, combined with Jace’s ability to pry into minds left them a huge selection of people to try. So many that they had to set themselves some ground rules as to who they would choose and why. These guidelines were quite simple. They would only blackmail someone if they could afford it. They didn’t want to ruin too many lives with their new career. Secondly, they would only put someone through that much stress if they absolutely deserved it. Miles the grocer had not only been cheating on his wife, but also bribing the police. That definitely put him on the deserve-it list. They would choose targets who were knowingly creating suffering for others – be it now or in the future. This thankfully still left them with a large number of possible targets. The biggest businesses were the shadiest. They could also afford to pay off condemnation. So, when it came to Tin Street, they were never without opportunity.

Vraska had once seen a sign outside a Selesnyan vernadi proclaiming that money did not buy happiness. They were wrong. Money brought her the most comfortable Winter she had experienced since moving up to the surface. They not only had money for frequent hot meals, but also to buy warm winter gear from the Corpse Lily bathhouse. They wrapped themselves up in hats, scarves and gloves, just in time to return to the surface for Jace’s first snowfall. Vraska remembered the first time she had ever experienced snow. She had found experience rather terrifying, not understanding why large white clumps of pure cold were coming from the sky. There was no snow in the Undercity, occasionally ice, but the surface city was soon covered in it. She watched in amusement as Jace ran round leaving footprints, before suddenly receiving a snowball to the face. She then had no choice but to show off her superior aim and accuracy, pelting him in a deluge of...
They found a boarded-up café, not far from Tin Street. It had been closed for a long time and was rumoured to be haunted by the vengeful spirits of deceased customers. They hadn’t found any ghosts, just bits of machinery, splintered wood and the occasional rat. The leftover Izzet machinery could still be powered up for warmth. It made the perfect shelter to sit out the winter in, and they even had enough money to buy themselves blankets. With hot food in their stomachs, they nestled into soft blankets as the snow pounded down outside. They were so warm and comfortable, this ruin of a café seemed like paradise. They were living better than Vraska had done for years. With fresh clothes, and occasional trips to the bathhouse, they now looked a little less ragged. This made the very people they blackmailed willing to accept their money. They didn’t have to worry about swiping their next meal, they could just go up and pay for it like normal people. Vraska couldn’t quite express how satisfying that was.

Looking more respectable, they were allowed into the local libraries. They spent many a happy afternoon, safe, warm, and surrounded by more books than they could read in a life time. Vraska was happy that Jace shared her passion for reading. He had an insatiable appetite for learning and now she could finally find answers for all his questions. Fiction or non-fiction, it didn’t really matter. They would surround themselves in books and while away the hours, reading each other their favourite excerpts, discussing what they thought the authors really meant and discussing their preferred endings. They impressed the librarians with their reading skills, and were soon allowed to take books back to their café home. This made the chilly evenings even better as they delighted in new knowledge and stories of places far far away.

They made an excellent pair and that showed no signs of changing. However, Jace was certainly finding his feet and was now willing to explore a little further by himself. They would increasingly run two missions at once – Vraska would blackmail one target and Jace would another. Their income increased but so did their notoriety. One day, Vraska returned back to the café, money in hand, but with a poster in the other.

**WANTED**

It proclaimed.

**THE TERRORS OF TIN STREET.**

**BY ORDER OF THE BOROS LEGION, ANYONE WITH INFORMATION CONCERNING THE RECENT SPATE OF ESPIONAGE AND BLACKMAIL ON TIN STREET MUST COME FORWARD OR FACE CHARGES OF CORRUPTION.**

**SAFETY OF OUR GREAT MERCHANTS IS IMPERATIVE TO A GREAT PRECINCT. ANY INFORMATION LEADING TO THE CAPTURE OF THE TERRORS PLAGUING OUR MARKET WILL BE REWARDED GREATLY.**

**CONTACT CAPTAIN GUS – RED STREET HQ.**

“I don’t think they know anything,” Jace commented as Vraska fed the poster into the machinery, “There’s no description of us, nothing. Interesting that someone came forward though. Would you want to admit you were being blackmailed?”

“Maybe if you were in love with the Boros Legion,” said Vraska, sitting down beside him, “Could have been Miles.”
They never did find out who reported their cases, but neither did anything come of the posters. To avoid an increased level of guarding, they spread their blackmail out a little further and made sure they were targeting a wide range of the guilded. It was during one of these trips further afield, that Jace and Vraska made a discovery. A life changing discovery perhaps, namely, the existence of coffee.

“They never did find out who reported their cases, but neither did anything come of the posters. To avoid an increased level of guarding, they spread their blackmail out a little further and made sure they were targeting a wide range of the guilded. It was during one of these trips further afield, that Jace and Vraska made a discovery. A life changing discovery perhaps, namely, the existence of coffee.

“I don’t think you’re meant to inhale it,” Vraska chuckled. Jace had stuck his nose in the cup and taken a deep breath.

“But it’s so good,” he whined, “It’s like drinking liquid fire. You feel warm and energetic.”

Vraska couldn’t disagree with that. She sat and sipped at her coffee, enjoying the warmth as the markets beneath them bustled and chattered.

“When we get a house,” Jace began, “We should have a coffee machine.”

“One of those big Izzet ones that take up half a room?” Vraska suggested with a smile, “That’s going to take up a lot of space we were going to put books in.”

“The other half will be books,” Jace said, as if the solution was obvious, “And we’ll sleep in hammocks attached to the ceiling, so there’s room for all the books on the floor.”

“Dibs on the hammock closer to the window,” Vraska put her hand in the air, as if someone else around here was going to make the choice for them.

“Fine, but I get the best pillow.” Jace offered her his hand as if it was a done deal. They shook, neither of them believing for a second that they would ever own something like a house. Houses were big, expensive, and required more money than they could ever dream of. There were limits to how much money they could extract from merchants. However, it was nice to think about. When she was feeling bold, Vraska liked to picture the library she could have, or run. She could make her own library and all the children could come visit, no matter how scruffy they looked. Jace once told her how he’d seen a bath the size of a large pond in the Rakdos hotel. Apparently, it made its own bubbles and you could eat and drink in it. That seemed a little excessive but having their own bath tub was a must in their fantasy home. Bubbles would be nice, if not a bit frivolous. Jace wanted a big sofa, or maybe some comfy armchairs, where you could read or just sleep. Vraska liked the sound of that. Their house would of course be very warm and they would spend sunny afternoons reading until they dozed off in their chairs. It was a nice dream, but not one that would probably happen to them.

The new year came, bitterly cold and with yet more snow. They sat on the roof of their café home to see the fireworks soaring over the rooftops of the Tenth District. Woops and cheers echoed from a few blocks away as a street party kicked off with great fanfare.

“I wonder who decided we should celebrate when a new year comes around,” Jace mused. He was staring upwards at the explosions of colour that rocked nearby spires.

“Same people who decided we should celebrate birthdays probably,” Vraska replied. They had a bag of candied orange peel between them, and a bottle of apple juice fresh from the market.

“When’s your birthday?” asked Jace, turning to her as a great boom announced the fiery image of dragon appearing in the sky. Vraska shrugged.

“I don’t know. Mother never told me…not sure gorgons even celebrate birthdays.”

“I wonder when mine is,” Jace commented, “Maybe we should come up with our own birthdays.”
Vraska wasn’t sure that was how birthdays worked, but she indulged him.

“When do you want to be your birthday then?”

Jace gave it a moment of thought.

“How about we both have a birthday in the middle of autumn. Then we can celebrate when we met too?”

She liked the sound of that. Also, it wasn’t something they had to think about for a while yet.

“Sure,” she replied, “Let’s share a birthday.”

Jace smiled and went back to staring up at the fantastical display blanketing the sky in colour and smoke. The Izzet truly loved their fireworks, especially those they could use to honour their Guildmaster in any way they could. The sky was alight with dragons and fire, explosions that sounded like cracks of lightning, even the occasional fiery comet that would land somewhere in the city, no doubt causing quite the mess.

They watched the fireworks until weariness got the better of them. Jace went downstairs first, stating he needed the bathroom, leaving Vraska with her thoughts and the distant sounds of revelry. Music echoed from somewhere nearby, punctuated by screams – of delight or fear she didn’t really know. Vraska couldn’t help but feel they were heading into a good year. A year that would continue on from this excellent winter. She yawned and turned towards the rickety stairs that led down the side of the building. With a few creaks, she made her way down, considering how long a lie in she could have the next day.

She approached the back door to the café, when suddenly she heard her name – shrill and panicked.

“Vraska!”

Jace’s voice cracked into a squeak of fear. She crashed through the backdoor to discover what had made him so terrified. She looked about and suddenly her blood ran cold.

The gorgon... she was here.
Chapter Summary

Jace grows in power and confidence. Vraska is pushed to the limits of her physical and emotional strength.

It was her.

Although she was now dressed for the cold, it was definitely the same woman. She had swapped her cape for a fur-lined cloak, still green but finely embroidered with brown detailing, patterned like layers of shelf mushrooms. The cloak was held in place by a broach, made of black metal and emblazoned with Golgari symbol.

Vraska stared at her. It had been so long since she’d seen an adult gorgon up close. Before this one, she didn’t think she’d seen any apart from her mother. This stranger however, looked nothing like her. This gorgon's hair was a glistening bronze, with black and brown banding up its entire length. Her eyes were bright orange rather than gold. She glittered in the light of the street lamps, pouring in through the café windows. Her golden nose stud, and matching earrings somehow produced an aura of great wealth and sophistication about her. Vraska suddenly felt very small. This stranger was so tall, so elegant, so refined… She'd never felt more like a street rat than now.

“Who are you?” she demanded, as Jace scuttled back towards the door she had just vacated.

“Why have you been following us? Are you Ochran? What do you want with us?”

“I do not care for the human boy,” the gorgon hissed, “He is irrelevant. He will leave.”

Vraska glanced back at Jace who was hovering in the doorway. If this was going to end up in a fight, she would rather have him backing her up. However, in doing so, he would be in incredible danger. This gorgon hadn’t attacked her yet but she clearly held Jace in contempt.

“What do you want me to do?” Jace’s voice entered her mind like a whisper. She felt his hesitance at being in her head, but understood. This was a dire situation and she’d allow the intrusion.

“Oh good.”

Hide behind the door, she told Jace. Can you keep this link up? Can I ask you to help if things go really bad?

“Yes, of course. I’ll be right here.”

He left, closing the door behind him.

“Good,” said the gorgon, “This is not a conversation for the uninitiated.”

Vraska frowned.

“I am not a member of the Ochran, or even the Golgari,” she replied, “I am certainly uninitiated.”
The gorgon smiled. She closed the gap between them in a few short strides. Vraska stood her ground despite the fact the adult towered over. She let out a warning hiss, her hair unfurling in an instinctive threat display.

The stranger merely let out a laugh behind elegantly taloned fingers. She looked down at Vraska as if she was something adorable. There was a great deal of affection in her fiery gaze that caught Vraska completely off guard. In one graceful motion, the gorgon bent down on one knee.

“Calm down, my sweet. I am not here to threaten you. I made a special request with our leader.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Why would you do that?” Vraska echoed Jace’s intrusion into her thoughts. The gorgon let out another tittering laugh.

“Why wouldn’t I wish to see Yveta’s lovely daughter? You look very much like her but so adorably small. Your little smudges of copper are precious.”

Vraska was now feeling distinctly uncomfortable. She thought she should be thrilled at meeting someone who had known her mother. Yet the sheer lack of aggression, or any sort of explanation, plus the sudden compliments, had unnerved her entirely.

“H-How did you know my mother?”

“It is traditional,” the gorgon replied, “When a new member of the Ochran is chosen, for a sister of the order to come and greet the newcomer. To put it simply, your mother greeted me. She pulled me out of a life in the gutter and introduced me to all I ever wanted. She welcomed me into a life where I could support myself. Once upon a time I hated what I was. But now I treasure my instincts like the gifts they are.”

“She’s inviting you to join the Ochran!” came Jace’s joyous thoughts from behind the door. Vraska had already realised this and her heart was hammering in her chest. Not only did this gorgon know her mother, but she had known her mother during her Ochran years? And she had experience that she now wanted to pass onto her? This… This was a lot.

“And I want to offer you what your mother did for me,” the assassin continued, “A chance to be more than you ever dreamed of being. With the Ochran, you can unlock your true potential, all the power your mother passed onto you. You’re special Vraska, and we would love you to join us.”

Vraska swallowed hard.

“Do I have to move back to the Undercity?” she asked. The gorgon smiled a little wider.

“Of course not my sweet. We will contact you when we would like to see you. Your training will of course be in the Undercity, but you won’t need to be there for more than a day at a time. You can still run around with your human friend. He’s very useful isn’t he? The higher ups are happy for you to work together. And, when you’re finally ready for your missions, your knowledge of the above ground will certainly be valuable.”

She was struggling to believe this but somehow it all made sense. She could learn how to use her powers under the instruction of other gorgons! With greater control over her magic, her mission to punish the corrupt of Ravnica would only be strengthened. She would be even more useful to Jace!

“Don’t worry about me! This is about you right now!”
She ignored him. And if she did have greater control over her powers, and Jace was right about their magic being enhanced by their ability to walk between worlds... Who knows what she could achieve? And she would earn money whilst doing so!

“I’ll do it,” she stated, “I’ll join. What do I have to do?”

The gorgon clapped her hands together, clearly delighted. From somewhere within her cloak, she pulled out a tiny black ornament. Vraska recognised it as the same Golgari symbol as the one on her broach.

“Open up your hands my sweet.”

Vraska extended her palms. The gorgon stopped the little black symbol into her open palms. There was a small flash of green light. The little metal sigil had turned into a broach with a heavy pin on the back, much like the one on the adult’s cloak.

“Wear this with pride, and we will be able to talk to you when we need to,” the gorgon stated, “And, when you are a fully-fledged assassin, you too will be able to contact us. Everything else you need to know will be explained in time. All our sisters are looking forward to meeting you.”

Vraska merely nodded as the gorgon straightened up back to her formidable height. She turned on her heel, and seemed like she was about to go, when Vraska realised something important.

“You haven’t told me your name!”

The gorgon tittered again.

“Oh no, how rude of me. You may call me Simona. Is there anything else?”

There was one more thing.

“If I said no, would you have tried to kill me?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” Simona replied, “I certainly would have tried. Would I have succeeded though? I think not.”

And with that she left as silently as she came.

“Is it safe?”

Yes. Vraska watched the doorway long after Simona vacated it. She’d forgotten to ask how Simona knew where she was in the first place. Or even how she’d got in through the front door, which had been heavily boarded up. The doorway was now free of planks and old tables and she wasn’t sure how long they had been gone. Had Simona planned this? Had she snuck into their shelter whilst they’d been watching the fireworks?

She heard Jace come in through the backdoor and hurry to her side.

“Are you Ochran now?” he asked, excitement plain in his voice.

“I think so.” Vraska showed him the broach. Jace leant in to get a closer look. There was a flash of blue in his eyes and he gave a delighted gasp.

“That’s got so much magic for such a little thing. It’s a communication device!”

“Can it be used to track us?” Vraska asked.
“May I hold it?”

Vraska handed over the broach and Jace held it up to eye level. Frowning intently, his gaze flickered blue and his tattoos glowed a little in the dim light.

“I…don’t think so. It kind of reminds me of my telepathy, like we just did. I think this lets you talk in your mind with someone else who also has a broach.”

He handed it back.

“New year, new job!” he exclaimed. “This is so cool! Are you excited?”

Vraska stared at the broach for a moment before fixing it onto her cloak. She couldn’t remember her mother having a broach like this, but in all honesty, she’d never known to look. Overall, she felt rather overwhelmed by this sudden experience. Yes she had glimpsed Simona every now and again, but she hadn’t thought anything good would come of it. Now she had met another gorgon, and that gorgon had given her a job? This was a bit too much.

Maybe she should sleep on it?

“When you put it like that, it does seem a bit much.”

“Out of my head,” she groaned, shoving the familiar pressure back the way it came. Jace mumbled an apology before going to gather up his blanket. The blasts of fireworks still echoed from outside as they re-barricaded the door. As soon as their sanctuary felt safe once more, they covered themselves in blankets, laying by the warm pipework.

“You’ve got to tell me about all the neat things you learn,” Jace said, peeking over the soft fabric he had drawn up to his nose.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Vraska murmured sleepily, “Promise.”

They drifted off to the sounds of distant singing. Vraska was rather glad they couldn’t make out the words.

The new year began much like the previous one ended. There was snow, cold and a lot of chances for blackmail. Jace had gotten bolder with his choice of targets. They moved onto Red Street, where not only the local Boros headquarters resided, but also an Orzhov basilica and the Azorius Precinct Council. The location proved to be a tantalising selection of targets. Want to punish a corrupt officer? There were dozens. Want to pressure a politician who was taking bribes? Why not target all three? Vraska loved watching their pale sweaty faces as they tried to subtly pay their way out of trouble. Not every mission was perfect. The Boros were quite resistant to being threatened. They swiftly realised that they had to get some really scandalous information before any officer would budge. Of course, there were those who responded with violence. Captain Gus didn’t take it very well when they threatened to expose the smuggling ring he was protecting in Tin Street. They discovered exactly why Miles the grocer felt the need to pay bribes. Captain Gus wasn’t just extorting merchants to hide their black-market dealings, he was also peddling some wares himself. His racket of choice was ordering new Boros weaponry and then selling it to anyone with the zinos to pay. They watched him meet some rather shadowy figures after sunset, passing off brand new swords and axes in exchange for a large jingling pouch of cash.

Thrilled by their own discovery, they decided to follow the shadowy figures to see where these weapons were taken. This mistake almost proved fatal. Instead of answers, they found themselves in a bloody encounter with an armed adult street gang. This group made Cyril and his Rakdos
bullies look like toddlers. These rogues did not tear into the fray like men possessed. Their actions were deliberate, calculated, and far more skilled than any opponent they’d faced. Vraska shot off one petrification after another whilst Jace tried to tear the blades out of the men’s grips with telekinesis. After accidentally severing a hand, he realised that his telekinesis was a little stronger than he previously thought. The action gave the men pause for thought, giving Vraska enough time to bring out her blades.

They finished the fight, heavily wounded but victorious. Jace was in the better state of the two and managed to support Vraska as they staggered to a Selesnyan clinic. Vraska passed out on the doorstep and he was forced to spin a story about a mugging. The Selesnyans were very kind and sympathetic. Yet, when she finally came round, Vraska awoke to the agony of having a strangers’ hands on her. She'd kicked, she'd scratched, she'd cried and yet the hands kept coming.

“I’m so sorry,” Jace pleaded, “I thought this was the best place to go. I didn’t realise this would happen.”

He crawled on all fours to join Vraska under the healer’s table. The floor was still dotted with blood from where she’d scratched at the people trying to treat her.

“N-Not your fault.” She was shaking so hard her voice was almost incomprehensible.

“There was so much pain. There were—were hands. I didn’t know where I was. I-I thought… I-I thought.” She buried her head in her arms, not wanting to show Jace her tears. She was supposed to be the strong one!

“You’re safe,” Jace assured her. He kept his distance but he clearly wanted to be closer. Vraska shied away. Her sharp fingernails tore into her leggings, reminding of her of how much damage she had caused. She had hurt people that were only trying to help her. What if she hurt Jace too? She couldn’t. She wouldn’t let that happen.

“You’re here, with me,” Jace continued, “You’re in a centre of healing. You’re safe. I…I’ll make sure they don’t touch you again.”

“I-I hurt them,” Vraska sobbed into her knees.

“You didn’t mean to,” Jace said, “And I’m sure the healers understood. You were scared. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Nevertheless, shame settled in like a fresh blanket of snow, deep and undeniable. The Selesnyans didn’t call the authorities on her, neither did they remark on her violent reaction. They made sure they made minimal skin contact, often working with tweezers than by hand. Jace stood her bed all the way through the dressing of her wounds, murmuring comforting words and reassuring her she was safe. Vraska appreciated his company but couldn’t help but feel humiliated. She hated crying in front of others almost as much as she hated being treated like something breakable. She was a survivor. She had been through so much worse than a bandaging…why was she so weak all of a sudden?

“You’re not weak,” said Jace as she huddled up, crying into a borrowed robe, “You’re stronger than any of them realise. You survived. You’ve survived when so many people haven’t. You’re the strongest and bravest person I know. Even strong people are allowed to cry every once and while.”

She felt like she had cried too much. In lashing out she had ruined so much, not just some healer’s robes, but also part of the connection she shared with Jace. She had just become comfortable with sleeping close to him, with holding his hand. Now however, she couldn’t even think of it without
frowning. What was worse, Jace had noticed.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said, on their last day in the clinic. He pulled a spare scarf out of his bag.

“You hold this end,” he offered the scarf, “And I’ll hold this end. That way we’re still connected like when we hold hands, and you can scrunch up the scarf when you’re feeling better enough to be closer.”

The idea was so silly but well-meaning, she couldn’t help but giggle through her tears. Jace beamed at the idea that he’d made her happy and that night they each wrapped one end of the scarf round their wrists, just to feel that bit closer.

Perhaps it was this torturous episode that made her come at Captain Gus with such ferocity. Once they had both recovered from their beating, they approached the Captain again with higher demands and greater punishment. Instead of coming to their meeting point with cash, the officer turned up with armed guards. Vraska hesitated only a second from her position on the rooftops. Their revenge was almost methodical. Jace kept the rest of the guards in a state of mental anguish and Vraska dropped down from the roof. Captain Gus only had a moment to express his surprise before she locked eyes with him. She pinned a notice and an envelope to his stone forehead before disappearing into the shadows.

**WANTED**

The notice proclaimed.

**THE OFFICERS ENABLING THE CORRUPTION OF OUR STREETS**

**BY ORDER OF THE TERRORS OF TIN STREET, ANYONE WITH INFORMATION CONCERNING THE RECENT SPATE OF SMUGGLING AND BRIBERY ON TIN STREET MUST COME FORWARD OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CORRUPTION.**

**THE SAFETY OF CITIZENS IS IMPERATIVE TO OUR PRECINCT. ANY INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST OF THE SMUGGLERS WILL RID OUR GREAT PRECINCT OF THE CRIME THAT PLAGUES ITS STREETS**

**HERE WE PRESENT OUR EVIDENCE - CAPTAIN GUS OF THE RED STREET HQ.**

Said evidence was laid out in the envelope. An identical envelope would soon be on its way to the Precinct Council.

Nothing came of their bold statement for a while. It took a lot of time and paperwork for the Azorius to do anything. Vraska saw no issue with turning two guilds on each other when the enforcers finally arrived to storm the Red Street HQ. She and Jace watched the ensuing battle from a nearby rooftop. Jace had even been thoughtful enough to bring sweets for the viewing experience. The Boros soldiers and Azorius enforcers caused so much chaos that they soon attracted quite the audience. The crowds cheered and made bets as each side tried to force their authority over the other. More Boros officers turned up for crowd control purposes, but soon found out that control was quite impossible. The battle grew into a street brawl as the two ‘terrors’ on the roofs watched on.

“That escalated really fast,” said Jace as he contemplated a strawberry flavoured lollipop. Vraska couldn’t help but agree.
“This is why we take justice into our own hands,” she replied, “Would you trust any of them?”

They watched until the chaotic violence began to get a little dull.

“I’m cold. Do you want to get coffee?” Jace suggested. Vraska looked up and saw a pair of griffins approaching over the precinct border. Probably a good time to get going.

“Sure. Same place as usual?”

After the precinct-wide disruption calmed down, their lives went back to a state of normal. They were forced to move out of their café by the approach of construction workers one icy morning. Apparently, someone had bought the place without ever looking once inside. Finding a new place proved difficult at first. The café had been a godsend, being both empty and sheltered from the snow. However, most of the local ruins didn’t share that luxury. You could have most of a roof, but be exposed through the lack of walls. Or you could take the risk of sleeping in some abandoned flats, where there were definitely other residents who would stab you in the night. Their options were both limited and less than ideal. Just as they were considering searching further afield, an unexpected solution came in the form of Vraska’s broach.

“Are you there, my sweet?”

Simona’s voice, as smooth as silk, echoed through her mind as they ate breakfast one frosty morning.

“Yes!” Vraska replied, clutching her broach as if on instinct. She knew she probably didn’t need physical contact to make the thing work, but she’d acted out of excitement.

“It is time for you to meet our sisters in arms. Everyone is so very excited for your visit. They’ve prepared all number of gifts and treats.”

“Where can I find you?” she asked. There were going to be gifts? It was hard to imagine anyone being that excited to see her.

“Meet me outside that pleasant little bath house you and your human are so fond of. I must thank you for leading me there. The facilities are quite charming.”

“Do I come now?” Vraska asked. Somehow she could feel the fact that Simona was laughing through their connection.

“Meet me tomorrow morning, my sweet. Should give you plenty of time to get underground.”

“I will. See you then.”

She felt the connection drop. She turned to look at Jace who had been watching her throughout her silent conversation.

“Was that the Ochran”? he asked. Vraska nodded.

“I’m going to meet the organisation tomorrow,” she said, “Do you want to come to the Undercity with me? They probably won’t let you in, but we are meeting at the Corpse Lily.”

“Oh, I can have a bath!” He looked positively thrilled at the prospect.

“Sure, but are you going to feel safe down there on your own?” Vraska asked, the thought was putting a dampener on her excitement at meeting Simona again.
“I don’t think Sven is going to let you spend all day in the bath. Are you going to be safe until I come back?”

Jace smiled.

“I think I know the area pretty well now. If I need something to do, I can go to that museum we keep passing.”

By the time they got to the Undercity, they realised another boon to travelling deep below the ground. The snow and ice that covered the surface hadn’t made its way this far down, and though a little colder, the Undercity was relatively unaffected. They found shelter in their favourite park, this time with blankets to further obscure them amidst the flora. Vraska couldn’t help but ask Jace if he was absolutely sure he would be safe here without her. After the sixth or seventh series of questions, Jace finally stopped humouring her.

“Look, I’m going to be alright. We’ve been down here so many times before and I’m not going any further than the pond. I’ve broken into people’s houses and that’s much more dangerous than this. I’ll be fine.”

It was still with great trepidation that Vraska parted from him outside the Corpse Lily bath house. Simona was waiting for her in the shadows of a nearby house, looking just as glamorous as the last time they had saw her. She was wearing a skin-tight green dress and a thick leather choker, from which dangled a small black Golgari symbol. The tips of her nails were painted gold and she had not one but two knives on her hips. Vraska couldn’t quite tell if she was ready for murder or a party.

“Come, come, my sweet,” she beckoned Vraska over as Jace disappeared into the bath house, “Everyone is waiting.”

Vraska’s nervousness only increased as she was led through a series of unfamiliar alleys and passageways. They went through a low stone archway, the path before them sloping steadily downwards deeper underground. Just as Vraska began to wonder where it led, Simona stopped to lift one of many metal gates, indistinguishable from any they’d passed, and led her down a narrow spiral staircase. This descent echoed with a faint buzzing. Vraska could only guess they were near the home of a family of kraul. As her eyes adjusted the increasing darkness, she saw Simona counting protruding bricks upon the wall. At two dozen bricks, she suddenly stopped in her tracks. Vraska almost bumped into her, catching herself before they could make contact.

“Watch closely,” Simona instructed. She raised one long taloned finger to the wall and began to scratch a series of crossing lines into the surface. Vraska did her very best to memorise the pattern but her concentration was suddenly hindered by the fact that one moment the stone was there, and the next, it had gone. In its place was a moss-strewn archway, the very familiar emblem of the swarm carved into its inner walls. A hidden guild gate?

“Come,” Simona said again. Vraska scrambled to keep up with her long strides as they passed through the impromptu opening.

“Where are we?” Vraska gasped.

The other side of the archway looked nothing like the staircase they’d just vacated. The narrow stone passage had opened up into a wide sweeping cavern, the ceiling of which was lost beyond even her vision. She stared about her, taking in the thick carpet of moss that blanketed every inch of the floor, studded by the occasional mushroom. More remarkable than even the floor, was clearly lined path leading them to the cavern’s heart. Statues of all shapes and sizes escorted them
towards the centre. Most of the figures were humanoid, elves and humans in long-eroded states of terror. The occasional troll or giant towered over their counterparts, casting long shadows through the luminescent fungi that climbed the cavern walls. As they approached the centre, the figures became even more impressive. Vraska gaped at the sight of a young dragon, a ferocious snarl captured forever in a deep black stone. A one winged angel, who looked like she had been attempting to cover her eyes a second too late, had partially crumbled due to age. But her remaining wing was so intricately detailed, Vraska could make out every feather in the stone.

“Our kind does not meet frequently,” Simona stated, passing by the angel as if it was just another overgrown boulder, “Even those of us in the Ochran. However, when we do we like to view the successes of our ancestors. Our mothers, their mothers, and all mothers before that… This place reminds us of the great victories of our kind’s past, victories you will never find taught in any school or history book.”

Vraska couldn’t help but feel awed. It was true, never had she seen any sort of monument to gorgon-kind. No book mentioned them unless they were some sort of hideous monster worth slaying. Yet all these statues, she was walking through history. She longed to know every story. How that dragon had been slain in stone. Why that angel had ever ventured down into the Undercity.

“Here we are,” announced Simona, “The Sisters’ Circle.”

Before them lay a wide ring of stone figures, encompassing a single large statue at its centre. Even with her limited experience of other gorgons, Vraska could tell this central statue was not made through petrification. She didn’t think you could petrify anyone into marble, especially not in so many individual colours. The five gorgons in the monument had been constructed out of a whole pallet of greens, blacks and browns, each hue glittered far finer than any of the surrounding figures. Their faces and hair had been carved with such fine detail, she had to imagine each statue must have taken months to complete. Unlike their circle, these gorgons did not look shocked or frightened. They were smiling at each other, their expression, right down to the shape of their brows, soft and familiar. The realisation hit Vraska just as they got close enough to read the stone plinth. This was the Sisters’ Circle… Her mother had mentioned them in her stories. Brave siblings who had tried to fight back for the freedom of gorgon-kind from their lich-lord masters. They had ruled the Golgari for a time, bringing about an age of prosperity for gorgon-kind before they were brutally murdered by the devkarin. This circle didn’t just belong to any sisters. These were The Sisters of Stone Death.

Vraska stared up at them, yearning to know which three were the fallen Guildmasters. It was hard to believe there had ever been a time where a gorgon had the power to rule the Undercity. It almost seemed impossible that there had been a point where the devkarin and their liches didn’t get to decide who was a person and who wasn’t. She would have loved to know them. Loved to hear how they had risen to power, how they had dealt with all the injustices thrust upon them. If she could even be a fraction as powerful as them… Maybe she could make a fraction of the difference to the world.

“Oh look,” Simona piped up, interrupting her fixation on the marble figures, “Everyone’s here… including E. You’re quite the popular recruit.”

Vraska turned just in time to see a group of women come up the stone-lined path. There six in total, all gorgons, all beautiful and none of them under six foot tall. She had never seen so many of her kind in one place. She had never known their scales could come in such vibrant hues: reds, yellows, bright greens and deep purples… Would she grow up to look so stunning? She desperately hoped so. Oh what she wouldn’t give to look so tall and powerful. She felt tinier as
they grew closer and closer. She had always looked up to her mother, both literally and figuratively. However she had never dared imagine that this was just how gorgons were. These assassins made angels look plain.

“Ladies,” Simona announced as the group joined them in the circle, “Mistress E.”

She nodded to the gorgon leading the group. Vraska thought that Mistress E may be the oldest of everyone present. She was a broad-shouldered and muscular woman with glittering black hair, tipped with gold. She had a sheathed sword at her hip and a bow and quiver at her back. She looked ready for a battle and Vraska couldn’t help but wonder how she got the large scar across her chin.

“May I introduce you all to our newest sister,” Simona continued, “This is Vraska, daughter of Yveta. She has kindly agreed to join our ranks. Vraska, may I introduce you to the sisters of the Tenth District Ochran… Mistress E, Pavla, Bela, Cecilie, Antonia and Ivana.”

Vraska did her best to remember who was who. Mistress E was the easiest to remember. Ivana was the brightest green and Bela was the red-head. Cecilie and Antonia looked like they could be twins… She was going to get them mixed up at some point, she knew it.

“There’s no need to worry so much my sweet,” she heard Simona’s voice in her head once more, “It’s unlikely you’ll meet most of them a second time. If Mistress E is here, it is likely the two of us will handle your training.”

Was Simona in her thoughts or was she just that obviously nervous? She waited a moment, and when her thoughts received no response, she assumed it was the latter. She was used to keeping to the shadows, people’s gazes didn’t get to linger on her very long. Now everyone in the circle was looking at her and she had no idea what to say. She felt she was under inspection. What was she supposed to do?

“I-I am honoured to meet you all.” Her hands fumbled in her dress as she gave a little bow. There was a series of murmurs and a tittering laugh from Simona.

“Isn’t she precious?” Simona exclaimed. Many of the other gorgons were smiling, the same sort of affection in their eyes.

“She’s Yveta in miniature,” commented Mistress E. She had a voice like gravel, like she’d had one too many pipes of rotweed.

“But does she have her mother’s skill?”

“I can assure you,” Simona replied, “Our leader would not have had me follow her for so long if She didn’t think Vraska had the potential.”

So Mistress E wasn’t in charge? Who was? Vraska looked between each face, trying to glean any sort of clue as to who this person was. Mistress E definitely had the most authority here, with Simona in a close second. Did this leader have a name?

“I mean no disrespect to our gracious leader,” Mistress E retorted, “But, if I am to train another sister, I wish to be the judge of her skill.”

She took a step forward, drawing the sword off her hip. The others in her group instantly backed off, some retreating with inhuman speed. Vraska stared up at Mistress E with wide eyes. They were going to fight? Now?
“Isn’t this a bit much?” Simona inquired, “She’s surely overwhelmed as it is.”

Vraska appreciated her concern but there was no better way to learn than to get stuck in. She didn’t learn her skills off a chalkboard. With every fight, she’d improved, and surely a fight against a proper instructor would be truly educational.

“I’ll do it,” she announced, instantly drawing all eyes back to her, “I accept your judgement Mistress E.”

The older gorgon smiled.

“Come on then girl. Let’s see what life’s got you.”

Simona backed off as Vraska drew her knives. The other sisters retreated to the edge of the stone circle, leaving Vraska, Mistress E and the statues of the Sisters of Stone Death.

Vraska expected a taunt, for Mistress E to bait her into attacking first. However as soon as the path was clear, the older gorgon came charging at her, sword aloft. Vraska dodged and rolled to one side, taking a mis-timed slash at her opponents ankles before having to hastily dodge a downwards swing. She was close enough to know that her little pocket knives weren’t going to be able to deflect E’s short sword. The adult was stronger that she was, an impact from that blade was likely to knock her flat. She dodged and dived as E drove her back towards the statue. She was clearly outclassed. The instructor wasn’t leaving a single opening for her to slip by. Her sword acted like an extension of her arm, and she sliced with such grace, such precision, that Vraska had to commit all her focus into staying in one piece.

“Nimble, good,” said Mistress E as Vraska found herself up against the plinth of the monument.

“However you haven’t even tried to attack me.”

Not strictly true, but when had she ever had the chance? Whilst Mistress E had that sword, there was no way she could get her little knives close. She grimaced as she was forced back, clambering halfway up the nearest statue. No, that sword would be her downfall. She had to get rid of it.

She swung herself on one outstretch stone arm and landed on the plinth in a crouch. Just as E came to raise her sword again, she charged a shot, missing entirely as Mistress E spun off to one side.

“Interesting,” she commented, but did not relent in her attack. She dodged spell after spell, Vraska doing her best to scale the monument as her eyes glowed at the force of her rapid-fire. They danced round each other, dodging blade and spell. Faster and faster, Vraska launched herself off the plinth and rolled on the moss as E’s movements became more ferocious. She shot another petrify off, it missed by inches, striking a statue on the perimeter, causing its head to crumble. Mistress E was grinning as she brought her blade down on Vraska’s head. Vraska rolled to the left, her eyes locked on E’s. The instructor braced herself to dodge another spell, but no spell came.

In the split-second E had to choose a direction, Vraska changed tact entirely. Eyes flashing gold she let the magic pass and instead flung a knife at the instructor’s hand. There was a splatter of blood and a gasp of surprise from one of the onlookers as E staggered back. Her sword clattered to the ground as she used her free hand to tug the knife out the other. This gave Vraska all the time she needed. Springing forwards, she seized the sword, spraying bloody moss as she swung it at her injured foe. She’d never fought with such a heavy blade before but somehow the weight just felt right in her hand. Her muscles strained as she slashed at her foe. It was now Mistress E’s turn to dodge as she leapt backwards, drawing a knife from her own belt with her still-bleeding hand.
“How does it feel girl?” she asked as she stepped this way and that, dodging Vraska’s clumsy swings with ease.

“How does it feel good to have a real blade in hand?”

Her arm was going to hurt after this, but in a way, it did. She’d been using her knives for so long, the prospect of trying something new excited her.

Mistress E seemed to be humouring her. Dodging, side-stepping, turning out of her reach. Vraska scowled. They were both equally matched at dodging, but she’d teach her that there was an advantage to being small. She drove E back towards the statues once more, cornering her against the plinth. She was far too big to go scrambling over the stonework. She was forced to catch the blade with her dagger, the sound of grinding metal ringing shrilly through the circle. Their gazes met. Her eyes glowed red. Vraska now had a decision to make.

She thrust her other knife into Mistress E’s arm.

The red glow faded and Mistress E burst out laughing.

Taken aback, Vraska stepped away as her opponent dropped her weapon onto the plinth behind her. Vraska picked up her bloody knife on the floor, still wary that this was some kind of ruse to lower her defences. However, the ripple of applause from round the circle seemed to indicate that the battle was over. Yet Mistress E just kept on laughing, both hands now covered in her own blood. Vraska glanced at Simona as she approached, wondering if she should ask if the instructor was alright.

“Wonderfully done,” Simona commented, before turning to the laughing gorgon.

“Mistress E, do you want me to have a look at…all of that?”

Mistress E straightened up, her laughter fading to a wide grin.

“You were wrong Simona,” she announced, “The girl is not her mother’s daughter.”

Vraska stared at her. But she thought she’d done really well?

“Yveta,” E continued, “Was only a prelude for what was to come. Do not define this one by her mother. Her potential is boundless in comparison.”

She had done well! There was another smattering of applause. The other gorgons approached the centre once more. Vraska looked at them all, still gripping E’s sword.

“I will teach this one,” Mistress E proclaimed, “In any blade that may suit her needs. Simona, you will instruct her on the delicate arts.”

She was still dripping blood onto the floor.

Vraska wasn’t quite sure what to do with herself as the gorgons gathered to congratulate her. She tried to give E back her sword but the instructor refused. Instead unbuckling her sheath and handing it over.

“I have many,” she insisted.

It was the first of many gifts, so many that Vraska struggled to work out what to do with them all. The others had brought bags with them containing possessions too small or unnecessary to keep,
but too dear to part with under normal circumstances. She was given new knives, beautiful curved blades with handles shaped like frilled mushrooms. Already overwhelmed by their generosity, she was left speechless by the presentation of five beautiful dresses. She had never owned something so gorgeous. These hand-me-downs, long out-grown by their previous owners, were the nicest things she had ever held. She couldn’t even believe they had let her touch them. This was far too much. She had no idea how she was going to look after all these. She didn’t have a wardrobe to put them in! They would get all ruined scrunched up in her bag!

Sensing her suddenly distress, Simona stepped in.

“Don’t worry my sweet. If you will allow it, I can store these away in my apartment until you’re big enough to wear them.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She was swept up into more conversation than she could comfortably handle. She mostly stood and listened as the adults spoke over her, occasionally explaining the finer points of their conversation. Overall the experience was exhausting, she was almost glad when Simona excused the pair, exclaiming that the young tired easily.

“Thank you for the meeting,” Vraska said, “I-I look forward to training with you.”

They seemed to adore her politeness. There were many murmurs of how sweet she was as Simona led her away. They returned back down the path towards the archway.

“The leader will be delighted that you managed to harm E on your first fight together,” Simona commented as they ascended the spiral staircase. Vraska didn’t quite know where to start. She had so many questions. Was harming E something to be celebrated? Why did the leader think this was exceptional? Who even were they?

“Who is the leader?” Vraska asked. Simona gave an enigmatic smile, and to Vraska’s surprise, did not laugh this time.

“Who do you think?” she asked. Vraska frowned. She didn’t know, that was why she was asking! The Ochran were a historic organisation in the Golgari. Being Ochran apparently meant automatic guild membership if her broach was anything to go by.

“Guildmaster Jarad?” she suggested. It was hard to keep a note of derision out of her tone.

“Oh, he likes to think he is,” Simona chuckled, “No, my sweet. We must of course pay our dues to our ‘mighty’ Guildmaster. We guard him from time to time, do his dirty work. As far as the devkarin in our organisation know, he is very much in charge.”

“But there’s someone else?” Vraska prodded. That sounded like something she should expect. There was always another layer deeper, especially in the Golgari.

“Of course. Jarad did not found our group. Like all devkarin, he merely profits off those he regards as lesser beings.”

She led her out into the alleys of the Chute Precinct.

“No, our leader knows intimately what it like to be a gorgon in an elf’s world. If you prove yourself exceptional, perhaps one day you will meet her.”

Now Vraska really wanted to know. She tried to press Simona for answers but even her apparent-
adorableness did not convince her to spill her secrets. Well, she’d just have to become exceptional then.

Jace immediately agreed when she told him about everything she’d experienced. The fact she now belonged to a shadowy organisation with an unknown leader was a whole new source of interest. If she had thought the sword was heavy, it was like a lead weight to Jace. He did his best to wave it around but dropped it every time he tried. He persisted to the point he managed to hit the mushroom in front of him, before calling it a day. They sat and rested in their usual place, watching families play in the fields, running up and down the bark-chip paths.

“It’s not as cool as your sword,” Jace murmured as the last dregs of park visitors left for the day, “But I found a thing.”

He pulled out a small box from his bag. It was very dusty, with clear fingerprints were Jace had opened it before.

“Where did you get it?” Vraska asked. Jace shifted a little where he sat.

“The museum… but I had a good reason.” He hastily took the lid off. Vraska couldn’t help but peer over his arm to get a better look.

“What is it?”

In the box there was a small black metal something. That the best Vraska could come up with. It was incredibly intricate, with no end of cogs and gears, all entwined within a delicate black wire shell. There were a few tiny pieces of glass on the outside, but Vraska could see absolutely no function to it. There didn’t seem to be a button, a lever, even a dial to operate it. What was it here for?

“It’s magic,” said Jace, “I don’t know what magic yet, but I don’t think its from Ravnica. Look at this.”

The little pieces of glass suddenly lit up blue. Staring intently, Vraska noticed a few symbols frosted in the glass. She had no idea what they meant, but it was unlike any language or code she’d seen on Ravnica.

“I want to know what it does,” Jace exclaimed, “It reacts really well to my magic. I want to know what it can be used for. I don’t think anyone at the museum knows.”

“That’s so cool.” Vraska watched him fiddle with it, occasional pulses of blue emitting from the thing. The excitement of today had really worn her out. Yet she couldn’t help but wonder whether the device was a threat. Those flashes had to mean something. What if there was another device out there somewhere? What if it had a counterpart? She glanced over at Jace who was utterly enthralled by his discovery. Yawning, she couldn’t bring herself to ruin his fun. Maybe she’d look at it herself another time. For now however, she was in desperate need of a nap.
Assassins

Chapter Summary

After months of training and tinkering, Vraska and Jace team up to take on their biggest target yet. Little do they know that this one job may change their lives forever.

[Content warnings for illness and mentions of kidnapping & misuse of dead bodies.]

Vraska had blisters on her blisters, but it was all worth it. She could feel the strength she had gained and it had only become more evident as she went through what Simona had called a ‘growth-spurt’. She saw less and less of her mentors as winter turned to spring and her training turned into real-world experience. Learning with Mistress E had been extremely gruelling. The Ochran weaponmaster was relentless in her approach to mastering the sword. Vraska had once seen Boros recruits train with wooden practice blades first, but E afforded her no such luxury. She put Vraska through her paces, trying her out with dozens of different blades until she felt that Vraska had found the right style for her. In addition to the physical training, Mistress E was always setting her nerves on edge. As she frequently reminded Vraska, they were assassins not soldiers. They did not learn stances, drills or techniques. They practiced the ability to survive even the deadliest of circumstances and carry off only the most silent of kills. This manifested in a frightening tradition of Vraska being suddenly attacked by her own mentor, as she attempted to master her swordplay. Without warning, Mistress E would come at her with knife or sword in hand and she had to desperately combat her attack, all whilst completing the practice task. It came as no surprise that being around Mistress E made her very paranoid.

Simona’s coaching was a lot gentler, but no less exhausting. What E had referred to as ‘delicate matters’, turned out to be magic and an assassin’s awareness of her surroundings. Simona took her out into the Undercity at night and taught her how to properly assess the threats people may present to her. She learnt to bend her magic, not just into a force for killing people, but into a means to read them.

“We can glean a person’s skill through their physique,” Simona explained, “And what weapons they wear on their persons. Yet magic lies beneath the surface, and is often the deadliest weapon in a foes arsenal. To identify that, we need to delve into our own instincts. A gorgons magic lies in the shadows, and it is through the shadows we can assess our foes.”

Vraska didn’t dare tell her that Jace could probably do this better. Assessment through shadows was very limited. Simona was focused on Golgari magic, when so many different variations existed above ground. Identifying a lich or a different kind of necromancer would probably be useful occasionally. However their shadow methods would be next to useless in identifying an undercover lawmage.

Thankfully her other lessons were far more useful. Simona had a more hands-off approach to assassination. She had a wide knowledge of death magic and various types of poison. She taught Vraska the best natural sources of rare poisonous fungi and how to harvest them. (Knowledge Vraska passed onto Jace, who was thrilled.) Simona helped her refine her targeting, suggesting techniques to focus her magic and not alert any magically-inclined foes to the fact she was charging a spell.
Her tutoring was short but intense. By spring, they started giving her targets. Starting her off on small-time politicians and other officials, they kept her in the Undercity for perhaps a little longer than she would like. Jace didn’t seem to mind, there were plenty of people he could blackmail in the Undercity, and plenty of interesting places to poke around in. It was during her third mission, a business owner who had made an enemy of his workforce, that Jace suggested they worked in tandem. The Ochran seemed to be giving her the task of killing wrong-doers. It seemed a shame not to extract money from these people before she brought about their timely ends. Vraska was very eager to put his plan in place. Now they didn’t have to scout about for targets. The Ochran would hand them over, and as long as they ended up dead, no one would be any the wiser. She’d already been given permission to work with him.

Working for the Ochran came with an unexpected bonus. Of course, Vraska expected to be paid. She was supported financially even throughout her training. What she hadn’t even considered however, was where that money would go. She sort-of assumed it would just be cash. That was until Simona presented her with the papers pertaining to her brand-new bank account. Her instructor explained that the Ochran had connections with multiple guildless banks, many of which ran their main branches on the surface. It had taken a little persuasion to get them to open a bank account for a fourteen-year-old with no permanent address. But, as Simona put it:

“They aren’t going to cross us, my sweet.”

Having a bank account was amazing, not just because it was a very adult thing to have. They no longer needed to carry all their ill-gotten gains around with them. Their blackmail had been constrained by the fact there was only so much gold they could hold on their person at any time. Now they had somewhere safe to put it.

“We can save up,” Jace pointed out as they returned from storing away their latest earnings, “We can save for a house!”

She admired his optimism but couldn’t imagine they would ever have enough for a house. She’d been looking at whether they could rent. However, it turned out you needed to pay a huge deposit and the agencies wanted to test whether you were capable of keeping up with bills. She couldn’t exactly tell them she was an assassin, even if her pay was quite regular, so renting was out of the question. Still, they had never had so much money. If the weather turned truly dreadful, and they couldn’t get to the Undercity, they would be able to pay for a place for a few nights.

“I have a test for you,” Simona announced one sunny afternoon. Spring was swiftly turning into Summer and they were both enjoying the warm breeze in their hair. They were sitting in the Selesnyan park not far from Tin Street. Jace had decided to spend the day researching. Throughout his solo endeavours, his curiosity had fixated itself dissecting the workings of various magical trinkets. He’d even bought himself a jeweller’s kit, so he could start disassembling and reassembling his little projects. Once he sated his curiosity, he sold the devices on, usually in better working condition than when he’d stolen them. With him happily occupied, Vraska was free to continue her training without any sort of guilt at leaving him alone. At their previous meeting, Simona had said there was little more that she could learn from theory. That she had to learn from experience from now on. What sort of test had she prepared?

“You may remember,” Simona explained, “That before you proved yourself to be quite so sensational, we were eager to see if you held your mother’s power.”

Vraska nodded. She hadn’t forgotten that. She thought Simona just met her gorgon magic. Was there something else?

“You’ve proved yourself to be extremely powerful my sweet, but there’s no way of knowing
whether you have her gift unless we put it into practice.”

“What gift?” Vraska asked. This definitely seemed to be something more than just her usual magic. She used that just fine.

Simona folded her hands elegantly in her lap and smiled.

“We of the Ochran call it the Severance. There are some beings in this land that we gorgons cannot petrify. The most relevant for us being liches. Their connection, be it to the earth itself, or their own personal phylacteries, roots them to life, or unlife, as the case may be. Whilst that tether remains, they will live on in one form or another. If they cannot die, they are immune to our magic.”

“So the Severance breaks them from that tether?” Vraska concluded, “So we can petrify them?”

Simona nodded, evidently pleased at her astute assumption.

“Yes, and that was what made your mother so very special. Her gaze held the Severance. When she petrified a target, she cut them off from all worldly tethers, enabling her to kill even the undead. We hope that she has passed that ability onto you.”

The ability to permanently end liches… Vraska couldn’t help but love the idea.

“So if you had the Severence…you could kill Guildmaster Jarad.”

Simona laughed so hard, it looked like she might cry.

“I love your ambition my sweet, but let’s start small first, ok?”

Vraska nodded in agreement, though she was no less inspired by the prospect of being a lich-slayer.

“We’ve had a contract come in for a high-ranking Orzhov pontiff. Orzhov death contracts work much like a lich’s phylactery. The magic anchors them to this world. If their physical form dies, they will come back as a ghost. Ghosts hold as much power as the living in the Orzhov, so you’ve effectively failed to stop them.”

“So you want me to try?” Vraska asked, “To see if I can sever the pontiff from their contracts?”

“Indeed.” Simona reached into her bag, sat on the bench beside her. It was a large black leather shoulder bag with a bouquet of overcity flowers poking out one side. Vraska knew that her instructor rather liked flowers. They were a novelty when you had spent most of your life underground.

Carefully moving the bunch out the way, Simona extracted a small brown envelope. She passed it to Vraska.

“Destroy this when you’re done with it. Preferably by fire. We can’t have all this information going astray.”

Vraska took it.

“Do not worry if this mission doesn’t end as well as you might like,” Simona informed her, “As far as we know, the Severance is an almost legendary phenomenon. You will still get paid if you turn the pontiff to a ghost. There are two levels to the contract. One for unlife, the other for complete
death.”

Vraska tucked the envelope away in her satchel. It didn’t seem right to open it in the middle of a park.

“You may want to enlist your human boy in on this,” Simona continued, “Who knows what kind of nastiness a pontiff gets up to behind closed doors? You might be sitting on a gold mine.”

Vraska was already intending to. She took the envelope back to Jace, who was waiting for her in a crumbling old church, a few miles away Tin Street. They sat amidst the remains of the pews and poured through the information provided.

Their target was Pontiff Musil - an Orzhov official and business owner. His firm was based around providing security for businesses, as well as providing them with property insurance. His main residence was a short distance from the Vizkopa bank, deep in Orzhov territory. A floorplan for his manor had been provided, clearly swiped from the estate agent who had sold it to him. Rooms had been marked as his public office, his study, and his personal quarters. Also detailed was a nearby establishment he liked to visit for lunch every day. It was a high class tearoom, catering for those who lived and worked around the bank. The fact his business was in security meant that he was going to be harder to get close to than their previous targets. However, the regularity in which he went to this one tearoom was clearly the way they could get into his head.

“We’re not going to be allowed in there looking like us,” Vraska stated, “We wouldn’t get in the door.”

“That’s easy,” Jace replied, “I can disguise us both…but what about our voices?

He had a point. This was a place for aristocracy. Even the way nobles spoke was different, As soon as they opened their mouths, they would be exposed.

They sat in silence for a moment. Vraska thought over everything she knew about the Orzhov and their wealthy. The Orzhov were all about their contracts and debts, often passing through Tin Street with entourages of begging servants and crawling thrulls.

“How about I don’t speak,” she suggested. Jace frowned a little so she went on.

“How about I be a young Orzhov noblewoman, who has lost her voice, and you are my indebted lower-class worker, who does the speaking for me?”

“That would work,” he replied, “I could say that you’re visiting from another District, along with your father who has business to settle. That way people won’t ask questions about why they don’t recognise you. Also…You tragically lost your voice when you were little and my family is indebted to yours, so I’m your voice now.”

“Yes, that’s perfect.”

The contract detailed that they had a week to kill this man. They had to get as much money from him in that time.

“We’re going to need to take some money out the bank to afford this place,” Vraska said, “We’ll make the money back. But...Will one lunch time be enough to go through his head?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Time was of the essence. They spent that afternoon staring through the windows of tailors' shops...
and skirting through the shadows of the Basilicas around the Vizkopa Bank. They made notes on the
defashions of the nobles they saw. Vraska practiced the posture, the small hand gestures, the
contemptuous glare, until neither of them could stop giggling at the absurdity of it all. They saw
Pontiff Musil heading from the bank back to his extravagant home. He was a beanpole of a man,
tall and stick thin, his white robes flapping off him like sheets on a washing line. His head and
hands dripped with gold. He had a thick gold coronet, set with black gemstones, and a matching
collar about his neck. His wrists tinkled and glittered with layers upon layers of bangles and
bracelets. Even his boots were embossed with gold.

“I really want to rob him,” Jace whispered, “We could afford everything we need just from what
he’s wearing.”

They did not rob him just yet. Instead, they worked on Vraska’s disguise and practiced how they
would behave going into a café. They slept in the back of a stables, thankfully devoid of griffins
and thrulls. By the time lunch time came around, they were raring to go. Jace layered illusions over
Vraska and then a few over himself. They couldn’t help but look over their new reflections in the
golden walls of a basilica as they passed.

“We look weird,” Jace commented.

Vraska wasn’t currently speaking, but she agreed. Jace hadn’t transformed nearly as much as she
had. He had become a strawberry-blond freckled boy with a thick golden collar, emblazoned with
an entirely fictional family crest. He had thick golden cuffs to complete the indebted look. His
tunic and cloak were now white, but otherwise his clothing was unchanged.

Vraska meanwhile was an entirely different person. For the first time in her life, her reflection
looked back at her with human eyes. She was a delicate looking girl with glossy black hair,
ornately braided about her head, and held in place with jewelled pins. She was covered from her
lace collar down to her jewelled pumps, the dress she wore was covered in gold coins, strung
together like bunting on a thin silver jewellery chain. Her summer dress made her look a lot
younger than she was. Striped in black and pearly white, she looked like a twelve-year-old, out on
her first holiday to another district. The look was completed with a bonnet emblazoned with the sun
symbol of the Orzhov and a golden purse shaped like mastiff puppy.

They set off slowly towards the tearooms. Jace had to maintain the illusions of Vraska’s skirts, so
they rustled properly as they walked. They saw Pontiff Musil arrive, waited for a moment, before
entering the tearooms themselves.

The Pontiff took a seat in the back corner without a word to anyone. They were forced to stand
behind a velvet curtained sign, stating that they needed to wait to be seated. Vraska couldn’t help
but feel slightly sick at the sheer opulence of this place. There was enough gold lining these walls
to feed dozens, if not hundreds of families, perhaps for their entire lives. Were the wealthy Orzhov
incapable of eating off anything not covered in gold leaf? Did they need to be surrounded by jewels
at all times? Vraska was grateful for the fact she didn’t need to say anything here. This whole place
was making her furious.

“Can I help you my lady?” a waiter had finally spotted them. Jace immediately piped up.

“My lady would like a secluded table from which to take her noon meal.” He lowered his voice a
little as if letting the waiter in on a secret.

“My lady wishes you excuse her silence. She has tragically been without voice for some years now
and this has made her anxious about being in company.”
The waiter gave an apologetic bow.

“Right this way my lady.”

Jace’s request for a secluded table had worked just the way they hoped. They were led to the far back of the tearooms, a few tables along from their target. Vraska was presented with a menu whilst Jace was completely ignored. There were numerous servants dotted about the café, many of whom weren’t even given the luxuries of seats, let alone to partake in the meal. A pair of women in exceptionally large dresses each had what looked like a lady in waiting and a bodyguard with them. The ladies in waiting were allowed to partake in the meal, sat on small stools, but the bodyguards stood stony-faced to one side. No one seemed to be looking at anyone else, caught up in their own business or conversation. This could only a good sign.

Vraska focused her attention on the menu and almost hissed at the prices before her. Were they really going to spend a week’s meal money on a single lunch? She was careful not to dig her sharp nails into the silk lining of the menu-case, but this was truly absurd. She hated everything about this place. She hated its gaudy interior. She hated its overdressed patrons. She hated the smell of incense and perfume that clogged the entire place. This café alone was probably worth more than the entire Corpse Precinct. Sven would have a heart attack if he ever saw this place. It was pure decadent waste, and it wasn’t even useful waste!

“Is your ladyship ready to order?” The waiter was back.

Jace cleared his throat but Vraska decided to ignore him. She showed the menu to waiter with a sickly sweet smile. She pointed at the Children’s Afternoon Tea. She was a child at this moment, plus, it was cheaper.

“Very good my lady,” the waiter gave another bow before gliding away back through the increasingly busy room.

“Do I get to have any?” Jace asked her telepathically.

“Oh course you do. Have you seen how much it costs?” she replied. Jace could evidently hear the anger in her thoughts

“Just think about how good we’re going to get this pontiff. It should make things more bearable.”

Vraska tried to focus on that. Pontiff Musil was sitting at a table covered in papers, it appeared he liked to work throughout his lunch. She had no idea when Jace started his investigations. He’d likely thrown up an illusion so no one could see his eyes glowing. All she had to do was look pretty and wait for her lunch to turn up. Gods, this place was unbearable. This better be the best sandwiches and cake she’d eaten in her life!

The waiter returned with one of his colleagues. He placed two tiered trays on the table, one filled with minute crustless sandwiches, the other covered in multiple types of dessert. His companion placed down a tea tray, complete with milk jug and sugar bowl. The china was painted with images of gilt Orzhov angels providing blessings to their grovelling minions. Vraska couldn’t think of anything less cheery to put on childrens’ tableware. She gave a grateful nod to the pair, who bowed again and then departed.

Jace poured her tea as was expected of a servant. He then went back to staring at the table, proving to Vraska that he was indeed deep into his research. There was nothing left for her to do except get stuck in. She bit back the incense-induced nausea and delicately tried one of the sandwiches. They were extremely boring. The soft white bread tasted nothing like the loaves she’d stolen from Tin
Street over the years. There was no flavour to it, no warmth. It was biting into a blanket, except that probably had flavour. The fillings were equally bland, no spice, barely any seasoning. One sandwich appeared to contain smoked fish but somehow even that seemed drained of its usual taste and texture. However she had paid far too much for this not to eat it all. Or at least they both were. She retrieved the plate from underneath the embroidered napkins and stuck it in front of Jace with a pair of sandwiches. The surrounding Orzhov may view this as an act of undeserved generosity, but she truly didn’t wish to eat all of them by herself. Luckily, she was able to wash it down with the tea. Though not quite as strong as their usual coffee, it tasted pleasantly floral. If Vraska was a fancy adult, she could certainly endure that..

She had started on dessert by the time Jace had even picked up a sandwich. He came round from his reverie with a little shudder and hastily gobbled up one of the disappointing triangles on his plate.

“These are really bad,” he stated in her mind.

“Bad and expensive, the worst type of bad,” she agreed. He finished off both sandwiches, and a iced finger slice, before falling still once more.

The cakes certainly made up for the appalling excuses for sandwiches. Vraska could feel herself growing steadily more energetic as she inhaled mouthfuls of sugar. This still cost far too much but she had to admit, the sweets were something else. There was custard. There was whipped cream. There were delicate swans made out of piped chocolate, and little biscuits, decorated with the Orzhov symbol and finished with edible gold. It was excessive but it all tasted great.

She forgot about her distaste for a moment as she entered a state of sugary-euphoria. She sipped at her tea and managed to pretend this was a regular occurrence for her as Jace focused intently on the mind to their left.

This continued until Jace made a little choking noise. She turned, raising an imperious eyebrow as he gripped onto the tablecloth. He looked like he was about to be sick.

“Can we go?” came his thoughts, “I’m going to throw up. Definitely, definitely going to throw up.”

Vraska gave a little wave to their waiter. He understood and brought them over a silk lined clipboard with the bill and a small golden dish.

Depositing a horrendous amount of zinos in the dish, she rose to her feet, beckoning for Jace to follow. The staff bowed her out as Jace hurried to keep up. He had gone very pale in the face. As soon as he was out of view of the café, he pressed one hand over his mouth and sprinted into the nearest back alley. Vraska followed, not even bothering to keep up the illusion of holding her skirts.

“Jace, what-“

He was violently sick all over cobblestones. The illusions surrounding them both flickered and died. Vraska swiftly grabbed the back of his cape and lifted it up so he didn’t cover it in vomit.

“What happened?” she asked as Jace wretched once more, “Was it something in the pontiff’s mind?”

It likely wasn’t the food. She’d eaten most of it and she felt fine, if not a little hyper-active.

“Yeah, I-“ He paused again to empty the contents of his stomach.
Vraska waited for him to recover. She retrieved a waterskin from her now normal-looking satchel and offered it to him. He drank gratefully.

“Let’s…” Jace gasped, “Let’s talk somewhere else. It smells bad down here.”

They retreated back towards the church they were currently sheltering in. They had to occasionally stop as Jace choked and spluttered away the last of his urges to throw up. The noises he made were horrible. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what he’d seen to evoke such a violent reaction.

Once they were back, Jace lay down on one of the pews, breathing deeply. Vraska took a seat in front of him.

“Are you ok to talk about it?” she asked. Jace nodded. He swallowed heavily and sat up.

“Well,” he began, “We have blackmail material…so much.”

That sounded good.

“He hasn’t been paying his tithes,” Jace continued, “He’s been bribing the tithe takers to pay less overall, but that…that isn’t even half of it.”

He took a long drink from the waterskin. Apparently he needed to steel himself for whatever came next.

“What-” he suddenly stammered, “What do you call it when people take dead animals, stuff them, and pose them like they’re alive in their house?”

Vraska frowned. That was not a question she expected to be asked today.

“I think it begins with a T,” she gave it a moment of thought, “Taxidermy?” She’d only seen the word in a book, she wasn’t sure that was how you pronounced it.

“Yeah that,” Jace agreed, “Well it turns out that-that the pontiff,” He swallowed hard again.

“He likes to taxidermy people!” Jace spoke in a rush as if he just wanted to get the words out and never think of them again.

“And he likes to pose them. And some of the poses, they’re intimate ones.”

Now it was Vraska’s turn to feel sick. What the everloving fuck? How did anyone ever think they could do something like that? This was insanity. Why would anyone ever… No, she couldn’t. She couldn’t think of any reason why a sane person would want to do that. This man was mad, mad and wrong!

“The people,” Jace continued, curling into a ball on the creaky pew, “Some of them…they’re in his debt, but others. He calls it collecting. But it’s just…just kidnapping. He looks out for pretty people and-and he has them kidnapped…and he does that to them.”

Vraska hurried to the other side of the church and threw up. So much for that fancy lunch.

Once her stomach calmed down, she returned. She was still struggling to believe this. Why. Just why?

“He knew who they all were,” Jace continued, his voice low and filled with disgust, “He
researched them, their families. But…now I have that information. We can wring all the money out of him we can. We can avenge those people and then we’ll give him what he deserves.”

Vraska nodded. Something about profiting off the kidnappings of others felt wrong but this man needed to be punished for his crimes. He needed to regret every single decision he’d made from the moment he’d set eyes on a person and decided they needed to be furniture. The Orzhov valued nothing more than wealth. Therefore, there would be no greater punishment than stripping his wealth from him before turning his miserable body into a stone ornament. After they did that, they were definitely going to report this to the authorities, alert the families of all those poor people. Vraska now understood why they would want this man assassinated. Pontiff Musil clearly had enough money to buy his way out of any legal detainment. Their brand of justice though, was undeniable.

Five days until Pontiff Musil had to die, they started their plan. It began like any other. Jace, in yet another post-boy disguise, would deliver a letter to the café, with an appropriate bribe if needed, to get the waiter to bring it over to his table. Another letter would be waiting for Pontiff Musil at home, which Vraska posted into his large ornate mail box. Their instructions were simple. If Pontiff Musil didn’t want them alerting the authorities, and the families of his victims, then he would have to pay up. After much debate they decided to charge per victim, daring to demand hundreds of zinos at a time. The man was going to die anyway. What did he need that money for? Simona was right, they were sitting on a gold mine.

Their letters contained lists of names, and in some cases, specifics as to where the victim was now and what Musil had done with them. Jace had gleaned enough from his mind to detail their treatment in sickening detail, enough so that the pontiff would definitely think they’d got into his house without his knowledge. They also prepared lists to send to the authorities and families, ready to make good on their threats if this didn’t work.

“It has to, right?” Jace stated, “There’s no way he’s going to want this to get out.”

Unfortunately, they didn’t get to see Musil’s reaction to their threats. What they did see however was the pair of thrulls with large chests strapped to their backs, that wandered into their church in the middle of the night. The thrulls trundled up to the altar, oblivious to the two teenagers hiding in the shadows. As instructed in the letter, the thrulls deposited the chests underneath the faded altar cloth before stumbling back the way they’d come. They waited with baited breath, listening to the thrull’s lumbering footfalls until they could be heard no more. Vraska was the first to leave their position under the parapet. She skirted the dark perimeter of the church. No one else was here.

She gave Jace two thumbs up and hastened for the chests. He got there first, casting a mist of blue magic over the containers to check for curses or traps. When he was satisfied there was none, he let Vraska go at the locks with her knives.

“Holy shit.”

She almost hit Jace with the lid of first chest as he leaned in to get a better look inside.

It was full to the brim with zinos, and not just gold ones either. There must have hundreds, perhaps even thousands of one hundred zino coins. Little platinum pieces that shone and twinkled in the moonlight. They stood in silent awe before realising they had not one, but two, of these chests. She opened the other. It was full of gemstones.

“Holy shit,” Jace said again.

“We did it.” Vraska managed. She didn’t know the exact sum of how much they’d demanded but
she was willing to bet it was less than how much they had received. Pontiff Musil must really want to buy their silence. She gently touched the gold with a fingertip, just to make sure it was all real. It felt cold, and very real. She stuck a knife into the mass and it descended all the way to the hilt, clinking off layer after layer of coins.

“It’s all money,” she breathed, “Jace, there’s so much... This is real right?”

Jace nodded before tentatively reached down and picked up one of the one hundred zino pieces. He put it up to his mouth and experimentally bit it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do to see if its real?” Jace replied, “I’m not sure what it achieves, but it tastes like money. It made my teeth hurt a bit.”

“Well, don’t, in case you break a tooth.” She ran her hands through the coins, loving the feel of cold metal trickling through her fingers.

“We should put it in the bank,” Jace suggested, “We can’t carry all this...do we get a carriage?”

Vraska nodded, straightening up a little.

“Put an illusion over us and the chests. Make us look like post workers again, we’ll be doing a late night courier service.”

Jace nodded. There was a flash of blue light and he was his spectacled post-boy self once more. Vraska didn’t have a mirror to look at herself in but she assumed she was suitably transformed.

“Pull the chests to the entrance. I’ll go get transport.” With that Jace was sprinting out the church.

If the bank had questions as to how two teenagers acquired this much wealth in one fell swoop, they didn’t ask. Neither did they blink an eye at receiving such a large deposit in the middle of the night. A bank with ties to the Ochran had probably learned better than to pry. Vraska, now looking like herself, was lead down to her vault, the two chests being wheeled behind them on a large trolley. They watched it being counted by a small army of bank tellers as the vedalken assistant from the desk asked them whether they should get in contact with a jeweller, to value up all the stones.

It was a wildly exciting night. The bank made them feel at home, going as far as to provide refreshment as they powered through the immense amount of cash. Jace and Vraska sat in her vault as the zinos were tallied into lock boxes, more boxes being retrieved as the night went on. A jeweller appeared in the early hours of the morning – an elven woman with a set of comically large lenses fastened to her face. She sat down with them, seeing that they were fascinated by her analysis, and went through every new stone with them. Demonstrating how she measured and valued each one, she let them peer through her lenses and make measurements of their own. The jewels varied from polished glass to real diamonds. The elf letting out excited cries whenever she stumbled upon something of particular rarity or beauty. By the time everything had been valued and tallied, dawn was peeking over the horizon. They were ushered into a private room to be told their total.

It was a lot.

It was more than a lot.

Vraska could barely believe her ears. The numbers were so large they were difficult to
comprehend. There was something very different about counting the zibs in your pocket and being presented with a number longer than your name.

“We can buy a flat,” Jace whispered, nose almost bent double against the glass of the estate agent’s window. The estate agent hadn’t opened yet, it was still far too early. However the fact remained. With the money they had just got, they could buy a one bedroom flat, not far from Tin Street, with a large bedroom to share, a living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom complete with bathtub. They could even afford to get furniture to put inside it. Vraska pressed her hands against the window, staring up at the property listings in a state of wonder.

“We can buy a flat,” she repeated, “But…let’s do the job first.”

After a rest and a hot flavourful meal, they returned to Orzhov territory. Jace had already prepared the letters they were going to send out to the authorities, and the victim’s families. So all they needed to do was complete Vraska’s assassination mission. Through the excitement of acquiring such a large amount of money, Vraska had almost forgot the real purpose of the mission. She needed to find out if she had her mother’s ability “The Severance”. They debated for a little while whether they should both enter the manor, or just Vraska. Jace could be very stealthy but he wasn’t as quick or light on his feet as she was. He had broken into multiple smaller houses, so Vraska was willing to give him the chance. In the end, after they had scouted their route on the floorplan provided, they decided to go together.

The way in was not a simple one. Pontiff Musil did own a security company, and therefore the protection on his own house was tight. The intention was to go in through the garden where thick hedges had taken the place of walls. However as dusk settled, and they approached the manor, they discovered an unexpected opportunity.

The pontiff looked like he was moving house.

Uniformed men were carrying large cloth-wrapped items out of the house and onto wagons. There was a steady trail of men going in empty -handed, and more coming out three or four at a time, carrying what seemed like furniture. As they drew closer, they saw a particularly humanoid looking shaped item being taken out to the wagons. They both realised in unison what must be occurring.

“He’s moving all the evidence!” Jace exclaime in their minds. That certainly explained the cloth wrappings.

“Can you turn us into removal men?” Vraska asked him, “Then we can just walk inside.”

These illusions were a little more precarious than those they’d used previously. The adults moving about were certainly taller than them both, and therefore their illusions needed to match. This meant they had to keep an eye on where their illusionary heads were, to make sure they didn’t give themselves away.

They joined the stream of workers and soon found themselves in a grand marble entrance hall. Everything was disturbingly white, from the stone staircase to the blank hangings on the walls. There were white robes hung on pearl-encrusted hooks. White boots nestled in beside white umbrellas in an equally pale rack. The path of the removal men was very obvious, muddy boot prints clear on the other spotlessly glittering floor.

They followed the trail of men down another blisteringly white corridor. This was one was dimmer lit, devoid of any windows. They went down a set of carpeted stairs and turned a left into what looked like a large dining room. A white oak table sat in the middle of room, chairs propped upside
down on its surface. Around the room were several large lumpy shapes, covered in cloth.

“I want all of this gone in an hour!” announced a shrill voice from an adjacent room. Jace and Vraska glanced at each other.

“Any longer and I refuse to pay a single zib! You lot were supposed to be the best!”

They broke off from the main group of removal men, dropping their illusions as they disappeared into a dark side-corridor. They slipped into shadows and silently approached the voice, which was still barking instructions.

“Be careful with that you fool! Do you know how much these things cost?! The workmanship alone is more than you see in a year! I said, be careful!”

They heard loud footsteps and the huffs of someone holding too much weight. Vraska grabbed hold of Jace by the hood and dragged him into an empty alcove, containing only an abandoned plinth. She willed them to disappear into the darkness as the footfalls got louder and louder. The shadows at the edges of the alcoves gave a shudder before rising up to swallow the area whole.

Louder and louder, someone was coming at greater speed, groaning under whatever load they bore. Vraska kept a tight grip on Jace, just in case he tried to cast anything and gave them away.

Whoever it was paused, just outside their alcove. It was a minotaur in removal uniform, bearing a misshapen cloth-covered lump that looked roughly the size of two people. The minotaur sighed before stomping loudly past. Jace let out a little sigh of relief.

“How did he not see us?” he asked.

“I think I might have used magic,” she replied.

She got the feeling that he had many questions about that, but understood now wasn’t the time. It had worked exactly as Simona had described, that was the important thing.

They hastened down the corridor towards the direction of the voice.

Pontiff Musil was dressed like he had somewhere to be. He’d donned a long black and gold cloak over his robes. The Orzhov emblem was emblazoned on the back, shining with gemstones in its centre. He had a walking cane in one hand and a large leather bag in the other. In front of him was a particularly large cloth-covered something. It was the last remaining item in the room, beside a large pile of spare canvas.

Jace glanced at Vraska. Vraska motioned for him stay put in the doorway. She needed to lock eyes with the pontiff to petrify him. They had discussed what they would do when they got to this point. She brought the shadows of the corridor in with her, slipping through the doorway in complete silence. Musil was facing his last covered creation.

“Now?”

“Now.”

Jace made a very loud crashing sound in the corridor. Musil whipped round, just in time for Vraska to leap from the shadows, seizing him by the throat with both hands. The effort dragged Musil down to eye level, a gurgle escaping the pontiff’s throat as her weight knocked the breath out of him. Wasting no time, Vraska met his shocked gaze with a glare of liquid gold.

The petrification took immediate hold. Musil let out the beginnings of a cry, but the sound was
stolen from stone lips before it could take form. Vraska relinquished her grip on the statue, stepping back to admire her handiwork. The pontiff was stuck forever, bent slightly forward, mouth agape, his neck dented from hands no longer present. In a moment of quick thinking, she seized one of the canvas sheets off the floor and tossed it over the top of him. There, now he’d be taken away with the rest of his sick creations. Those workmen had probably been ordered not to look under the sheets. No one would be any the wiser.

She smiled to herself as she retreated back into the corridor. Look at that. No ghost. She wasn’t sure how long it took for one to appear but as far as she could tell, she had done it.

Hastening back to Jace’s side, they sped back down the dark corridor. They could still hear the removal workers moving in and out of the dining room, oblivious to the fact their employer was as inanimate as their cargo. They glanced at each other.

“Disguises?” Jace shot at her. Vraska sized up the competition in the next room.

“Just make us difficult to see.” She replied, flipping up her hood so it covered her face. Jace mimicked the action, for a moment he was nothing but a pair of glowing eyes in the dark.

“What now?” he asked, “Just run?”

Vraska grinned and nodded.

They sped into the dining room. Passing the removal men with ease, they were a blur of cloaks, gone before anyone could let out an exclamation of shock. Through the white hall, down the steps and past the wagons, they carried on sprinting until the manor was far from sight. For one mad moment, Vraska considered tugging on one of the cloths, exposing what was inside for all to see. However there just wasn’t time as shouts began to echo from inside.

They ran until their legs ached and their lungs burnt at the effort it took to keep on going. They were far beyond Orzhov territory, past the ruined church, up and above Red Street and back to home territory.

“I think…” Jace panted as they skidded to a halt in the alley behind the chicken man, “I think I’ll just send the letters with stamps.”

Vraska burst out laughing. Adrenaline was running high but trust Jace to still be worrying over the details. She sank to the floor, head resting against the brickwork. Breathing hard, she drew back her hood and relished in the warmth of the summer night.

“We did it,” Jace exclaimed breathlessly, taking a seat beside her, “We—we got him. He’s gone. He can’t hurt anyone else.”

“And I can kill liches,” Vraska grinned as she withdrew the little envelope from her bag. She drew out her copy of the contact. Sure enough, there were the green letters that only appeared when the contract was fulfilled. Target Terminated. She didn’t know how the contract knew, but at this point, she didn’t care.

They took a moment to simply breathe. Tin Street bustled noisily beside them. The calls of the night merchants, the music of the street performers, mingling with the chatter of the crowds.

“You know what we should do tomorrow?” Jace said. There was a cheeky grin on his face.

“What’s that?” Vraska replied.
“We should buy a home,” he stated, folding his arms and leaning back against the wall, “A home just for us.”

Vraska shared in his grin. She couldn’t help it as they burst out laughing once more. Them? Owning a home? The idea was so ridiculous it was funny. Yet somehow it had happened. It was going to happen. This would be the last ever night they had to sit here on the ground. The last time they would wonder where it was safe to lay their heads.

“You know what,” she chuckled, “I think we should.”
Prospects have never been brighter for Jace and Vraska. After securing a small fortune in bribes, they are ready to look at finding their first home. Yet when an unexpected invitation arrives, Vraska is forced to consider how safe the pair really are.

If the estate agents next to the bank had questions as to how two street urchins had acquired enough money to buy a flat, they didn’t ask. Jace and Vraska had prepared for the encounter with all the fastidiousness they might a mission. They had gone to the baths, bought themselves a fresh change of clothing, and Jace had even gone and got a haircut. They’d never looked so respectable. However, it turned out they’d been worrying quite needlessly. As soon as they stepped into the estate agents, they were greeted by a very familiar looking vedalken.

“Are you those kids?” she asked, before they could even try and introduce themselves. They started at her quizzically.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, clutching her clipboard tighter to her chest, “My sis was telling me about these kids who came into our bank the other day. A boy and a gorgon with a lot of cash. You’re them, aren’t you?”

There was no point denying it. It turned out the estate agents were owned by the same vedalken family as the bank. Considering they were next door to each other, this made sense. The estate agent introduced herself as Karla. The bank teller they had met the other night was her twin sister, Malena. Apparently they’d become quite the topic at the family dinner table.

“We’re looking to buy a flat,” Jace informed her as she ushered them to her desk.

“Oh course!” she replied, “Well, with what you two have going for you. I’m sure we’ll find you a new flat in no time.”

They showed her the sign they had been looking at a few nights ago. There was a third floor flat, ten minutes’ walk from Tin Street, at the top of relatively new block of flats. It was plumbed, had hot and cold running water, and came with a fully fitted kitchen and bathroom. The rest of the furniture they would have to find, but the prospect of even an empty flat was beyond their wildest dreams. She took them there to take a look round. They were excited by the lift on the outside of the building that took them up to a small outdoor balcony. The front door was painted a vivid shade of red, had a brass knocker and a small peephole to look out for unwanted guests.

“This space has been empty for about six months now,” said Karla, “The previous owners sold it to my parents to make their move easier. Most people are turned away by the single bedroom, but if you two are happy to share, it should be perfect.”

The door made a very satisfying clunk as she opened it. There was evidently a very sturdy lock on the door.
“Please.” She gestured them inside.

They entered into a wide empty room. The only feature of this room, besides the carpeting, was a large fireplace cut into the wall. It had a black mesh grate covering the front and small stack of wood leaning against the wall beside it. The walls were painted a raspberry pink colour, studded with the occasional hook or nail where the previous owners had hung pictures. There was a round window on the same wall as the door, filling the space with sunshine. Vraska couldn’t help but stare. This entire room was bigger than the space she’d lived in with her mother.

“If you follow me, I’ll show you the kitchen,” Karla directed them to the first of three further doors. Inside was a small kitchen, just big enough for her and Jace to stand side by side. It was amazing how the people who made it managed to fit so much in. Karla opened doors to reveal a full-sized refrigerator disguised as a cupboard. There was a stove for cooking on and a little counter top for them to prepare their meals. This room also had a window – they could have sunlight all the time!

The bathroom fulfilled all Vraska’s dreams about having a bathtub. No more would they have to go to the Undercity to afford a bath. The bathroom was bright and clean, with new white porcelain and a big mirror over the sink that they could use to get ready for the day. Most exciting of all however, was the bedroom. The previous owners had left a large bookshelf in there which they were free to keep when they moved in. As Karla pointed out, there was plenty of room for two single beds, bedside cabinets for the both of them, and a large wardrobe. The bedroom was only a little smaller than the living room. They would have so much space! Imagine how many books they could fit in, and they didn’t even need hammocks!

“Please don’t think me insensitive when I ask this,” Karla the estate agent said, as she showed them back out.

“Do either of you have parents who can sign your paperwork? We aren’t really supposed to sell to minors.”

They glanced at each other.

“Can I get a teacher to do it?” Vraska asked. Karla gave an uneasy grimace.

“Who’s your teacher?” she asked, “Do they have any guild prestige?”

Jace watched her as she wondered how Simona would react to this sudden responsibility. She had been the one to set up her bank account, and if it was the same family, maybe they’d let her do this too?

“She’s a magic instructor for the Ochran,” she informed Karla. The vedalken let out a small laugh and awkwardly clapped her hands together.

“Oh, Mistress Simona, I see! That means you’re probably Ochran as well. Dear me… I didn’t know they started so young… that explains a lot.” She took a deep breath and gestured downwards with her joined hands.

“Well, I’ll talk to my father and we probably won’t need that signature. Would you like to look round any more properties or is your heart set on this one?”

They looked at each other again, before nodding in unison.

“This one please,” Vraska confirmed.
They were escorted back to the estate agents and sat at Karla’s desk whilst she went to talk to her father. She returned with a lot of paperwork and some very official looking red ink.

“The flat is yours,” she stated. They beamed at her.

“However, we’re going to need to take a trip next door to get this all smoothed down at the bank. I’m guessing you’ll be paying up front?”

They were indeed. Returning to the bank they were greeted by Malena and an exceptionally tall vedalken in a suit. Undoubtedly, the twins’ father. He sat them down and congratulated them on their purchase. On their own insistence, they read through the paperwork, paragraph by paragraph, line by line. They made sure they had joint-ownership, each owning half the value of the property. Not that they were going to split any time soon. Karla commented the whole process was a lot faster since they didn’t have a mortgage to worry about. After everything was signed, they were escorted back down to Vraska’s vault. They sat through yet another counting, expedited by the lock boxes which each contained a fixed amount. To their delight they still had a remarkable amount of their fortune remaining.

“We were able to sell the gemstones off for you,” commented Malena, “Of course we took a cut, but you should be able to make a very comfortable move. Congratulations!”

They took out what they thought they needed for furniture before finishing up in the bank. Back at the estate agents, they each received a set of keys. Karla awkwardly waved them off as her colleagues stared at her. The fact she’d sold a flat to some children would undoubtedly be a conversation starter for quite some time.

The next stop was furniture. Vraska knew of three shops on Tin Street that sold second hand furniture and she intended to visit every one of them. As usual, Tin Street did not disappoint. They found a large sofa, big enough to sleep on, in the first shop. It was patched in a few places, but was impressively clean and came with a soft white throw with tassels on the ends. When they decided to get a coffee table too, the shopkeeper offered to help them get the furniture back to the flat with them if they waited until he was closed for the day. Their sofa and table were put out back and they moved to the next shop, now in search of beds.

Their parade of furniture caused quite a stir that evening as they headed back to their flat with a train of burly men holding a household’s worth of fittings. Hoods up, so not to be recognised, they carried what they could through the market. Jace managed an armful of second hand cookware, jangling along with a large cooking pot filled with plates, utensils and cutlery. Vraska carried a huge bundle of blankets and pillows, tied together with rope for ease of transport. Their little furniture procession contained two beds, and the mattresses to put on top of them. They had to take the lift up one person at a time, squeezing in with chairs and cupboards, but there were many sighs of relief as their help reached the top.

After all was in place, they thanked the shopkeepers and other helpers, promising to come back to their stores if they needed anything else. Vraska busied herself in making up the beds with her blanket pile, whilst Jace put away all their kitchen supplies. When they reconvened in the living room, they realised they had completely forgotten about curtains. However, that did little to lessen the magnitude of what they’d achieved.

“This is our home.” Vraska’s voice cracked a little as she spoke. Jace almost put a hand on her shoulder, before remembering her aversion to touch. Instead he opted for smiling at her.

“It’s ours, we did it… We have a home!”
Vraska laughed. It came out a little watery and she realised she was crying with joy. She couldn’t help but wonder what her mother would have thought. Whether she could see her now, moving into her first home at fourteen. At first she would be shocked. Vraska was having a hard time believing it herself. But then she would be so proud. Her daughter was a successful assassin, carrying on her legacy, with a stable home to boot!

“We’re not garbage anymore,” she hiccupped a little through her tears, “We don’t have to run. We’ve got money, we’ve got food, we’ve got a house. We’re real people after all.”

“We’ve always been real people,” Jace told her, “Just…now we’re people with our names on some legal papers.”

He wasn’t helping with her efforts not to cry. She hated crying in front of him, even if it was happy crying.

“And now we’ve got a permanent place” he continued, “We buy groceries, and get post, and keep all the books we get and decorate everything the way we like it. We’re like normal every day people. We are normal people. We’ve got jobs and a house and we’re almost fifteen!”

Vraska suddenly realised why he was so chatty. He too was welling up and he was trying to hide it behind inane noise.

“Jace, I…” She took a step forwards, then a faster step, then another. Before Jace could do anything more than gasp, her arms were around him. Slowly, he returned the embrace, stunned at her sudden display of physical affection. Tears began to run thick and fast around his cheeks and he buried his face in her cloak.

“We really did it,” he murmured, “We're home.”

They relocated their hug to the sofa and stared into the empty fireplace. It had almost been a year since their first meeting, fighting over who got to sleep in that ruined and abandoned hearth. Now look at them. They had their own hearth! They had a roof that was theirs, beds that were theirs, and most importantly, they each had a friend. They each had found someone in this harsh unforgiving world. A friend they could trust to watch their back. A friend they could trust with their worries and their fears. A friend they could curl up with on long cold nights and imagine better days to come. Better days they had managed to make into their reality.

As she began to doze off amidst the sofa cushions, Vraska had a strange thought.

Was this what it felt like to be safe?

Was this what it felt like to be truly happy?

She’d ask Jace about it in the morning.

On the first morning in their new flat, Jace got post.

It wasn’t normal post either. They had a letter box they could collect mail from. However, this letter had just appeared on Jace’s bedside table as if it has always been there. Vraska eyed it with immense suspicion. It was addressed to Jace Beleren, with no accompanying address. Vraska wasn’t even aware that Jace had a surname. It had never really come up. As Jace made use of their exciting new bathroom, she experimentally prodded at the letter with the tip of a knife. It ended up
with a small dent in the corner, but was otherwise unaffected. It was not necrotic, but it definitely was magical. That was all she could tell without her resident magic expert. It was rude to open another person’s post. As its recipient was too busy singing to himself in the bath, she was forced to wait.

“How did it get here?” she asked as soon as Jace made a reappearance. He sat beside her on the sofa bringing the faintly-glowing envelope with him.

“Apart from magic,” she added as he held the paper up to eye level. His vision flared bright blue as he inspected the letter from corner to corner. Turning it so no edge went uninspected, he ran his fingers over every inch of parchment. Vraska watched with baited breath as he flipped the envelope right way up. He silently held out a hand. Vraska stared at it. His eyes were still alight with magic. He seemed to be looking everywhere and nowhere. How was she supposed to know what he wanted? They sat like that for about a minute before Jace gave up on whatever he was requesting. He ripped open the envelope, tearing it at the folds. A single piece of paper fluttered to the ground. Vraska resisted the urge to make a leap for it. This was Jace’s letter. He got to go first. She contented herself with watching as he picked it up off the floor, bringing it too, up to eye level.

“It’s blank,” Vraska commented.

In his hand was a small white square of paper. There was nothing on it. What the hell?

Jace shook his head but said nothing more.

Vraska crossed her arms and leaned back on the sofa. This was all really weird. What could he see that she couldn’t?

Jace sat in silence for a long time. Vraska started to wonder whether she should go out and get breakfast, in the hopes he’d be done when she got back. He however had sat through many of her silent conversations with Simona, so it was only right that she waited for him to be done.

By the time he was done, she was really hungry.

“It’s an invitation,” he gasped, wrenching himself out of his reverie, head falling back against the sofa cushions.

“What?”

“An invitation,” he repeated, “To meet another planeswalker. That’s what we are. We’re planeswalkers. The worlds we go to are planes, and we walk between them.”

Vraska stared at him. He’d got all that from that little piece of paper? Jace suddenly jumped to his feet and ran over to their bedroom. Vraska watched him go, very confused. Something big was happening and she had no idea what it was.

“This!” Jace cried from the adjoining room. He came back bearing the weird black wire thing he’d found in the Undercity museum. He set it on the coffee table in pride of place before slumping back onto the sofa.

“That’s how he found me. He lost this device last time he was Ravnica, and he sensed my magic through it. And he’s so grateful I managed to find it, he wants to teach me how to use my magic better. Isn’t that neat?”

That did indeed sound neat. However Vraska couldn’t help but feel wary of anyone who needed to communicate through mystical pieces of paper, rather than face to face. Also, they had never met
another ‘planeswalker’ before. How did they know he could be trusted?

Jace must have seen her concern.

“He says he’s worked with lots of planeswalkers before. He runs a whole group of them. It’s really hard to lie through telepathic communication. I think he’s telling the truth.”

Vraska believed him, but that didn’t mean she believed whoever this was sending telepathic letters into their bedroom.

“What does he do with his group?” she asked.

“Erm, he didn’t say,” Jace looked back at the piece of paper in his hand. It and the envelope had stopped glowing. Had it used its magic up?

“But he’s going to train me,” Jace continued brightly, “Maybe he’s going to be my Simona.”

There probably wasn’t anyone in existence quite like Simona, but Vraska got the gist of what he was saying. He was looking at this letter in the same light as her invitation to the Ochran. This planeswalker was offering to train him, possibly to recruit him into his group. In Jace’s mind, this was exactly like what had happened with her. However, Vraska couldn’t help but worry about the fact this would-be mentor was from another world entirely. She knew about the Ochran. She had connections through her mother. Jace could end up walking into one great big trap and he’d be none the wiser. She didn’t want to quash his hopes though, not when she’d achieved so much already.

“And if he’s not,” Jace reasoned, “I’ll just come straight back here! He didn’t say I was entering any sort of contract.”

That was slightly reassuring. Vraska couldn’t deny him this chance. Especially when he’d been so patient with her.

“When does he want to meet?” she asked.

Jace seemed thrilled at her unspoken approval.

“This afternoon! He’s even told me how to get to his plane. There’s magic in this that will take me there. It’s only got enough for one though.” He looked down at the piece of paper and then back at her. He evidently had hoped they could go together and Vraska would have much preferred it that way. However, Jace had proven himself capable time and time again.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise,” Jace assured her, “If it gets too much, I’ll come straight back here.”

There was a moment in which they stared at each, beseeching the other to understand how they felt. Then Jace’s stomach rumbled loudly.

“Can we go and find breakfast?” he asked.

Vraska nodded and got to her feet. Somehow this invitation had diminished her excitement about their current situation. Perhaps she was just being overly cautious, but the fact was that Jace would be meeting a complete stranger on another world entirely. She was going to be a nervous wreck until he came back, that was for sure.
They went out to pick up breakfast, taking a moment to marvel in the fact they could buy enough food for multiple meals and store it in their kitchen. Vraska put her hood up as they returned to Tin Street, still looking for signs of danger. Their life may have gained a bit of stability but there was still threats lurking around every corner. There was a certain irony in simply paying Miles the grocer for a bag of fresh fruit when she had so often stolen from him in the past. He was naturally completely unaware of who they were and the same could be said for the baker, the milkman, and all the other vendors. As they departed, they stopped by a clothing stall with baskets of undergarments and socks. As Vraska browsed, she locked eyes in a small girl who was playing in the safety of her mother’s stall. At the sight of her, the child immediately burst out crying and Vraska hastily retreated. In her anxiety, she couldn’t help but think this was a sign of bad things to come. Jace thought it was amusing, but she certainly didn’t.

They returned home for a luxurious breakfast of bread and jam, served on their very own plates using their very own cutlery. The plan was later to go and get some curtains, but Vraska guessed she would be doing that by herself.

“Wish me luck!” Jace exclaimed as the afternoon came, too fast for her liking.

“Good luck,” she said, “Stay safe.”

He merely nodded and vanished in a swirl of blue. Vraska found herself staring long and hard at the spot he had just vacated.

He was going to be fine. He was powerful, clever, competent. He would manage by himself. He’d be back soon, before she’d even miss him!

With a groan, she lay on the sofa, curling into a ball reminiscent of cold street corners.

He was going to be fine.

So why was she so scared?
With Jace’s extended absence, Vraska grows ever more worried for her friend’s safety. She starts her own investigations into Jace’s mysterious tutor, and along the way, discovers that even planeswalkers are not immune to the trials of adolescence.

Jace didn’t come back that afternoon. Vraska went shopping for curtains alone. She used the trip out to go back to the clothing stall, successfully making her purchase without scaring any more children. As she shopped, she tried to convince herself that Jace being away was a good thing. He would find shopping for women’s underwear incredibly embarrassing. Yes, this was working out for the best. Jace would be fine. Everything would be fine. There was no need to panic.

She lingered in Tin Street longer that she’d planned, not wanting to go back to their empty flat. It was their joint birthday coming up soon. Getting Jace a present was another thing she could do whilst he wasn’t here. She wiled away a few hours perusing second hand book stalls and clothing shops. She’d always considered pyjamas a little bit frivolous. Why would you need separate clothes for sleeping in? Yet now they were homeowners, they could indulge in the luxury of pyjamas. Jace would probably like them. She picked up a pair and a book titled “Great Inventions of the Tenth District”, which suited Jace’s new found love of tinkering. Once home, she hid the gifts in her bedside table and returned to the living room with a book of her own. Something to pass the time with until Jace came back that evening.

Jace did not come back that evening. Sleeping that night proved almost impossible, even on their comfy new beds. Vraska tossed and turned, trying not to stare at the empty mattress on the other side of the room. Jace had promised he would come back immediately if things went badly. If he wasn’t back, that meant everything was fine, right? Right. She had to believe that. She believed in him. Everything would be fine.

“You look like a mess my sweet.”

Vraska looked up at Simona with tired eyes. She’d taken a look at herself in the mirror that morning and traced the dark shadows from two weeks of terrible sleep. She felt like a mess. A fortnight had passed and there was no sign of Jace anywhere. Stuck in an empty flat with only one night’s work to keep her occupied, she felt like she was going crazy. After spending so many years alone, she thought she would be used to it by now. However, getting to spend so long with Jace had clearly weakened her resolve. She was so lonely that she hailed Simona’s return as something of a
miracle.

Her mentor had contacted her via broach and asked to meet in their favourite park. When Vraska arrived, she noticed that Simona had a large box with her, sat on her lap like a parcel waiting to be delivered. She sat on the bench beside her, feeling the familiar sensation of being very small. That was just how sitting next to Simona was. Yet it didn’t help improve her mood.

“I’ve decided to spend some time above ground,” Simona announced, “Things below have got a little…chaotic of late.”

“How come?” Vraska asked. Simona gave a sigh, gripping onto the box with scarlet painted talons.

“The devkarin do this from time to time. They get antsy about the fact there are so many gorgons in the Ochran and start viewing us as threats. There are eight of us in the Ten District Ochran, eight. Do you know how many devkarin assassins there are?”

Vraska shook her head.

“Fifty-three, and that’s just the Tenth District. Eight of us to fifty-three of them and they still feel like there’s too many of us. Most of them have never even seen a gorgon.”

“Why now?” Vraska wasn’t surprised that the devkarin were complaining about the existence of gorgons. That was just what devkarin did. However, if Simona had decided to spend some time in the over city, something must have especially stirred them up.

She sighed again.

“Don’t take this the wrong way my sweet,” Simona assured her, “But… The report on your assassination on Pontiff Musil just got to Ochran headquarters. The leaders amongst the devkarin are mostly liches.”

“They’re freaking out about the Severance,” Vraska concluded. Simona nodded.

“I can assure you, they don’t know who you are, or more importantly, where you are. Especially as your signature is just a V. However, the fact there is a gorgon around who can end them has caused a more than a little discontent.”

“Are they going to hunt for me?” Vraska asked. As if the last few weeks could get any worse…

“They might try,” Simona replied, “But they won’t step foot above ground. You’ll be safe up here if you keep a low profile…speaking of which.”

She opened her box with a flourish.

Inside was a large cylinder made of metal and glass, resting on top of what was unmistakably the pile of dresses Simona had been keeping safe for her. The cylinder was very beautiful. The glass was completely clear and appeared to be a pipe, stoppered at each end with two beautifully moulded brass end caps. These caps had been made into the likeness of a cluster of shelf mushrooms, trailing down the glass as if they had grown there. On what Vraska could only assume was the top end, a brassy rendition of the Golgari symbol had been added, but gave no indication of what it was for.

“I acquired this in case a day comes when either of us are being followed with hostile intent,” Simona explained, “I own one of these myself. This is a vessel in which you can receive, and send,
your contracts. New contracts will appear in the tube. You can remove them via this lid.”

She gestured to the top with the Golgari emblem.

“And when your contact is done, instead of giving your paperwork to me, or sending it to the headquarters, you can just pop it in here and it will send it for you. Also, I thought you might like your dresses.”

She put the lid back on top and offered her the box. It was surprisingly weighty. Vraska took it, glad there was a lift up to their flat.

“Now that’s all done,” Simona announced, “Tell me, my sweet. What has got you in such a state?”

Vraska stared down at the box in her lap. Simona didn’t care a bit about Jace, so she probably wouldn’t care that he was missing. However, if he did come back to Ravnica anytime soon, it would be good to have another pair of eyes looking out for him. She probably shouldn’t tell Simona that he was a planeswalker. That was an explanation for another day.

“My roommate is missing,” she settled with as a reply.

“Your human boy?” Simona replied.

Vraska nodded. Simona gave her a sympathetic smile.

“It’s ok my sweet. It’ll get easier with time I promise. Men of all races are very fickle. They are much like moths. Drawn to the prettiest brightest thing they can find, they neglect to see the beauty that lies in the shadows. We might draw their curiosity for a while but—”

“Your think he’s left me?” Vraska interrupted. Jace wouldn’t just abandoned her like that. It had only been two weeks! He wouldn’t forget about her that soon, not after all the time they’d spent together. He was just really busy with his training. She’d checked in with him every day after her tutoring, but maybe he couldn’t do that from another world. He wouldn’t just leave. Even if he did prefer the new world he went to. Surely, he’d come back and get her?

There was an increasing amount of pity in Simona’s gaze.

“We’re monsters to them my sweet,” she continued, “Why do you think your father never stayed to be with you and dear Yveta? No one ever stays, they always chase after something brighter, prettier, than us.”

Vraska shook her head. She’d never considered why her father had gone. She had assumed it was just a relationship that hadn’t worked, like so many seemed to do. It had never occurred to her that he’d just gone and found another woman after satiating his curiosity. That was beside the point! Jace wouldn’t abandon her. Jace didn’t believe she was a monster, so why would he? He was going to come back! He had to come back!

She took the box home with her and carefully hung the dresses up in their wardrobe. She spent more time than she’d like to admit just touching the soft fabric, revelling in the silks and lace, no doubt spun deep within the Undercity. They were decadent in a way that she wasn’t. Beautiful in a way that perhaps she’d never be. Maybe that’s why she was so enthralled by them. After it rolled off her bedside table, she opted to prop the cylinder up on their bookshelf. It was there that she made a discovery.

The black wire device was still in their flat.
This was the thing belonging to Jace’s tutor. The possession he’d been so grateful to get back that he’d offered to tutor Jace in thanks. So why was it still here? If this planeswalker had been so keen to have it back, enough to reward Jace for it, then why was it still in their flat? Vraska picked it up and looked it over with a critical eye. This didn’t make sense. If it was this valuable then firstly, Jace should have taken it with him. Secondly, his tutor should be wondering where it was. Why would he reward Jace without having his device returned? She didn’t put it past Jace to hurry off and forget it in his excitement. However, he should have come back for it. No, something was wrong here. Did the planeswalker really want his device back? Or did he just want Jace? There was only one thing Vraska could think of doing. This troublesome affair had started with this device, so it was the device that needed looking at. There had to be someone on Ravnica who could work out what it did. With that information, she could then track down this planeswalker and rescue Jace from him. If it came to that of course.

She went to the library and found a directory of local businesses, searching for an Izzet lab nearby that would help her identify the device. It turns out there were three labs, in walking distance, that would identify strange machinery for you. Apparently “Innovation Identification” was big business for the Izzet. Probably, she surmised, because they didn’t know what they were inventing half the time. She wrote down the addresses and went looking for the labs, wondering if this trip was wise without owning any safety gear.

The first trip was a resoundingly failure.

“Get out!” griped an aging goblin wielding a sparking pipe wrench, “We don’t serve your kind here!”

She stared at him.

“Excuse me?”

“We don’t want your kind here!” exclaimed the goblin, “We are men of Science! We don’t need filthy monsters gunking up our machines! See the Simic if you want fixing, or crawl back to the Undercity where you belong!”

Feeling the well of power behind her gaze, she took a deep breath and resisted the urge to petrify the idiot. She turned on her heels and stalked out, livid at being told she needed ‘fixing’. She walked several times round the block to calm herself down, muttering to herself about the sheer rudeness of people. Once her breathing had levelled and the urge to petrify had receded, she went to look for the second lab. This one was thankfully far more welcoming.

“Good afternoon!” She was hailed by a minotaur wearing thick brass goggles and mizzium coils round her horns. She’d never seen an Izzet minotaur before, but this lady certainly looked the part. She was laden with gadgets - two thick mizzium gauntlets covering her forearms and a large set of canisters strapped to her back, faintly buzzing with electricity. She stomped over to what had evidently once been a front desk, however it was so covered in boxes, bits of metal and empty coffee cups that it had just been absorbed into the workshop.

“Good afternoon,” Vraska replied, “Are you able to identify the purpose of an item for me?”

The minotaur clapped her metallic hands together in delight.

“We certainly can hon. We’ve got a big of a back-up at the moment. Lots of new customers ‘cause The Bolt and Ball down the street just got put under new management.”

“The rude goblin is their new management?” Vraska surmised. The minotaur gave an obvious
“Yeah, that’s the one. Bastard that one is. I assure you, we run a courteous establishment here at Mizzium House. Cooperation is the mother of Invention as they say.”

Vraska took her word for it.

“We’re looking at three days for a check-over, basic magical properties, that kind of thing,” continued the minotaur, “Or a weeks wait for a full analysis. Can you wait that long?”

“A week is fine,” Vraska said, “Do you want payment up front?”

“We take a deposit and count that towards your fees at the end of the process,” she replied, “If you’ll give me a little look at the device, I’ll drum up a price for you.”

Vraska handed over the device. Jace must have lost its box somewhere, because she’d had to bring it wrapped in a paper bag.

The minotaur delicately took the device out and brought it up to eye level.

“Gosh, you got a pretty one here,” she commented, “This is some real fine craftsmanship. Got to be careful not the damage this one.” She looked over her shoulder and shouted.

“RAL! I got another one for you. You’re going to like it. Bring a big jar would you?”

There was small crash from an adjacent room. A tall teenage boy came running from out back. He had a welding mask tilted up onto his head and a pair of tinted goggles underneath. Despite his numerous layers of protection, his face was covered in ash.

“What is it Dr Marian?”

“Nice piece of mechanics for you to identify. After that lot from the Azorius of course, don’t want those paper mages breathing down our necks.”

“Of course Dr Marian.”

The boy took the device from her and popped it into a large glass bell jar. Vraska watched him go, almost certain she’d heard his voice somewhere before. Perhaps she’d passed him in the street.

The deposit was steep but any price was worth getting to the bottom of this. She was almost certain that learning about this device would help her locate Jace and his suspicious mentor. With a week to wait before she could get any results however, she had to find some way to distract herself, before she drowned herself in worry. A new contract, appearing as promised in her communications cylinder, kept her occupied for a few days. Two Simic families appeared to be having a feud and were settling it with assassination. The job was a fairly simple one once she’d found their house. The fact that her target was blind made the mission slightly complicated. There was no clean petrification that day. However, there was no living person that didn’t go down to a swift blade across the throat. As she left, she realised she’d never learned what the feud was about. Grateful for the chance to keep herself occupied, she supposed it didn’t really matter.

Five days into her week long wait, there was an enormous thunderstorm. Thanking her fortune that she was inside and not out on the streets, Vraska curled up on the sofa with a book and desperately tried not to think about where Jace might be now. She finished the novella in record speed, but it was far too wet outside to consider returning it to the library now. She sighed and considered calling it an early night.
Entering their bedroom, she noticed one of the wardrobe doors was slightly ajar. She went over to close it and caught sight of one of the hand-me-down dresses. She paused. That was something she could do.

She pulled all five dresses out of the wardrobe and carefully laid them on the bed. Most of them were still clearly far too big, but there was one that looked like it could fit her now. Feeling a little foolish, she undid the various buttons and fasteners, before stripping of her practical attire and putting the dress on.

It felt so soft. Sliding on with all the ease of a sock onto her foot, the dress was nothing but silky smoothness and gentle to the touch. It clung a little about her hips, giving her the awkward task of tugging the delicate fabric downwards so it spilled forward, tumbling to around her ankles. She fastened the tiny buttons with slightly trembling hands, making the task even harder. The catch between her shoulder blades was also tricky, but when she finished, she couldn’t help but look down at herself in anticipation.

The gorgons of the Ochran were all extremely beautiful. She’d felt so small and ugly in comparison, like a baby bird who had yet to fledge, surrounded by magnificent adults. Yet, as she looked at how her hips had begun to fill out the silky green fabric, how it made her legs look so long and elegant, she began to believe. Maybe one day, she could be beautiful. Maybe the other gorgons were examples of what she could become. She twirled on the spot, loving how the gauzy layers swirled with her with all the grace of a dancer's ribbons. She let out a small giggle, embarrassed by her own reaction to what, in the end, was just a collection of fabric. Yet that fabric was making her feel so grown up. When wearing this, she looked nothing like a street rat. She had elegance. She had class. Feeling the heat on her cheeks from her own embarrassment, she nevertheless hastened into the bathroom to see herself in the mirror.

The sight that greeted her was an excitable girl in a dress that was so close to fitting, it was almost painful. The gorgon that had worn this before her had clearly been very busty. She couldn’t imagine filling out the cups of this dress any time soon. However, even with the room in the bodice, she looked like a new person. Experimentally moving her hair so it curled around her face and shoulders, she tried to copy the styles of some of the gorgons she’d met at her initiation. Their hair was a lot longer but she managed to meet the style halfway. She let out a little gasp of delight, running a hand over her bare shoulders, not even caring as her fingers traced over scar after scar.

She looked so adult! She looked like a proper gorgon, someone who deserved to be around Simona and all the other gorgeous assassins. Maybe she could get this dress altered? Then wear it next time she met Simona, to show her how much she had surely grown. Yes, she would get the bodice altered a bit and then she’d have a proper dress of her very own! She was growing up!

She was about to give another twirl when suddenly she smelled a whiff of something burning coming from the next room.

THUD

She jumped, almost tripping over her dress. Hurrying out of the bathroom, she arrived just in time to see Jace reeling from his impact with the coffee table. From the swiftly dissipating shimmers of light, it looked like he’d tried to planeswalk directly into their flat, only to collide straight into the furniture.

Jace let out a loud expletive, rolling off the floor and sitting cross legged on the carpet, nursing his bashed knee.

She was so happy to see him, she didn’t know what to do first. Did she greet him? Did she ask if he
was ok? Did she get something for his knee? In her confusion, she ended up hovering awkwardly in the doorway to the bathroom, only managing an inquiring:

“Jace?”

He looked up at her. There was a moment of complete stillness before his mouth fell open in shock. He stared at her wide-eyed, as if he’d never seen her before. Her concern only increased as he continued to look at her as if she was a complete stranger. He opened his mouth. Closed it again. Opened it as if to say something, but then promptly shut it again. He shuffled a little where he sat, as if the floor had become rather uncomfortable. Moving so he was sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, he continued to stare as if transfixed.

“Jace, are you alright?” Vraska asked.

He nodded and made another attempt at speech. Nothing came out however he was beginning to go very red in the face.

Vraska hastened to his side, wondering if he was ill. She knelt down beside him, noticing that he had a leather rucksack on his back and a small cut on his left cheek. Apart from that, he seemed unchanged. What was wrong? Was this magic?

Jace managed to make a small spluttering sound as she drew closer. His gaze suddenly flickered from her face, to her chest, and then back again, as if he didn’t dare linger for too long. Immensely confused now, Vraska sat beside him, waiting for him to catch up with himself.

After a series of nervous glances about her person, Jace finally managed to splutter.

“I-I wanted to wrap your birthday present properly whilst you weren’t here!”

Vraska frowned. That was what this was about?

“Well I haven’t wrapped yours,” she replied, “You don’t need to. Do you want to exchange gifts now?”

Jace nodded. She got to her feet, soft strands of fabric brushing against Jace as she hastened back to their room. When she returned, he was sat on the sofa, pulling paper-wrapped packages out of his rucksack.

“Happy Birthday,” she announced as she joined him on the sofa. She presented him with the book and the pyjamas. He accepted them with a continued look of awe on his face. He gently felt the soft clothing and ran an appreciative eye over the cover of ‘Greatest Inventions of the Tenth District.’

“Thank you!” he beamed at her, “These are amazing. I can’t remember ever having pyjamas before and this book looks really interesting”

He was keeping his gaze firmly fixed on her face.

He offered her his brown wrapped packages. She didn’t know why he was quibbling about wrapping. This was exciting! She gently unwrapped both parcels, revealing a beautiful black nightgown with gold floral detailing. She chuckled as Jace said:

“I-I guess great minds think alike.”

The garment looked otherworldly. The flowers embroidered into the gown were nothing like she’d
seen on Ravnica, and the cloth-covered buttons were painted so finely, she had never seen anything like them.

“I-I went to this plane called Kamigawa,” said Jace, “And I saw this in a market. I hope you like it.”

“It’s so beautiful,” she exclaimed, “I love it.” Perhaps it was silly, but she was definitely growing an appreciation for beautiful clothing. She smiled at Jace who promptly went an even deeper shade of crimson.

The other package contained a gorgeous leather bound notebook, complete with matching pen and ink pot. This was definitely from Ravnica, she recognised the stamp on the leather as the same place she’d got the sheathes for her knives.

“Thank you,” she said, “And thank you for coming back. I was really worried something had happened… How is your training?

The relief was washing over like ripples in a warm bath. Here he was! A bit flustered but otherwise perfectly fine. He was back and of course he’d been late if he’d travelling to different worlds. She’d known she was worrying too much but this simply proved it.

“It’s been really good,” Jace replied, “I’ve learned all sorts of things and gone to all sorts of places. My magic is going to be really useful from now on. I’ve learned some wards I can put on our house, so we won’t get unexpected visitors. I might put them up in the morning.”

He gently touched the cut on his cheek as he spoke and Vraska realised that the cut wasn’t the full extent of his injuries. Though it had mostly faded, there were definitely the remnants of bruising around his eye, as if at one point it had been black and swollen.

“Just a little accident,” Jace said, noticing her attention and swiftly withdrawing his hand, “My mentor has a lab and I keep walking into things.”

The coffee table would certainly agree.

“Should we go and get a birthday dinner?” she suggested, straightening up a little in a seat. “There’s a place that’s just opened up next to the basket stall. It’s quite cheap but it smells great and it’s always busy. With the storm keeping people out, it’ll probably have tables.”

“Sure,” Jace got up, carefully putting his gifts on the coffee table. Vraska went and grabbed her cloak and bag from the hooks by the door.

Suddenly, Jace gave another splutter. She turned and stared at him.

“Are-Are you,” he stammered, “Are you going out in that…that dress?”

She looked down at herself. She’d completely forgotten about the dress. He had a good point. This wasn’t really the right attire to go out into a storm with.

“I’ll go change,” she said, before hurrying into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

On her return, Jace seemed to have managed to calm down in her absence. They took the lift down, eagerly exchanging news of what they had got up to in the last few weeks. Jace was enthralled by the idea of her communications tube, and desperately wanted to have a look at it when they got back. She meanwhile tried to glean bits of information about his tutor from his stories about new spells and places. She gathered that he was an artificer of some kind, which made sense as Jace had
found one of his devices. He was a powerful mage, and was developing Jace’s skills as a telepath, especially when it came to reading minds for blackmail purposes. From the sounds of it, Jace was only benefiting from the exchange. By the time they reached the restaurant, Vraska was almost sure that she had been needlessly frightened. Jace was handling himself. She should never have doubted his ability.

“I’ll come back sooner next time, I promise,” Jace assured her after they ordered their food, “Master Tezzeret says he’ll have jobs for me soon, and I’ll come back between every single one.”

One of his hands was on the table. She considered for a moment what might happen if she reached forward and touched it, before realising that there was really no need to hold hands in a restaurant. She cast the urge aside as foolish.

“If you are going to be a long time,” she replied, “Just…promise me you’ll leave a note or something. I got really scared.”

“I will I promise…and I’ll tell you all about the worlds I visit too.”

“I’d like that.”

They passed the rest of the evening with pleasant conversation. Jace said nothing more about the nature of his jobs or of his mentor. Her loneliness spurred her to fill most of their conversation with her own news, describing missions and what she’d learned from Simona, and everything she’d seen in his absence. It wasn’t until they were both getting ready for bed, that she remembered the strange device she’d handed over to the Mizzium House. She should ask Jace about that. Why his mentor didn’t seem to want it back after being so grateful for its discovery. When she returned to their room, she found him already fast asleep, tucked under the blankets in his new pyjamas.

Well, she’d just have to ask him tomorrow.
As Jace's absences grow ever longer, Vraska finds herself questioning the emptiness of their home. Is it her fault that life turned out this way? Has Jace simply had enough of her? A new arrival in Jace's life turns all her worst fears into her reality.

Good morning.

I promise I wanted to stick around but I got called back for a job. I didn't want to disappoint Master Tezzeret so am going straight away. Yesterday was the best birthday ever. Thank you for suggesting that restaurant, I really missed Ravnica food and hanging out with you.

I'll come back the moment I'm done.

See you soon!

Jace.

Vraska sighed. Well, at least he’d left a note this time. She really wanted to ask about the device. However, if he kept to his promises, he should be back soon enough. She had one more day of waiting until she could get her results from Mizzium House. If he came back by then, well, she’d have her evidence and maybe he’d find the lab’s results interesting.

She made her breakfast, still wearing the night gown he’d bought her. It was truly beautiful. She’d love to see the real-life counterparts to the flowers embroidered on its silk. As she ate, it occurred to her that she could. She could go to other worlds whenever she wanted. Jace wasn’t the only one who had that power. Travelling between planes was her gift too, she didn’t have to mope round their flat when she had little to do. There were more worlds out there, more worlds than she could imagine. She could take herself on day trips. She could go to the place this night gown was made. Why wasn’t she making use of all her abilities?

Still, unlike Jace, she had commitments on Ravnica. If she was gone too long she might miss a new contract, or Simona might need to talk with her whilst she wasn’t there. She was willing to bet the broach didn’t work between worlds. Vraska sighed and went and did the washing up. Jace was probably having a far less mundane morning than her.

When Jace didn’t come back the next day, her fear returned instead. Not as strong as previously, not after learning that he was fine, but the seed of worry had been planted. Every time she thought about him, it grew a little more. It had been one day, she told herself, that was nothing! He’d been gone for almost three weeks and come back absolutely fine. Jace was good. She was just being stupid and overprotective! She made a conscious effort to bury the feeling as she set off to Mizzium House and Doctor Marian.

“I need a moment!” the minotaur announced, as soon as Vraska set foot into her workshop. The large room smelled disgustingly acrid, a mixture of bleach and melted metal. Dr Marian had a red mask strapped over her nose and mouth and hurried over to offer one to Vraska. As she tied it over her face, she heard a large fan pick up somewhere in the back. Dr Marian gave a huff of frustration
and stomped across the room, giving a panel on the wall a decisive thump. The fans in this room started to whir, spreading the smell even further, out into the street.

“Follow me!” Dr Marian shouted over the noise, “My office is sealed!”

Vraska had to assume that meant the smell hadn’t got in. She picked her way through trolleys and tables, narrowly avoiding what looked like a large vat of something purple and sizzling. Glass instruments were strewn across the floor like caltrops, any one threatening to pierce her feet if she misplaced a single step. She had no idea how Dr Marian managed to negotiate this space on a daily basis. Was it easier with hooves?

Safely sat in Dr Marian’s office, they were finally able to breathe. The space was no less messy, covered in a liberal coating of paper coffee cups and discarded stationary, however it didn’t smell like a chemical factory. As she took her seat, Vraska looked about for any signs of the device. It didn’t appear to be in the room.

“So, do you want the good news or the bad news first?” Dr Marian asked, sweeping a few errant papers off her desk chair.

“Bad news?” Vraska suggested. It was probably better for her nerves if she got the good news last and ended the meeting on a high.

“Ok.” Dr Marian sat.

“The bad news is, your device, which was fascinating by the way, had an inbuilt self-destruct.”

“Ah.” She could see where this was going.

“We didn’t trigger it,” Marian continued, “Ral managed to get some readings seconds before it detonated. It received a signal just before it blew itself up, which leads us to believe it was triggered remotely.”

“I see.” So, if this device did indeed belong to Jace’s mentor, he must have been the one to set off the self-destruct. This made no sense if you considered that Jace was meant to be returning it to him. This machine was meant to be so precious that Jace was being rewarded for bringing it back. Except he hadn’t brought it back, and his mentor had destroyed it. It wasn’t precious at all. Jace was being lied to.

“We did however work out what it does,” Marian said brightly. She pulled a brown folder off a towering stack on her desk. She flipped it open and ran a quick look over the contents.

“We’d never seen anything quite like it. The outer casing was truly unique. At first glance, we thought it was some kind of Simic design, but the mechanics inside were certainly too solid in nature to be theirs. However, as the saying goes, a transmitter is a transmitter no matter how pretty you make it. There’s always an in and an out, and a power source. Your device had all three. Ral identified a definite input and output, based on magical pulses, and the pulses would be sent goodness knows where. The symbols on the glass are complete nonsense, so probably some kind of code. The whole dark Dimir aesthetic of the thing, coupled with the ability to send pulses, makes us think this is a coded communication device. Certain pulses in a certain frequency meaning different things. You stumbled across some sort of spy tech.”

Considering her lack of knowledge of other worlds, her conclusion was factually sound. If Vraska had no idea this came from another plane of existence, she too would assume a mysterious transmitter belonged to the Dimir. This all certainly explained how Jace’s mentor had found him
and only deepened her mistrust. Sure he’d found Jace due to the device, but he didn’t want the
device at all. He’d blown the thing up. No, this man was after Jace. And what was worse, she had
no idea where either of them were right now.

Since the ‘spy tech’ no longer existed, her bill was greatly reduced. She ended up getting most of
her deposit back and was sent home with a complicated sheet of diagrams. Even after Dr Marian’s
brief instruction, they made absolutely no sense to her. She could probably find a book on the
matter and decipher them, but she didn’t think that would do her any good. She’d learned what she
needed to know. Jace’s mentor was a liar. Who knows what else he could be lying about? Jace
could be in terrible danger and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. For a wild
moment, she wondered if she started choosing worlds at random, could she find them eventually?
Vraska swiftly shut that madness down. Who knew how many worlds there were? Besides, a
planeswalker who felt it necessary to lie to children, would probably keep his location hidden.

Her helplessness only served to frustrate her further. She would spend long nights, wracking her
brain, trying to think of something, anything, she could do. A week passed and Jace did not return.
Another week and still no sign. Weeks turned to months and Vraska threw herself into Ochran
missions with a frenzied passion that desperately sought to distract her from her fear. Her kills
became sloppy and brutal. She lashed out with her knives, preferring physical combat over simple
petrification. She was fulfilling contracts faster than they could process them, but no one
complained. Simona didn’t seem to care. She hadn’t heard from her mentor since she was handed
her communications tube. It appeared Simona had disappeared from her life as readily as Jace had.
At least she hadn’t promised to leave notes.

Three months passed and Vraska was doing everything she could to distract herself from her fear.
She picked up a stack of hobby books from the library and taught herself how to cook, bake,
sharpen knives, mend clothing, wire a lamp, weave a basket, identify a building’s age by its
architecture and look after a garden. She did not have a garden, or need to wire a lamp, but with
every new thing she learned, the less she had to think about the issue at hand. Jace was gone. No
signs. No notes. No nothing. During the third month, desperate to leave her lonely flat, she started
to make trips off world. She went to the pink sky plane and tried to relax in its constant tranquillity.
She managed to sleep there when her bedroom seemed too lonely, but it did nothing to occupy her
thoughts. So, she tried for other worlds. She went back to Theros, the last plane she had visited
when she was little. It had been her final destination before she managed to find Ravnica again. She
liked Theros. It was warm, the food was exceptional, and the ocean wasn’t buried under miles of
concrete. Going to the beach occupied her for some time. She taught herself how to float in the
shallow waves and enjoyed the saltiness of the sea breeze. She watched little fishing boats with
colourful sails bob up and down in the distance. One of them got eaten by a kraken as she watched
on in alarm. Making a mental note not to swim out that far, she enjoyed the sun for as long as her
mind would let her. It was Winter in Ravnica and she much preferred the heat.

Her time on Theros ended abruptly when she was swarmed by priests one balmy summer night.
They claimed to be devotees of the goddess Pharika and they wished to know what nature of
gorgon she was. At first, Vraska had been delighted to learn there were gorgons on other planes.
Yet she swiftly learned that the Theros gorgons were viewed as terrifying monstrosities, They
certainly weren’t considered people. Apparently, the gorgons of Theros had the lower body of a
snake in place of legs, and thus her appearance had confused many of the locals. The priests of
Pharika however, had a different take on the matter. Apparently, their goddess took the form of a
gorgon. They had therefore somehow surmised that she was a worshipper, beloved of Pharika, and
had received the goddess’s blessing. This, they informed her, explained her more humanoid form.
She wasn’t a gorgon, but a human with gorgon-like features, resembling her deity. She was an
Emissary of Pharika and they wished to welcome her to their temple.
Vraska decided this was more than she could handle right now. Without another word to them, she promptly planeswalked out of their midst. Perhaps this only solidified their belief that she was an emissary of their goddess, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She was restless. There had to be something, anything, that would take away the worry gnawing at her heart. If going to the beach couldn’t cure it, then she had to find something else that would make her happy. She was stuck on a precarious edge between guilt and fear. Every time she tried to distract herself, she felt terrible for trying to forget about Jace. Yet if she thought about him, her worry would surely drive her crazy. Returning two streets away from their flat, she shivered from the onslaught of cold winter wind. She was dressed lightly, appropriate for the beaches of Theros but certainly not a Tenth District Winter. Hurrying back home, she left the lift as soon as it was wide enough to allow her through. Shivering, she opened the door with fumbling fingers. Gods, it was awful out here!

Closing the door with a little more force than necessary, she was so grateful to be inside, that she missed the sudden cry from within her home. The second exclamation however, had her whipping round in alarm.

“Jace! There’s someone in your home!”

Vraska backed up against the door, drawing a knife on instinct. The voice had come from their bedroom. There was a stranger in their home, and apparently, Jace was here too. The intruder sounded female, elven perhaps. Whoever or whatever the case, this was her and Jace’s safe haven. Strangers weren’t welcome.

With all the quietness of her assassin training, she paced across the room, keeping her gaze fixed on the bedroom door. As she approached, she heard footsteps from the other side. Whoever this was, they were getting closer. She braced herself as the door creaked open.

“Oh!”

Vraska found herself staring at a tall elven woman in a long green gown. She stuck out in their apartment like a flower in a rot farm. From her honey blonde hair and bright green eyes, to the tree emblem emblazoned across the bodice of her dress, she was unmistakably from the Selesnya. As she stared back at Vraska, she drew forth a long white staff, topped with the Selesnyan symbol.

“Stay back!” she exclaimed, “I am Emmara Tandris of the Selesnyan Conclave! I will not let you prey upon the wounded!”

Vraska scowled at her. Prey? What did she think she was? She refused to be threatened in her own flat!

“What are you doing here?” she hissed, “This is my home. You are the intruder here.”

“Vraska!”

His voice was very faint, but it was unmistakably Jace’s. On instinct, she took a step forward. He sounded like he was in pain, she had to get to his side! The elf however seemed to disagree. She pushed the end of her staff against Vraska's chest. Vraska visible flinched at being touched without her consent. She shoved the grandiose stick out the way. Jace needed her and she was not letting some stupid elf stop her!

“Jace, I’m here,” she replied, “This idiot woman isn’t letting me see you. Who is she?”

Emmara Tandris glanced over her shoulder as if suddenly unsure of her course of action. There was a series of loud coughs from the bedroom, before Jace croaked:
“Emmara… Vraska is my roommate. She isn’t going to hurt me.”

The elf turned back to Vraska. Without any hint of subtlety, she looked her up and down before raising her staff. As Jace started coughing again, she abandoned her position in the doorway and hastened back into the room. Vraska followed.

“I’m sorry Jace,” Emmara was saying, as Vraska caught up with her, “I didn’t think your roommate would be a mons—“

Vraska cleared her throat, loudly.

“Would be a girl,” Emmara corrected herself. Vraska couldn’t help but dislike her. What sort of person walked into another’s home and insulted them? There were however more important matters at hand than the rudeness of a stranger. Primarily, Jace.

He looked awful. Lying in bed, partially covered by the blankets, he looked like he’d been beaten to an inch of his life. His face was a rainbow of brusing, complete with two black eyes and a swollen upper lip. His nose was red and looked like it recently been broken. As he gave Vraska a weak smile, she noticed that one of his front teeth had been chipped. His hands were wrapped in bandages. As she drew closer, she noticed that, just visible above the blankets, a number of cooling salves had been pasted over his bruised and battered chest.

“What happened?!?” she exclaimed, hastening to his bedside, completely ignoring Emmara.

He gave an uneasy grimace.

“I got beat up,” he managed.

“I can see that,” Vraska replied. Now she was closer, she gave him the once over. The amount of bruising on his chest, he had to have broken a few ribs. He was lucky he wasn’t bleeding internally!

“I found him at the side of the road,” Emmara informed her, “He had a broken nose, three broken ribs, a fractured wrist and more bruising than I’ve ever seen on a man. Upon his request, I brought him back here and I’ve been treating him ever since.”

Vraska glanced over her shoulder at her. She hadn’t been asking her, but that wasn’t going to stop her being grateful.

“Thank you,” she told her, “Thank you for bringing him home.”

She seemed a little surprised at her gratitude but said nothing of it.

“He’ll recover, but he needs bed rest,” Emmara continued, “Plenty of it, and three nutritious meals a day, he’s clearly not been eating well.”

“I’ve been trying,” Jace mumbled into the covers.

“I’ll make sure he gets rest and meals,” Vraska assured her, “I promise.”

Emmara nodded, though her stance was still wary.

“I’ll come by with some more pain medication tomorrow evening. You should have enough for now. Jace has the means to contact me if anything goes wrong.”

Vraska nodded and made a pointed effort to guide Emmara towards the door. Jace gave a weak
little wave and a thank you as she departed. Emmara smiled at him and he blushed all the way to his ears. Vraska could tell even under all the bruising. So that’s how this was. Did she and Jace know each other prior to this?

As soon as Emmara was gone, she returned to their bedroom. Jace was attempting to sit up in bed and failing miserably, wincing as he put unnecessary pressure on his torso.

“Take it easy,” she told him, taking a seat by his bedside, “You’re supposed to be resting.”

Jace pulled a disgruntled expression but lay still.

“Now she’s gone,” Vraska said, “Could you please tell me what happened?”

It was the first time she’d seen him in months. Something had clearly gone wrong and he owed her an explanation. Who had done this? Last time he’d come back he’d had a cut on his face and a black eye. Had the same person hurt him, or was it someone else? Had a mission gone wrong? Was his tutor hurting him? He couldn’t turn up looking like this without some sort of explanation!

He made a little noise somewhere between a grunt and a whimper.

“It’s been almost five months,” Vraska pressed him, “I’ve been so worried and…and now you’re like this? Please, tell me.”

Jace couldn’t meet her gaze. He tried to, but instead ended up fixing his sights upon the ceiling.

“If-If I tell you,” he stammered, “He might be mad.”

“He?” Vraska repeated, “Your mentor? Did he do this to you?”

Jace gave a little nod. Vraska almost rose to her feet in alarm. All her worst fears about the mysterious planeswalker had been confirmed. Not only was he a liar but he was hurting his pupil?!

The black eye from before, had that been him too?

“He gets angry,” Jace murmured, “When my work isn’t up to his standards. I try really hard but…I think he changes his standards when I’m not there.”

Vraska was livid.

“Where is he?” her voice turning into a hiss, “I’ll make sure he never lays another finger on you, or anyone else.”

Jace’s eyes widened and he tried to sit up again, but let out a small yelp of pain.

“You can’t fight him!” he exclaimed, his voice growing stronger in his panic.

“Of course I can, he’s hurt you,” Vraska replied, “I’ll fight anyone who hurts you, anyone who even thinks they can and get away with it.”

“You can’t,” Jace protested, “He has all these planeswalkers working for him. He’s incredibly old and powerful. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Vraska didn’t understand why Jace was defending him like this. He was clearly terrified. Surely he would want the source of his suffering removed?

“You came back from training with bruises all the time,” Jace commented, “This isn’t that different.”
No. This was completely different!

“Because I was learning physical combat,” Vraska explained, growing frustrated at his refusal, “Because that’s what happens when you use swords. This man is abusing you. He’s setting you impossible tasks and then punishing you for not being able to complete them. He even lied to you to get you to join his group. He never wanted that device. It’s been here in this flat the whole time!”

As soon as she raised her voice, Jace’s eyes filled up with tears. Instantly realising her mistake, she lowered her tone, keeping her words soft and gentle.

“Jace.”

“Yes?”

“Listen to me. Please. You cannot continue working for this man. I don’t care how well he pays. We can get that money on our own. You don’t need to work for a man who keeps beating you up.”

“But I have to,” Jace protested, “I promised him. I owe him for training me.”

“You stopped owing him anything the moment he caused you pain,” Vraska replied, “Promises can be broken if the other option is getting beaten to an inch of your life.”

“I’m scared of him.” Jace sounded so vulnerable that her heart hurt.

“Then don’t go back,” she said, “Stay here. I’ll protect you if he comes looking for you. It’s not like he knows where we live, right?”

“I put wards up,” he mumbled, “But he might do.”

“Then I’ll protect you all the more.”

It didn’t look like she had convinced him. Nevertheless, she accepted the responsibility of assisting in his recovery and did her very best to make his healing comfortable. Finally, she got to put to use her new cooking skills. There was something incredibly depressing about spending so much time on a meal for one, but now she was cooking for both of them, the preparation was worth it. Her training had taught her to how to tend to her own injuries, but the skills were transferable. She changed bandages, applied salves and measured out medication with a practiced ease. She would have to thank Simona next time she saw her, not that she would probably care about what had happened to Jace.

He was very quiet at first. Only speaking when spoken to, Vraska soon realised that the act of talking may be causing him pain. However, with his recovery, came the return of his voice. He had a lot he wanted to say on a particular topic. Something, or more specifically someone, had his undivided attention.

“Did you see her?” he asked Vraska over dinner, two weeks after his unexpected return. This was how he started most of his conversations, so Vraska merely nodded. She’d seen her the last three times Jace had asked this too.

“When I saw her I thought she was an angel come to rescue me,” Jace continued, “She was this haze of gold and kindness, come to pull me out of the gutter. I thought she was a miracle, sent by Ravnica itself, to welcome me back. Even though she was so pretty, she was so strong. She carried me back to her vernadi and I’d never seen anyone, I mean anything, so beautiful.”
Vraska stuck her fork in her dinner and let him ramble. She’d heard this story at least five times and it got further embellished every time he told it. At first Emmara had been his heroine, then his saint, and now she was an angel sent by the plane itself. Picking at her dinner, she listened to him gush about being in Emmara’s home and how soft her hands were and how lovely her voice was. In his head, there didn’t seem to be a single inch of Emmara Tandris that wasn’t perfect in every way. As soon as he opened his mouth he was singing her praises. Not once had he asked about what she’d been up to over the last few months. He hadn’t even asked how she’d been doing. Or whether it was ok that she had declined three new missions to stay at home and look after him. He would thank her for dinner, or for getting for a book him. Yet even with her right there in front of him, she didn’t feel any less forgotten. Not when she was constantly treated to the Greatest Highlights of Emmara all day and all night.

She couldn’t help but think of Simona’s advice to her.

“Men of all races are very fickle. They are much like moths. Drawn to the prettiest brightest thing they can find, they neglect to see the beauty that lies in the shadows. We might draw their curiosity for a while but-

But as soon as a pretty blond elf came alone, they would forget about you entirely! Vraska didn’t want to believe it. She refused to think that Jace would replace her. However, the never-ending Emmara talk was wearing at her resolve.

“We’re monsters to them my sweet… No one ever stays, they always chase after something brighter, prettier, than us.”

No. Jace couldn’t replace her. She clung to this thought as, after three weeks of care and attention, Jace was ready to be up and about again. Vraska had come up with a long list of things they could do together. New attractions that had popped up in Jace’s absence. Yet it wasn’t to be. As soon as he was fit enough to go outside, he was out the door, shouting that he was going to visit Emmara in her vernadi. Vraska knew the two had a means of communicating through a little wooden leaf totem Emmara had left on his bedside. They had probably organised this, leaving Vraska to eat her breakfast in lonely silence.

“It’s ok my sweet. It’ll get easier with time I promise.”

It wasn’t getting easier. She should have known, as soon as he ran out the door, that she was facing another long absence. What made this one worse was the fact that Jace was very much on Ravnica. She suspected that he was still working for his abusive mentor, but he was returning after each of his missions to the comforting embrace of his new best friend. Emmara would no doubt patch up his injuries and he’d think the world of her every time she did. Vraska meanwhile only saw glimpses of him, late at night or early in the morning. He would occasionally stock their fridge, or leave his laundry out to dry. Four months after his Emmara-obsession began, Vraska would return home to find three brand new sets of robes in their shared wardrobe. They were unsurprisingly blue but he’d had them embellished with white symbols identical to his Gruul tattoos. They were extremely well made and no doubt cost a fortune, personalised or not. She later found another set in the laundry hamper. He’d been wearing them on his latest visit to the Selesnya…of course he was.

Vraska took her ill-fitting dresses out of the wardrobe and glared at them as if was their fault. On Jace’s previous absences, she’d been sick with worry. Vraska had done everything to deny her thoughts that something had happened to him. She'd done her best not to think about him at all. Yet, she knew now. She knew he was being hurt. She knew why he was absent. She knew what he was up to most of the time. Did she feel any better because of it?
She felt worse.

She stuffed the dresses back into the wardrobe and flung herself at her bed, bouncing a little at the force of her fall. She gripped hold of the blankets, piercing several holes with her nails. Staring at the puncture wounds, she let out a low hiss.

This wasn’t worry anymore.

This was fury.

There was nothing she could do to quell the rage that was boiling up inside. She didn’t want to be angry. She refused to be the bitter one in whatever fractured relationship she and Jace had left. The holes in the blanket were only confirming her worst fears. Normal human nails wouldn’t have done that. Or normal elf nails. She was the monster who could rip through fabric with her talons. She was the monster who didn’t deserve the attention of her own roommate. She was the monster who was being replaced by someone infinitely prettier! Simona was right and she was furious at herself because of it. Simona had always been right and she’d been too stupid and naïve to understand.

Hot tears soaked into the blankets as her thoughts raged against her attempts to placate them. She’d been here for him, night and day. She put his needs above hers, refusing missions, spending her time looking after him rather than learning or exploring other worlds. She had waited, and waited, and waited, and this was how he treated her? Like the house they’d bought together was nothing but a pit stop between missions? Just a place where he could bathe before visiting his crush?

They weren’t living together anymore. His bed was barely touched. His possessions would have gathered dust if not for her routine cleaning. Sure they shared a house, but they were living such separate lives now. She was just a crutch for when he fell. As soon as he was back up again, off he went, to the people he liked more.

She sobbed herself to sleep on top of the covers, fully clothed. When she awoke, her eyes were pink and puffy and she had perforated the blankets so many times they were irreparable. Cursing herself, she went to pull a fresh set of clothes out of the wardrobe. There she saw them, again, those fancy robes. Fancy robes for a boy too busy to spend time with the likes of her.

Well, two could play at that game.

When was the last time she had truly felt happy? When was it, that she looked at herself in the mirror, and actually liked what looked back?

It was when she tried on that dress.

She stared at the hand-me-downs and suddenly felt very shallow. Was this it? Was she going to try to ignore the Jace-shaped hole in her heart by covering it in silk? She had told herself she was going to get these altered. Now was as good a time as any. She didn’t need anyone’s permission to look good. She was Vraska, daughter of Yveta, Ochran assassin and proud wielder of the Severance! She had the time and money to look fancy as well. If it made her happy, then she deserved to do it!

In a burst of new found determination, she packed up the dresses into a bag. The fashion was uniquely Golgari. It seemed unlikely that any of the tailors on Tin Street would know how to work with fungal netting and spider silk. Casting a critical eye over the flat, she saw absolutely no reason why Jace couldn’t take care of the house for a change. With purpose in her stride, and a
glowing ferocity in her eyes, she set off for the Undercity alone.
Chapter Summary

Vraska continues to battle against her self-esteem in the face of Jace's absences. A trip to the Undercity leads her to an unlikely ally and perhaps a new calling.

Chapter Notes

AN: You may have noticed the rating of this story has gone up to "M". This is just to be safe, as there is a little bit of horror in this chapter. It also lets me consider exploring some more adult themes later in the story.

Vraska was on a mission. It was a very self-indulgent mission, but she was determined nevertheless. She had five dresses that did not fit and she wasn’t returning home until she had five dresses that did. Muttering to herself all the way, she entered the Undercity by a main entrance, forgoing the Chute Precinct entirely. It had occurred to her that maybe the devkarin of the Ochran may not be pleased to see her. However it had been over a year since she’d upset them with her existence. They surely had better things to do with their time than chase a year-old lead. No, it shouldn’t be too dangerous for her to head straight for Spinners’ Row – a street she had only visited once with far less money in her purse. Spinners’ Row was a street full of clothing stores, tailors and shoemakers, deep in the heart of the shopping district of the Undercity Tenth. She’d once marvelled at the beautiful garments and jewellery through the windows, picturing them as something truly unattainable. How bizarre it was, returning here, with money as no object.

She chose The Silkspinner’s Nest, the oldest and most prestigious of the tailors, rumoured to be the origin of the street’s name. As she entered, a small bell tinkled above her head, instantly drawing the attention of a uniformed shop assistant.

“Welcome to The Silkspinner’s Nest, how can we help you today?”

The devkarin didn’t even blink at the fact a gorgon had just walked into his shop. Vraska felt herself untense a little. She’d almost forgotten how blissfully simple it was to be in certain parts of the Undercity. Gods, she’d missed being down here.

“I have inherited some dresses, I would like them taken in so they fit better,” she informed the assistant.

He nodded.

“Let me take you to one of our tailors and we’ll see how best to assist you.”

She followed him to the back of the shop where two more devkarin elves sat behind a large table, drinking tea. At their approach, one of them stood, putting his cup to one side on a shelf.

“What are we doing today?” he asked, glancing between Vraska and the assistant.
“I need some dresses taken in,” Vraska informed him, “They were gifted to me but are far too large.”

The tailor nodded.

“May I have a look at what I’m working on? Please feel free to place them on the table there.”

Vraska took the neatly folded gowns out of her bag. She’d wrapped them up in paper, just to make sure nothing caught or got dirty on her travels. As she started to unwrap the garments, the tailor gave an appreciative gasp. This drew the attention of his colleague. She stood up to get a better look and promptly dropped her tea cup. The shop assistant looked fairly panicked, scrabbling to pick up the pieces. However both tailors seemed utterly fixated as she revealed the last of the dresses.

“Could it be?” asked the female elf. She drew closer, running an appreciate finger down the silk of one of the skirts,

“This texture, it surely is.”

The male elf was checking the bodice of the dress she’d already worn. He took out a small magnifying glass out the pocket of his waistcoat and began to inspect the stitching.

“You’re right Adela… This is Madame Zdenka’s work.”

Vraska looked between them. They were acting like she’d just pulled out some sort of long-forgotten relic, a treasure even.

“We can’t alter this Dominik,” said Adela, “This is Art.”

Dominik turned back to Vraska.

“I agree with my partner ma’am. We couldn’t possibly alter one of Madame Zdenka’s designs. That would be sacrilege to the name of fashion.”

“Who is Madame Zdenka?” Vraska asked. She wasn’t impressed at their refusal. She wanted a wearable dress that made her feel good. She didn’t care who made it or whether it was art.

“Only the finest tailoress the Undercity has ever known,” Adela told her, “Her work pioneered the use of naturally occurring fungi into our cloth making processes. Her craftsmanship is unparalleled.”

“So you won’t take them in for me.” Vraska had already started packing the dresses up, beginning to think of all the other tailors down the street. One of them would surely help her rather than standing about gawking.

“We couldn’t,” insisted Adela, “Anyone who mars such perfection could never call themselves a tailor. You’ll be hard pressed to find anyone who doesn’t revere Madame Zdenka’s designs… You’d surely have to go to Madame Zdenka herself. Having anyone else alter this…” She gave a little shudder.

Vraska decided they were being far too melodramatic about this and decided to take her custom elsewhere. However, just in case the other tailors proved just as infuriating:

“Where can I find Madame Zdenka?”

Dominik and Adela glanced at each other.
“I think she lives in Greenhelm Heights, near the port?” Adela didn’t sound confident about that. However, Vraska wasn’t going to waste her time in this useless shop any further.

“Thank you,” she said, her dresses already packed safely away. Before they could say anything more, she was making her way out of the shop.

Her trip up and down Spinners’ Row proved very frustrating. It turned out Adela the tailoress was right. As soon as anyone identified her dresses as being from the famed Madame Zdenka, they refused to even touch them. This was not assisting her temper, which flared constantly as she strode across the cobbled stones, crossing from one useless shop to another. She just wanted to fit into these dresses! Why was that so hard to comprehend!

By the time she reached the end of the street, she realised there was only one choice left to her. She was going to find Madame Zdenka and demand she alter her own work. Vraska had managed to get a few more directions out of various merchants. Madame Zdenka indeed lived in Greenhelm Heights, a kraul neighbourhood beside the Greenhelm Cargo Transport Bay and Port. The area got its name because it was built over the top of an enormous stone head, the remnants of a giant statue long buried deep underground. The port was easily accessible by public transport, by road or boat. Before heading to the beetleback station, Vraska purchased a cheap cloak from a nearby market stall. She had just shown half a dozen people some very valuable items. If she was leaving the city centre, she’d rather not be followed and mugged as soon as she was out of the reach of the law. Donning the cloak and drawing up the hood, she settled for non-descript anonymity as her first line of defence.

The beetle to Greenhelm Cargo Transport Bay was almost completely riderless. She clambered up the rope ladder, paid her fare to the driver, before taking a seat on the almost deserted saddle-carriage. There was room for two dozen riders on this relatively small transport beetle. However she counted only four other passengers as they set off - two human men who looked like they worked at the port, a similarly-hooded individual who sat right at the front staring straight forward, and a young kraul in the semblance of a school uniform. Kraul didn’t tend to wear clothing in the humanoid sense, they adorned themselves in traditional head and chest pieces. This young kraul however had donned a button up shirt and a black waistcoat embroidered with a school crest. Vraska couldn’t help but feel glad that this kraul had become a student at an inner-city school. Most of those institutions were devkarin-run and owned. They must truly be exceptional to be allowed in.

Everyone got off at Greenhelm, descending the ladders in complete silence. As soon as she set foot on the pavement, Vraska took a moment to take in her surroundings. This didn’t look like the sort of place you would find a famous artist. There was no easy way of putting it – Greenhelm looked rough. She had no right to judge, having grown up in the crime-hub that was Dredgefold Docks, but this wasn’t somewhere anyone would live voluntarily. If not for the ambient buzzing of hundreds, if not thousands, of kraul, you would think this place abandoned. No one was lingering about on the streets. Her fellow passengers had disappeared from sight completely, into the port or into surrounding buildings, leaving her alone on the shattered pavement. The structures around her were in serious need of repair. As she set off towards Greenhelm Heights, she passed many a boarded up window, blocked off door or pile of abandoned rubble. Many of the buildings had been painted with large scrawling symbols, one emblem painted over another as if by gangs in a turf war. Yes, this place reminded her of Dredgefold Docks all too well. What was a renowned tailorress doing here?

Striding up the sharp incline towards Greenhelm Heights, Vraska came to realise this journey would be a lot easier if she had wings. The buzzing was getting a lot louder, proving that this was indeed a community of kraul. She reached a gate made out of scrap metal and old scaffolding,
beyond its arch was a dark mountain of rock and fungi, punctured with many holes, no doubt entrances to many homes.

“What do you want?” chittered an armoured kraul, who sat next to the gate on an old mushroom encrusted barrel. He had a large spear clamped in two of his claws, the others were gripping a magazine.

“I’m here to see Madame Zdenka,” Vraska told him, pulling down her hood. Simple honesty went a long way in places like this.

“I’m a new customer.”

The kraul guard nodded, lowering his spear.

“Three levels up, head to the your left, follow the cats.”

Vraska thanked him and proceeded under the archway. She had to wonder what he meant by ‘follow the cats’, but she supposed she’d discover what he meant when she got there.

There was a staircase built into the side of the artificial mountain. Vraska took the stairs two at a time, grateful that she wasn’t required to clamber from entrance to entrance. There didn’t seem to be much logic to how this place was structured. From appearance alone, it looked the kraul had simply burrowed wherever they could, the only organisation provided by this lone set of stairs. Nevertheless, she persevered. Upon reaching the third landing area, she took a left along a tiny path carved into the rock face.

It only took a few paces to spot her first cat – a large grey tabby with a single white-tipped paw. She stared at it. It stared at her for a moment before getting up and sauntering along the ledge ahead of her. She followed, as instructed, and they were soon joined by two more cats – one black and white and the other entirely grey. The felines had no problem navigating the narrow passageway as it wended its way through holes in the mountain’s exterior. Vraska was very careful as to where she put her feet. Now she was inside, she could clearly see how this structure had been made. This mountain consisted of ruins upon ruins, layers and layers of buildings that had been compacted into the earth as Ravnica continued to build on top of them. She walked through an old bell-tower, bell still hanging high above them, but the corner of the structure had been smashed into what looked like an old office. Three more cats joined them in the belltower. The new arrivals meowed at her and rubbed their way round her ankles. The physical contact caught Vraska off guard, but somehow the attention of cats was far less intimidating than the touch of a person. She and her feline entourage delved deeper into mountain until they came across another archway.

At the sight of it, the cats streamed inside with many trills and meows of excitement. Vraska stopped just shy of the light streaming through the opening. She wasn’t about to go charging into someone’s house announced.

“Madame Zdenka?” she called out, “Excuse me? Madame Zdenka?”

There was the sound of movement coming from beyond the arch. Vraska waited patiently as two of the cats returned to sit, purring contentedly, by her feet.

“What are you doing standing out there girl?” came a shrill voice from inside the archway, “Come in, come in! There’s room for all! No use dallying on the doorstep!”

Vraska did what she was told.
Through the archway was a large sitting room, complete with two overstuffed armchairs, a large wooden coffee table, and piles upon piles of books, magazines and baskets of nick-nacks and trinkets. Every surface, be it chair, table or stack, was draped in some of lace covering, making the room look like it had rained doilies in here. The walls were covered in yet more lace netting, partially obscuring the old posters, framed portraits and pages from magazines pasted all over the walls. Nearly all of these images contained women of various ages and races. There was a liberal spattering of pin-ups, alongside pages of fashion magazines and stately portraits under cracked glass, Orzhov and Azorius in origin, now thrown in with the rest in one great collage of femininity. Vraska couldn’t help but be awed. She’d never seen so many different ladies in one place. There were humans, elves, merfolk, minotaurs, faeries, kraul, even gorgons. She did note as she glanced over the many frozen faces, that there were no devkarin elves in their midst. Silhana elves, yes, she saw the honey blond women and instantly remembered Emmara. No devkarin elves however, Madame Zdenka must have gone far and wide to collect her pictures. Surely it would be much easier just to get a devkarin fashion magazine? They probably sold those somewhere nearby.

“That’s better!” exclaimed a voice from an adjoining room. Vraska looked up just in time to see an elderly kraul enter the room. She was wearing three sets of spectacles, tied together with thread so they sat on her face and supported each pair of her eyes. She was undoubtedly old. Short and wrinkled with age, she walked with a cane in one claw and an umbrella in another, supporting herself as she crossed the living room toward Vraska. Her large glasses made her eyes look tiny, none of them quite able to focus on the guest in front of her. She wore a traditional kraul headpiece and chest plate, but instead of metal, she had undoubtedly fashioned her own out of finely embroidered silk. The remnants of some sort of robe clung round her wirey frame, but she paid it no mind, ripping it further as it caught on her cane and she simply kept on going.

Vraska took a deep breath and felt for the shadows around her. Her suspicions were immediately confirmed correct. Madame Zdenka, if this was indeed her, was not just old, she was ancient. Undead in fact, the amount of necrotic magic held in that frail form almost certainly meant that Vraska was in the presence of a lich.

“Let’s get a better look at you dear,” the elderly lich proclaimed as she drew closer, squinting up at Vraska, a full head shorter than the fifteen year old.

“Oh my, aren’t you young my dear! You must be the new Ochran member that Miss Pavla was telling me about. Such a chatter box that Miss Pavla. I swear you Ochran gorgons get more beautiful every year! You’ll be here for your first dress I suppose?”

This did indeed seem to be Madame Zdenka. Vraska wasn’t surprised that she was a kraul, it was the lich thing that was slightly unnerving her.

“I actually inherited some dresses off my Ochran sisters Madame Zdenka,” she said, raising her voice a little to be heard. Madame Zdenka was speaking very loudly, it was possible she was slightly deaf.

“Did you now! I know, take a seat dear and I’ll go and get us some tea. Conversation is always better with tea, and sweets! You must be so hungry having travelled all the way out here! I’ll get some cake.”

Vraska was about to open her mouth and say that it wasn’t much trouble at all, but it appeared Madame Zdenka had already made up her mind. She hurried Vraska towards one of the over-stuffed armchairs and Vraska found herself backing away so rapidly that she had no choice but to sit. Satisfied, Madame Zdenka nodded and scuttled back the way she’d come, where Vraska assumed there was some sort of kitchen.
There was a series of loud clanks, followed by the chinks of crockery. Vraska sat patiently, taking in the rather strange décor. Every inch of wall was covered in collage, but what she’d taken to be yet more lace hanging from the ceiling, was in fact thick spider webs. Once she had spotted them, she began to notice more and more signs of spiders, from cobwebs across the frames to fine strands of spider silk caught on bits of furniture. This made sense for someone who worked in spider silk, perhaps she had her own silk producing swarm, but Vraska couldn’t see any living spiders in the room. There were plenty of cats. In Madame Zdenka’s absence the group of cats had made their way in and were settling comfortably on various cushions and piles of fabric. Perhaps that was why there were few spiders? Vraska wondered how the cat versus spider ecosystem worked as Madame Zdenka clattered about in the kitchen.

She returned bearing two trays, the first containing a pot of tea, two cups and saucers, as well as a sugar bowl and milk. The second was completely full of cake and biscuits, most of which Vraska couldn’t identify. As Madame Zdenka poured them tea, she tried to identify the white fluffy substance that seemed to make up most of the cakes. It certainly wasn’t cream, it looked like some sort of mushroom-based alternative.

“Eat up my dear,” prompted Madame Zdenka, “I don’t get such beautiful guests very often these days. Nothing but the best hospitality for the prettiest little Ochran!”

She gave a cackling laugh as she sat down in the other armchair, tea in hand.

Curiosity getting the better of her, Vraska took one of the not-cream filled cakes. As soon as she bit into it, she knew instantly what it was. This was sweet ball-mushroom, but mashed rather than deep-fried. It reminded her instantly of the travelling fairs, but somehow the non-fried version was even sweeter.

“So, these dresses you’ve got,” Madame Zdenka said, catching her with a face full of cake, “Presents from the other Ochran gorgons?”

Vraska nodded, swallowing heavily.

“They were given to me when I joined,” she explained, pulling them out the bag, “But they’re all too big. Could you alter them so they fit me?”

Madame Zdenka reached out for the parcels with her three unoccupied arms. She unwrapped them all with surprising speed.

“Oh I remember these,” she exclaimed delightedly, “This one was for Pavla.” She put the first dress over the arm over the chair and moved onto the next.

“And these two were for the twins, what were their names… I always get those two ladies mixed up. They should wear badges or something.”

“Cecilie and Antonia,” Vraska commented.

“That was it! Such a clever girl you are.” Madame Zdenka put the two dresses atop the first. She was now at the one Vraska had actually worn.

“Oh, and this was for Ivana, very petite that lady, when I met her she was wearing children’s fashion and that simply wouldn’t do! I set her straight with a fresh new wardrobe.”

That dress joined the pile.

“Oh, and this,” Madame Zdenka let out a low buzz of delight at the final gown, “This belonged to
Bela, the Nightflower, she used to call herself. How romantic, I enjoyed making such an old style for her. Vintage, she called it, but I was alive when ruffled shoulders were all the rage! Many a ruffled shoulder I made in those days.”

“Can you alter them so they fit me?” Vraska asked.

Madame Zdenka clicked her mandibles together, as if deep in thought.

“No,” she suddenly announced, “No, I don’t think I can.”

Vraska looked at her, crestfallen. She’d come all this way! What was the point of travelling so far? Was she going home without a single dress that fit?

“It would be a crime to put such a delicate young thing in such relics!” Madame Zdenka exclaimed, “These are yesterday’s dresses my dear. Yesterday’s fashions for yesterday’s generations. You are the new face of gorgon-kind, and I wish to frame that lovely face with cloth that accentuates its beauty.”

Vraska wasn’t quite sure what to make of this. She felt like she was being complimented and didn’t know how to handle that at all.

“I’m not that pretty,” she murmured, “The adults are-“

“Ah!” Madame Zdenka interrupted, “Ah-ah-ah! We don’t talk ourselves down like that! Here in old Zdenka’s house, all women are beautiful…except the good for nothing devkarin of course. Zdenka only makes beautiful clothes for beautiful women. You have returned five of my dresses, I will make you five of your own.”

“How much does that cost?” Vraska asked. She had only been intending to pay for an alteration. Five new dresses? That was going to be a lot!

“It costs nothing my dear,” Madame Zdenka replied, “I do not charge the beautiful gorgons. I charge the devkarin thrice as much to cover the costs! That is why I get all the beautiful women coming back to me. Let the elves pay, it is revenge for the suffering they cause!”

She evidently had a vendetta against the devkarin and Vraska couldn’t blame her. The devkarin had long treated kraul like second-class citizens, and the kraul didn’t even have the infamy of being natural-born killers to lend them some status. Vraska had no objections to having some rich devkarin pay for her dresses, but it seemed wrong to not give anything in return. When she voiced these objections, Madame Zdenka gave another of her cackling laughs.

“You are a sweet little one,” she informed her, “If you wish, you can keep an old kraul company whilst she works. You can never have too many hands around!”

Spending the afternoon with Madame Zdenka turned out to be a surprisingly relaxing experience. Not only was there a seemingly limitless supply of tea and cake, but it was fascinating to hear the elderly kraul talk. Madame Zdenka had lived, or un-lived, for a very long time. She was eager to share her experiences as part of the Golgari guild. She’d met lich lords and death barons, dressed guildmasters and their traitorous servants. She claimed to have seen the guild change hands and witnessed the fall of angels. Occasionally she would stop mid-sentence with an utterance of

“Hold this.”

Vraska would hold whatever was given to her, even if it was in the middle of having her measurements taken. ‘This’ often turned out to be a cat who was in Madame Zdenka’s way. She
spent many hours simply holding a ball of fur who vibrated warmly against her chest. After the fifth cat, she started to think Madame Zdenka was doing it on purpose.

“If you ever doubt yourself, look into the eyes of a cat,” Madame Zdenka informed her as she sketched out designs on an enormous easel, “If they trust you, you can trust yourself.”

Vraska wasn’t entirely sure she bought that logic, but the cats were certainly adorable.

After a few hours of measuring and sketching, Madame Zdenka finally gave her the answer to the question she’d been yearning to ask since she got there.

“I used to have a shop you know.,” Madame Zdenka exclaimed from the kitchen, “Until those horrible elves stole it from me.”

“They stole your shop?” Vraska asked. Well, that explained why she hated devkarin so much then.

“It was the most beautiful tailors in all of Spinners’ Row,” Madame Zdenka sighed. Sensing another story, Vraska sat tight and took a sip of tea.

“The Silkspinners’ Nest, the finest tailors in all the Undercity.”

Vraska almost dropped her cup. That was the same place she’d been to earlier! The devkarin tailors had even told her about Madame Zdenka on her visit!

“It belonged to my family for generations. We raised the best silk spinners in the Tenth District, beautiful ladies from all over Ravnica would come to sample my exquisite handiwork. I had all my children working with me, all those who would fit in the shop of course, and then all the others would run deliveries all over the world. I trained them and they were masters, every single one of them. We outfitted the high classes of the Golgari for generations upon generations, official outfitters to the Guildmaster even! We were a beacon of excellence. We showed the entire Golgari what the hardwork of kraul could achieve! So, of course, those damned devkarin decided it couldn’t continue.”

Madame Zdenka returned from the kitchen with a small book of fabric swatches.

“They raided my poor shop in the dead of night, proclaimed to find all sorts of illegal substances I knew for a fact had never been there before their arrival. My poor sons and daughters tried to fight their forces, protecting their home from unknown invaders, but the devkarin did not care. They were slaughtered, and the devkarin did not stop there. They called it an accident but I know what they did. They destroyed my colonies, the homes of my precious spinners, ripping off their little limbs to turn into jewellery! Oh I wish I could rip off their limbs!”

Madame Zdenka didn’t seem to need to pause for breath as she continued.

“They turned me out of my own home! I protested! I went to the Guildhall by myself and brought lawyers in from the overcity. Yet they refused me, they called me old woman, old fraud, stupid insect! There is no justice in this terrible city! The laws are made to suit the wretched devkarin, and they exploit them at will. I know who ordered that raid. I know who planted those substances! Adela and Dominik Svesoth! That wretched couple had been trying to buy my shop for years but I wasn’t selling! They took my home, my family and my spinners! If I could get my hands on them, well, I would stuff their heads and put them on my mantlepiece!”

Vraska couldn’t help but share in her rage. How could they? She had just spoken to Adela and Dominik that morning, and they had spoken about Madame Zdenka with such reverence. How could they do that knowing they had ripped apart her life like that? Did they really think they were
so superior that they could love the art and abuse the artist? She was livid. So angry, that when she left Madame Zdenka’s for the day, the thought stuck with her all the way back to the city centre. She had a month to wait until her dresses were done. This was fair, considering the silk was being spun from scratch, but there had to be something, anything, more she could do. Madame Zdenka had been so kind and wanted nothing in return except her company. Vraska couldn’t stand people who treated others like monsters. She hated those who would look down their noses and decide who could be classed as a person. No, Madame Zdenka deserved justice. She deserved more than the Golgari had ever given her.

Vraska found herself gripping the hilt of her sword – the gift from Mistress E, another person who the devkarin would deem too monstrous to live freely. She walked back to Spinners’ Row, despite the shops being long closed. Her time with Madame Zdenka had quelled her rage for a little while but it had returned at full force. Now it had a target.

“Something for your mantlepiece, Madame Zdenka.”

One month later, she presented the elderly kraul with a pair of stone heads. Adela and Dominik Svesoth were both fixed in a permanent gasp of horror, their mouths agape, their eyes wide, their expressions trapped forever in stone. Getting just the heads had been something of an ordeal. She hadn’t been entirely sure whether she could petrify a severed body part. Always going for the full body, eye contact and all, she’d experimented with her petrification a little less than she’d thought. She hadn’t even needed eye contact this time. It had been hard to hold Adela’s head, the blood was making the hair all slippery, however she managed to petrify it just before it hit the floor and ruined the facial features. Decapitating the pair had been messy, but their bathroom had proved more than sufficient for cleaning up the mess. It was somehow pleasing to know that she could petrify the parts she wanted to keep and then leave the rest looking like it could have been killed by anyone No one would ever know it had been a gorgon.

“Oh you do spoil this old lady!” Madame Zdenka exclaimed, taking one of the heads and bringing it up to eye level.

“You can even see the abject terror in his eyes! My dear, you do know how to make a kraul’s day. I know where just to put these, they’ll go perfectly either side of my carriage clock!”

She presented Vraska in return with a large wooden box filled with clothing. From the weight, Vraska had a feeling that there were more than five dresses in here, but she was too pleased at Madame Zdenka’s own delight to worry about that right now. She watched as Madame Zdenka made room on her mantlepiece for the two stone heads, talking all the while.

“Do you know who you remind me of dear?” asked Madame Zdenka. She sounded like she was about to cry from happiness

“Who’s that?” Vraska replied.

“I have a grandson, I have thousands of grandsons, but this one is my most successful grandson. He became a death priest you know, no other kraul in living memory can claim that my dear.”

Vraska was fairly sure Madame Zdenka was somewhat necrotic herself, but let her continue.

“He has all these ideas like you do. About making the Golgari better for us non-human non-elf folk. And he always helps out an old kraul in need of a little retribution. I think that you too would get on ever so well.”

Vraska was about to ask what her grandson was called when Madame Zdenka beat her to it.
“But he travels round so much he does, that Mazirek. Always going about with followers and his shamans. But he always finds time to visit his old grandma, he’s such a good boy that Mazirek. I know.”

She pointed one claw at Vraska.

“Next time he comes visiting, I’ll let him know you’re around. He’s a powerful mage you know, between the pair of you, why you could cause so much trouble for those good-for-nothing elves.”

“That sounds wonderful Madame Zdenka.”

The knowledge that there was a powerful kraul death priest out there intrigued her no end. If he was truly standing up for the most downtrodden in Golgari society…well, she wanted to talk to him at the very least. Thoughts of this potential ally stuck with her long after she departed Madame Zdenka’s workshop. As she left the tunnels, she could hear the elderly kraul singing to herself in state of a sheer joy. Her chattering song echoed through the kraul-made burrows. She would definitely need to meet with this Mazirek and learn what he was doing. She felt amazing from helping Madame Zdenka with her revenge. Who knows what she could achieve with a like-minded individual? She had achieved justice this day. She had brought peace to an old woman who had long lost hope that her abusers would meet any sort of consequence. There must be hundreds more out there, like her, unable to find justice due to the corrupt lawmakers of their guilds. Improving lives was surely the best mission of all! If her purpose, her only value, in this world was to bring death then let that death improve the lives of others. Life and death were cyclical after all. Death to the corrupt to bring life to their victims!

She rode this moral high all the way back up to the surface. She returned to their flat and laid her new clothes out on her bed. Correct about the weight, she revealed, not five, but a staggering twelve brand new dresses. Not only that, Madame Zdenka had provided her with matching bags, stockings, even ribbons for her hair! Vraska had to take a step back to marvel at it all. This finery looked so out of place in their flat, she had to make sure she hadn’t dreamt it all up. Overall, these dresses looked far more modest than the ones she’d been gifted. The necklines were higher, there were less gaps to show off thighs or midriffs. This suited her just fine. She also rather liked the variety of buttons on the back of most of them. Upon unfastening and refastening them, she realised their purpose. These dresses could continue to fit her as she grew, she could adjust the sizing just by fastening a different set of buttons. How practical! She picked one and hurried into the bathroom to try it on. Even the bloodstains in their sink didn’t put her off changing there and then.

Redressed, she turned to look at herself in the mirror. She curled her hair about her face, momentarily bashful, before daring to take in the view.

It fit perfectly!

No longer was she an awkward looking girl trying to fill an oversized dress. She was a tall elegant young woman with curves to match! She laughed at her own shyness and turned to look at the lacy back of the dress, moving her hair aside to get a clearer view. She looked like a proper gorgon now, like she was going to grow into one of the beautiful ladies of the Ochran. Running her hands down to her hips, she let out another small laugh at how ridiculous it was that she would get this excited over clothing. Yet anything that made her feel like she belonged, anything that could bring her joy these days, was very much welcome. Oh she couldn’t wait to see Simona again! For once she wouldn’t feel so small! Yes, she certainly had enough dresses to make this her signature attire. Jace could walk about shrouded in his personalised robes. She had all her dresses made for her!
After a few more appreciative turns and twirls, she realised she should probably do something about the blood in the sink. It wasn’t her doing, and the thought only soured her mood when she realised the sink wasn’t the only victim of whatever this was. There was a bloody handprint on the white tiles next to the toilet, and another on the edge of the bathtub. It didn’t take a genius to know whose blood this probably was. Her mood darkened considerably as she went to fetch some cleaning clothes. These prints hadn’t been there this morning when she got up. Which meant Jace must have come by whilst she was in the Undercity. He’d left blood everywhere and then clearly left without cleaning it up. Vraska would understand it if he was too injured to do so. However in that case, shouldn’t he still be in the flat? It looked like that he’d tried to wash himself off in here before heading out again – to Emmara’s no doubt. Nevertheless, she cleaned up the bloody marks, to avoid being left with stains. She muttered loudly to show how clearly unhappy she was that she had to do it, but no one was around to hear her complain.

Those bloody handprints were the most she saw of Jace for the next few months. The fact he neglected to show up for their sixteenth birthday only served to enrage her further. She had put a present out on the coffee table, hoping he would see it when he passed by. The present had certainly vanished, but none had been left in its place. Ochran missions thankfully demanded a lot of her attention. There was something about this time of year that made people want other people dead, and she was happy to fulfil the demand. The pay was excellent, the deadlines were reasonable – her assassin work was the only thing in her life that seemed to be going remotely well. Unable to ride the high of helping Madame Zdenka, she had found it difficult to channel her determination for vigilante justice anywhere useful. Most of her time was being taken up with work and the rest was spent angrily pacing round their flat, when she wanted to be on Ravnica at all. She did go back to Theros that Winter. She chose a different beach, with different coloured sailing boats and far less krakens. She bought herself some Therosian clothing and lay on the beach, trying to focus on the sounds of waves and crying gulls. The fishermen didn’t bother her and there didn’t seem to be any priests of Pharika about either. She wiled away a day each weekend on the black sand, wondering what it would be like to actually go out on a boat. Maybe she should learn to sail? Would anyone bear her presence long enough to teach her?

It turned out that gorgons did not tan very well. Instead, they burnt. After a long itchy afternoon, Vraska decided enough was enough. She changed back into her regular attire and planeswalked back to snowy Ravnica, purchasing herself some moisturiser on the way back home. Considering whether she could recreate the seafood of Theros at home, she also picked up some fresh fish and decided to make a go of it. It wasn’t like anyone else would be trying it, she could afford to make mistakes.

After accepting that the spices on Theros were very different to the ones used on Ravnica, she still managed to make a passable meal. As she was pouring herself a glass of juice to go with her dinner, she heard the tell-tale sounds of someone colliding with their coffee table.

THUD

“Fuck!”

She let out a deep sigh and continued pouring juice. If he broke it, he was paying for a new one. Picking up her dinner, she carried it into the living room. Sure enough, there was Jace, sitting on the sofa, nursing a stubbed toe. She sat on the other side of the sofa, leaving a gap between them.

“You’re here!” Jace exclaimed, forgetting instantly about his foot. Vraska raised an eyebrow at him. She noted that he was wearing his fancy robes.

“I’m always here,” she replied, “I live here.” She couldn’t help but sound a little snappy. She didn’t
know who she was angrier at, him, or herself. Either way, he was here now and her mood had not abated one bit.

“You weren’t here yesterday,” Jace commented, “I came back and I couldn’t find you anywhere. Where did you go? Why weren’t you here?”

Vraska bristled. He was asking her where she was? After he’d been gone for months?!

“I could ask the same of you,” she retorted, “Where have you been? You can’t talk about being absent. You’re barely here!” She couldn’t help but raise her tone. How could he be such a hypocrite?

“You’re barely here either!” Jace exclaimed, his tone rising to match hers, sounding more and more frustrated with every syllable

“Every time I come back, the flat is empty! You’re never here when I need you!”

He could not claim the moral high-ground here. She was in the house all the time! It was him that went missing for months!

“I have a job,” Vraska reminded him, “I’m here at least every morning and evening, but I have to get groceries, go to the shops, go out and do normal person things! Do you think I’m just sitting here all the time?”

“No, I just… assumed you would be here,” Jace explained, “You’re always here. Where else do you go?”

Vraska was livid.

“You assumed I would be here?” she retorted, “You assumed I would just always be sat here, patiently at home, wallowing in my loneliness, waiting for you to get back?”

“No!” Jace protested, but his defensive tone said otherwise. He shifted awkwardly in his seat as if trying to put more space between them.

“Well I did that,” Vraska continued, “I waited and I waited, and I cried myself to sleep because I thought something had happened to you and there was nothing I could do about it! I spent night and day terrified that my only friend had met some horrible fate on a far-flung plane. I literally made myself sick with worry! But did that bring you home? No. Did our birthday bring you home? No. Did the promises you made me time and time again bring you home? No!”

“But I’m back now,” Jace said weakly. This only served to fuel her fury. Sure he was back, but had he even tried to apologise?

“This barely counts,” Vraska spat, “Sure, you’re on Ravnica, but it’s not to visit me. You come back for Emmara, don’t you? Don’t deny it! Every single time you come back here, it’s for her!”

Jace opened his mouth and then promptly closed it again. He wasn’t even trying to deny it!

“You’re only in the house because this is where you meet up!” she continued, “If not that, it’s because you’re picking up a present for Emmara. Or you’re trying on a new set of robes for Emmara. Or you’re grooming yourself to impress Emmara. You’re excited for an evening with Emmara. You’re showing Emmara your book collection. You’re showing Emmara your magic.”

Vraska took a deep breath. The anger had been welling up inside for so long now, there was no
“And when we were together. What did you talk about? Did we discuss how our days have been? The jobs we’ve done? The worlds we visit? No! You rambled on and on about how wonderful and beautiful Emmara is. It’s as if nothing matters to you anymore except *fucking Emmara*!”

Jace went bright red. That wasn’t how she intended her statement to be interpreted but she stood by it. She refused to be a victim of Jace’s hormones. They were supposed to be friends! They were supposed to be there for each other! She refused to be forgotten just because Jace was horny for some beautiful elf!

“She’s got a boyfriend,” Jace mumbled. Vraska could not give two figs about Emmara’s relationship status. As far as she could see, she had the confession right out of his mouth. He hadn’t even denied it!

“Does it mean *nothing* to you that I’ve been worried?” she stormed, “Does it mean *nothing* that I’ve been scared out of my mind? Did you even *think* that I might have been terrified? Beside myself at the thought that someone could be hurting you and I wouldn’t be able to be there for you when it happened?! But no! Of course you didn’t think about it. Because even whilst you dreamed about Emmara, you knew that pathetic lonely Vraska would be waiting for you when you came home! Where else would she be? No one else would ever like a disgusting monster like her! She’d wait whilst you ran after pretty women, because what choice did she have? She’s far too hideous to ever be liked by anyone else!”

Without even waiting for his response, she abandoned her dinner, strode into the bedroom, and slammed the door behind her. Curling up on her bed, she felt hot tears streaming down her face. Hiccupping through her sobs, she cursed herself for being so stupid. She’d ruined everything! Jace was never going to come back again after she’d shouted at him! Now he’d definitely think she was a monster, a monster who yelled and accused him of terrible things. She’d been such an idiot to think a beautiful dress would change anything. Seeing him again had brought back all the hatred she’d tried to hide. This was her fault! All her fault! He’d come back to see her and all she’d done was turn him away! Why was she so stupid? Why couldn’t she have just bottled up her anger and just had a pleasant conversation? Why did she think she even deserved to be happy?! He was going straight back to Emmara now, boyfriend or no boyfriend, and she would never see him again.

“Vraska?”

There was a tentative knock on their bedroom door.

“Vraska? Are you in there?”

“You saw me go in here!” she sobbed.

“Are—are you crying?” Jace inquired.

“You know perfectly well I’m crying! I hate it! I hate being this angry! I hate ruining everything!”

There was silence from Jace’s side of the door.

Hours later, when Vraska had managed to stop crying and compose herself. She stepped back into the living room. It was dark, evening had long come and fallen into night. Jace was nowhere to be seen, but her dinner had been put into the fridge and a bunch of flowers placed on the worktop. She picked them up, confused. There was a note attached.

*Dear Vraska,*
I didn’t really know what to do whilst you were crying. You were really angry so I thought maybe it was better if I just gave you some space. I have to go back to work, but I wanted to let you know that I don’t believe any of the things you said about yourself. You’re not a monster, and you’re certainly not disgusting or hideous. You’re my best friend and I do care about you.

Stay safe,

Jace.

Vraska stared at the note and felt tears well up in her eyes once more. She shook the paper, as if demanding answers. It merely crumpled in her fist as she leaned against the worktop.

“Then why did you go?” she murmured, “Why did you leave?”
The answer to years of suffering can be a few moments of honesty. Vraska finds comfort from an unlikely source. Jace returns in the worst state possible.

Chapter Notes

This chapter also comes with a picture. Find it at adashofstarshine.tumblr.com.
I’m also pleased to announce that next chapter, Chapter Twelve, will be the first chapter from Jace's point of view!

There were two things of which Vraska was certain.

Firstly, she was very good at killing. Her one skill, her art if you could call it that, was her ability to murder. That was what people paid her to do and they were happy with her work. The only complaint she’d received was when the devkarin caused a fuss about her having the Severance. They hadn’t even done that to her face so she considered her record spotless.

Secondly, getting revenge for Madame Zdenka had felt really good. She loved to help and when killing was her speciality, she would certainly kill if it helped other people. Helping Madame Zdenka had been the only thing that had made her happy in what felt like an age. The problem was, she didn’t have anyone to help. She didn’t know anyone who wanted revenge so that aspect of her life had to be put on hold right now. Content with her work missions, she was probably going to have to wait a while before she could aid anyone else. This was a little disheartening, but there was nothing she could do about it.

There were many things Vraska was very uncertain about.

Where was Jace? Ravnica, intermittently, but where on Ravnica? What was he doing? Sometimes she thought about it, sometimes she did everything she could not to. As long as things kept moving occasionally in their flat. As long as his laundry came and went, as well as his nasty aftershave, she knew he was alive. That was the best she could hope for. Passing each other occasionally was all they really managed these days. Jace would occasionally remember to leave notes, explaining where he was going, but sometimes Vraska couldn’t be bothered to read them. Misery had achieved nothing. Denial had achieved nothing. Anger seemed to have made everything worse. Jace couldn’t even look her in the eye anymore. She’d ruined everything and now she just felt sort-of numb.

What was so appealing about some people that meant you would forget others? Vraska didn’t get it. She was forced to consider this after accidentally stumbling across a pair of guards making out furiously in alley. Swords on the ground, their post long-abandoned, they seemed so engrossed with each other’s bodies they didn’t even realise they had been walked in on. Instantly, Vraska realised her mistake and sprinted home, blushing furiously all the way. Yet the sight had raised some questions. How did you know? How did you tell that a particular person was the one you wanted to make out with? What did Jace see in Emmara that made him think ‘yes I would like to
kiss that woman’? What had made those guards look at each other and say ‘yes I would like to have sex in a public place with this person?’ Was there a sign or a switch? Did something turn on the hormones in your brain when you got old enough? If so, why had Jace’s switch got turned on before hers? She was fairly sure she was the oldest out of the pair of them.

Yet she’d never wanted to glue her mouth to another person’s in an alley. Never in her sixteen years had she looked at a person and thought ‘yes, I would like to kiss them.’ Was something wrong with her? The only thing she could think of was that her aversion to being touched had somehow messed with her mind. Her trauma in that prison cell, that head injury, had damaged her brain. Perhaps her switch had broken. Maybe it had never grown properly. Maybe she was just so monstrous that her brain didn’t work in the way that people’s did? Perhaps the multiverse really didn’t want her to be happy. Maybe killing machines didn’t get to be happy.

She thought of the guards more times than she would willingly admit. Imagined what it would be like if someone wanted to make out with her in an alley. She could never picture a face, male, female, human, non-human, her brain couldn’t come up with person she would be in that alley with. She took this as a sign that perhaps she was untouchable after all, even if she did get over her fear of contact. If her mind couldn’t come up with a suitable partner for her, maybe she was just destined to be alone.

It was this she was thinking of when she heard a knock at the door to their flat. Surprised, she leapt off her bed and hastened to the front door. No one ever came calling. Jace had put wards on their house to deter anyone trying to visit, unless they had been specifically invited by him or Vraska. So who on earth was this? Peering through the peephole in their door, Vraska realised her shock had been pointless. It was Emmara Tandris, waiting patiently outside their door. Of course it was. Who else would Jace invite into their home?

“Good afternoon,” she greeted, opening the door, “Can I help you?”

Emmara was dressed very formally. She had swapped her dress for a long white gown covered in Selesnyan imagery of plants and animals.

“Oh, hello Vraska,” she said, quite pleasantly, “You haven’t seen Jace around have you?”

Alarm spiked, before fading back into numbness. Wasn’t he supposed be with her?”

“Not since Winter. When did you last see him?”

Emmara looked a little disheartened.

“Two months ago, at the Gathering of New Leaves.”

Vraska was vaguely aware of that being a Selesnyan festival, something about welcoming in the Spring.

“Then you’ve seen him more recently than I have,” she stated, “I thought he came and visited you quite often.”

She wasn’t going to snap at the elf. It wasn’t her fault that Jace was a hormonal mess.

“Yes, he did,” Emmara replied, “But I haven’t seen him for such a long time. I was wondering if anything had happened to him.”

“I wonder that every day,” Vraska commented, “I’ll let you know if he turns up.”
Emmara frowned a little. She cast a curious eye over Vraska, inspecting her head to toe.

“Are you well?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Vraska stated, a little faster than intended, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready for work.”

This was a lie. The fact he hadn’t been visiting Emmara was giving her a new cause for concern. It was always possible he’d moved onto someone else – she had no idea how his brain worked, but she somehow thought it unlikely. She tried to repress the worry – bottle it up with everything else she’d been feeling since she’d lost her temper at Jace. Expressing how she felt had only made things worse, so now she was trying not to give anything away. She was the perfect assassin, silent, stoic, immovable... or at least she was doing her best impression of one.

Summer came and Vraska’s life had become very routine. Eat, work, eat, sleep with the occasional journey to another plane. She never lingered very long. Even in the warmth of the summer, she felt that everything was taking more energy than it used to. Getting up was harder, going to the market was harder, even grooming herself seemed to be taking far too much effort. She felt drained, like a mizzium canister at half power, occasionally managing a burst of energy but fizzling along with no real passion or excitement. Of course, she wanted to know where Jace was. Of course, she wanted him to be safe. However there was nothing she could do, so why try? She needed that energy just to face herself in the mirror every day.

Despite her constant exhaustion, sleep refused to come easily. She found herself going to the library and researching sleep aids. She read that bubble baths were supposed to help you get to sleep, and promptly picked up a bottle of it from the cosmetic stores on Tin Street. She ran herself a bath, added extra bubbles, before locating the new memoir she’d picked up from her favourite Undercity bookseller. The book was by an unknown author who had witnessed the rise and fall of the Sisters of Stone Death. His life was very typical of a Golgari from that period, he was low-ranking, low-paid and up to his shoulders in grime. However, that just made him all the more interesting. It was nice to see history unfold through the eyes of the common worker and not a biased lich lord.

She let out a sigh of relief as she sank into the blissfully hot bath. Opening up her book, she returned to a chapter about how this mysterious author had found himself delivering a basket of black-tipped bleeding hearts (a particularly deadly form of mushroom) to a mysterious woman in red. For a common man, he had the most wonderful writing style. She could feel his anxiety as he loitered by their meeting point, careful not to catch the eyes of any passing devkarin. She felt herself unwind as she lost herself to the intrigue of the past.

There was a loud crash. Water cascaded over the sides of tub, splattering against the tiles, hitting the bathmat with a wet thud as Vraska sat bolt upright. At first, she thought Jace had collided with the coffee table again. Then she had remembered she had moved the coffee table for exactly this reason. When no swears followed the noise, Vraska’s heart leapt into her throat. She got out the bath, hastily scrubbing herself dry before flinging on her nightgown. She hastened into the living room, stopped in her tracks, and gasped

Jace was sprawled face-down on the carpet. The tatters of his cloak were covered in blood, and as Vraska got closer, she became absolutely certain it was his own. Kneeling on the now-crimson floor, she gently turned him over. He rolled like a dead weight; no strength left in his limbs. The blood was everywhere. There didn’t seem to be one wound, no, blood was gushing from several gashes on his face, his hands, his bare chest... They were knife wounds, long deliberate cuts placed exactly over where it would hurt most. It didn’t take years of assassin training to know this
was torture plain and simple. Jace must have used all his remaining strength to come home and now… Now he was bleeding out. Now Jace was dying. Now Vraska didn’t know what to do. This was too much. She could bandage a wound, maybe set a broken arm, but this…

She leant over him, blood soaking her nightgown as she searched the fragments of his robes for the little sigil she knew he kept on him at all times. She tore off shreds of robes, bits of belt in a panicked attempt to find the wooden emblem. Every second she failed was a second in which Jace dying. He was breathing, but with every heave of his chest there was yet more blood.

“Emmara!” she screamed, seizing the little leaf out of Jace’s trouser pocket and clapping it desperately in both hands. She didn’t know how it worked. It felt a bit like her broach so all she could do was focus all her magic on it and hope it would work.

“Emmara!” she called out, “Jace is dying. Help, please! He’s bleeding out. He just got back and collapsed. Please help us!”

She felt a warm glow of energy and the leaf suddenly crumpled into ash. She stared at her bloody ash-strewn hands. No. No. No. What had happened? What did that mean? Did she destroy it? Did her magic ruin the charm? Had Emmara even heard her?

There was no time to get help. All she knew how to do was contain the bleeding so that was what she’d do. She grabbed a blanket off the sofa and began to shred it into strips. There was so much blood she didn’t know where to begin. She opted for wrapping strip after strip round his heaving chest, thinking of all the places, that was the place he should bleed out least. Next she tried to wrap a blanket strip round his head, moving aside bloody matted hair. It occurred to her that maybe she should put something on the wounds, antiseptic, or at least clean them. But Jace was bleeding out and she was panicking. She couldn’t let him die!

“Vraska!” There was a loud hammering on the door and Vraska immediately leapt to her feet.

“Vraska, it’s me!” came a familiar voice, “Let me in!”

She sprinted to the door, almost breaking the latch in her haste to get it open. Emmara immediately came in, flanked by two Selesnyan healers in long white robes. Behind them she spotted a pair of griffins sat on top of the lift platform and didn’t care. She hastened back to the living room, where Emmara and her help were already addressing the bloody scene.

“What happened?” Emmara demanded as her assistants raised their staves, the whole room illuminated in a soft green glow.

“I don’t know,” Vraska said shrilly, “There was a crash and he just appeared in the living room looking like this… there’s blood everywhere. He’s been slashed, with knives, it looks like its been done on purpose, if any more arteries—“

Emmara raised a hand and she fell silent. Her gaze was filled with fear but her voice was calm.

“Vraska, can you please go fill up some bowls with warm water. We’ll do our best for him but we’re going to need to clean him up to get a better look at his injuries. We’ll need water, cloths, soap.”

Vraska nodded and immediately hastened into the kitchen. She pulled out every bowl-like thing they owned, almost choosing a colander. She filled everything that could be filled with warm water out of the tap, making sure it didn’t scald. Then she retrieved cloths and towels from the bathroom, and all the soap they owned. She made several trips back and forth, placing everything Emmara
had asked for on the coffee table.

“Good, thank you,” said Emmara. She and her healers were positioned around Jace, encompassing him with a hazy white aura of magic. She didn’t look at Vraska as she returned, but spoke as if she knew exactly where she was.

“Please could you go stand guard by the door? We can’t be interrupted.”

Vraska went to the door and paced, back and forth, back and forth. There was a lot of chanting coming from the other side of the room but somehow she couldn’t bring herself to look. She’d placed Jace’s life in the hands of three strangers and she couldn’t bear to be responsible if they failed. It occurred to her, after ten minutes or so of arcane murmuring, that Emmara probably didn’t want the door guarding after all. She was just trying to get Vraska out of the way. It was true that there was nothing Vraska could do in the situation, but that didn’t stop her feeling slightly hurt. Her panic rose when the chanting abruptly stopped and Emmara started murmuring to her colleagues. Vraska covered her face in her hands, leaning against the wall, silently praying that whatever nature spirits the Selesnyans believed in would have mercy on her and bring Jace back. In a mad moment she considered contacting Simona, in case she knew any necromancers, in case that was the only option left to them. Yet she resisted. Jace would live. He had to live. He had to! Jace was all she had ever had. Ravnica would never be home again without him!

“Vraska?” Emmara called softly.

They had been chanting on and off for about an hour when finally, Emmara spoke to her. She had spent that hour slowly unravelling in the corner, closer and closer to tears with every minute that passed. By the time Emmara reached her, she was a blubbering mess. What was it with her crying in front of random Selesnyan healers? This wasn’t a habit!

“Vraska?” Emmara tried again, walking over to her, “Vraska, it’s alright. He’s going to be fine.”

She looked up at her, the blood on her face now streaked with tears.

“Vraska, come.” Emmara gestured her forwards. She joined her beside Jace was now lying on a remarkably cleaner carpet. The two other healers shuffled backwards as Vraska leaned in to get a look, hands clamped over her mouth, so no embarrassing sobs came out.

Jace was no longer bleeding. That was the first thing she noticed. The next was the clean cream bandages that wrapped him almost head to toe. There was a definite herbal smell coming from the wrappings, or maybe that was just the Selesnyan magic. However, the fact remained he was unconscious, but he was breathing.

“He’s going to be very delicate for a while,” said Emmara, “He’s lost a lot of blood, but he’ll recover with time. He’s going need a lot of rest, care and attention. I’m going to need to check on him often, to see if our medication is effective. If its alright with you, I would prefer to stay the night, to keep watch over him.”

Vraska nodded, barely able to believe her eyes. He was going to be ok? He was going to recover?

“Th-Thank you,” she stammered, “Thank you, I-“ She didn’t know what else to say.

Emmara glanced over her shoulder at her colleagues. They gently lifted Jace from his position on the carpet and carried him through the door to their bedroom. Vraska watched as they lay him down on his bed, before returning. Emmara nodded at them with a smile. They both bowed and swiftly departed, closing the front door behind them.
“Vraska, let’s sit and keep an eye on him,” Emmara directed, gesturing her towards the bedroom.

“I’ll go and make some tea, and we’ll talk.”

Vraska went and sat on her bed, not even registering that she was being invited to sit in her own home. She clasped her hands in front of her and tried to breathe. By the time Emmara returned, she was close to composing herself. The tears were still coming but she wasn’t sobbing anymore.

“Here,” Emmara offered her a damp towel. Vraska accepted it, wiping the blood off her face and hands before accepting a mug of freshly brewed tea. The elf sat on the bed beside her, keeping a little distance between them.

“You were right,” Emmara told her, “Those were deliberate wounds, with the intention of causing him the most pain possible. Bruising around his wrists showed he was most likely restrained whilst it happened. The blade used…it wasn’t steel or bone. The closest thing I can thing of is a blade made of pure light, or pure mana, a magical force that could tear a man apart. Do you know of anyone with weapons like that?”

Vraska shook her head. She didn’t, but she had a suspect in mind.

“His boss,” she choked, “His boss has been beating him. That’s why he keeps coming home with so many injuries. He’s got a terrible temper, he’s never pleased with Jace’s work, and he takes his anger out on him. I told Jace not to go back. To quit. But he didn’t listen.”

Emmara’s expression was grave.

“He mentioned something like that to me. He didn’t want to quit. He felt trapped, too scared of what his boss might do. He didn’t want to draw him to Ravnica and expose us to his wrath. He was scared for me, for you…”

She took a deep breath, as if gathering herself for what she was about to say.

“A part of him also wanted the money he made. He felt like he was burdening you with supporting your house alone. He wanted to provide for you too.”

Vraska blinked at her. So this was her fault? She was to blame for the fact that—that Jace… She could feel the tears coming back.

“It was his pride,” Emmara elaborated, as if she had read her thoughts, “Foolish male pride mixed with his terror. He wanted to protect you, provide for you, impress you. You are not to blame.”

“He probably wanted to impress you more than me.” The thought escaped her too fast for her to reign it in. At the sight of Jace dying on the floor, her attempts at stoicism had been utterly ruined. A little of her bitterness took form whilst she was too emotionally vulnerable to stop it. Emmara frowned a little at her.

“What do you mean?”

Vraska suddenly became very aware of her surroundings. Here she was, crying her eyes out, wearing only a bloody nightdress. Whilst Emmara, diplomat of the Selesnya Guild, was sat on her sofa, perfectly composed in full guild regalia. She was an elf, no doubt with hundreds of years’ worth of experience and emotional maturity, and here she was, a sixteen year old who was jealous of the fact her only friend had gone elsewhere.

“Nothing,” she replied. Emmara continued to stare at her, silently.
“It’s nothing,” Vraska insisted, “I mean…” She sighed.

“He has a crush on you,” she said, as if that explained everything, “And…and he never stops talking about you. He’s always saying about how you’re the kindest prettiest person he’s ever met. It makes sense that if he’s trying to impress anyone, he’s trying to impress you.”

Emmara smiled and Vraska couldn’t help but bristle a little in response. Her expression was odd, almost pitying. Vraska didn’t want her pity!

“Then why, when he’s visiting me, does he always talk about you?” Emmara replied, “Why is he always telling me about how strong and beautiful you are? He idolises you. Perhaps a little more than is healthy, but it is very sweet. He called you his guardian angel.”

Now it was Vraska’s turn to frown. She struggled to believe that. Angel? She was the angel? That sounded ridiculous coming from the beautiful blond elf in white robes, who walked around bathed in light. She was a gorgon, a monster! It would only be natural if Jace preferred Emmara over her.

“I barely see him anymore,” she muttered, “This is our home, but when he’s not working, he’s with you… I’m not jealous.”

She fixed her gaze on Emmara to show that she wasn’t intimidated by her superior everything.

“I’m happy if he’s happy but… He’s the only friend I have. Maybe the only friend I’ll ever have. Who’s going to want to be friends with this.” She gestured vaguely at herself.

“This?” Emmara asked, cocking her head a little to one side, as if confused.

Vraska grimaced. Was she really going to make her say it?

“With a gorgon,” she said, “With-with a monster. It would be easier for him if he could spend time with someone who doesn’t make babies cry just by walking past them. I know he’d be happier if he got to spend all his time with a person and not a-a _thing_ but…” She scowled and looked away. Why was she saying all this? What had Emmara done to her? Was there something in this tea?

“Who said you were a thing?” Emmara asked. Her beautiful voice was full of concern. Vraska couldn’t help but hate it. She didn’t want pity!

“Everyone,” she retorted, “Society. You’ve never spent much time in Undercity have you?”

Emmara shook her head.

“We’re monsters to be slain, or locked away where no one can ever find them,” Vraska explained, “It’s a miracle Jace has put up with me for so long.”

“No,” Emmara simpered. She reached out a hand as if to touch Vraska but thought better of it. Vraska wondered if Jace had told her about her aversion to touch or she was just that covered in blood.

“No, Vraska. I know that when we first met, I almost called you a monster. I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Vraska could only stare at her in surprise.

“Every time we have met, you have proven how woefully ignorant I was,” Emmara continued, “You are a kinder and more intelligent person than many I have met on my travels. We in the
Selesnya believe that personhood is not defined by the shape of your body, but by your capacity to love and care for the people and world around you. For a moment I forgot that, can you forgive me?"

Vraska was momentarily speechless. She was apologising to her? After she almost accused her of taking her friend away?

“Y-Yes,” she stuttered, “Yes, of course... And can you forgive me?”

“What for?” Emmara asked, smiling softly at her bashfulness.

“For thinking you were trying to take my friend away,” Vraska replied, “For thinking you were my replacement.”

Emmara let out a little laugh. Even that was ever so pretty.

“You are forgiven. You cannot be blamed for the anguish of adolescence. I’m sure Jace will have many crushes over the years, it is part of growing up for many. The bond you two have already is stronger than any fleeting fancy. Don’t be afraid, you won’t be replaced.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Vraska sipped at her tea, feeling small and useless between Emmara and the unconscious Jace. The apology made her feel slightly better. Having someone who wasn’t Jace say that she wasn’t a monster was certainly a first, and not an unwelcome one at that. She wanted to believe Emmara when she said that their bond was strong enough to last through many a fleeting crush. But she really wanted to hear it from Jace too. She wanted to know that he really didn’t intend to replace her.

“Did,” she tentatively broke the silence, “Did you tell him that you had a partner? That his crush wasn’t going anywhere?”

Emmara nodded, giving a little sigh.

“Yes, many times. However, I may have been too subtle, or perhaps gentle, with him. He was very eager to please and, well, I enjoyed his company. When he’s feeling better we will certainly have a talk about it. Though, certainly not before you two have talked. I have the feeling much has gone unsaid between you, and it has only made your anguish worse.”

Vraska could only agree with that. If they had told each other how they felt since the beginning, then perhaps this would have never happened. As soon as Jace was better, they were going to talk! Preferably, whilst Jace was still in bed and couldn’t planeswalk out of the situation. She felt that Jace was going to have a rough recovery – both physically and mentally. However there wouldn’t be much recovery at all between them if they didn’t say what needed to be said.

Having Emmara round the house was strange, but not unpleasant. Because it made more sense for her to be beside Jace, to monitor his healing, Vraska surrendered her own bed and slept on the sofa. She was allowed to finish her bath and change into a less-ruined set of night clothes in privacy. When Jace showed no signs of waking the following morning, Vraska spent a nervous few hours sitting at his bedside, whilst Emmara went home to pack an overnight bag. Vraska had no idea what the Selesnyans had done to him, but a little of the colour had returned to Jace’s cheeks. It was sort of hard to tell, underneath all the bandages, but he certainly looked like he’d escaped death’s door. Praying for no emergencies, she anxiously waited for Emmara to return. Compulsively straightening Jace’s blankets, and making sure the room was presentable for Emmara’s return, she began to pace. After she’d done several laps of the room, she couldn’t help but notice a new arrival in her communications tube. A new mission? Now? This really wasn’t the time!
Nevertheless, she took the roll of papers out the tube. Oh no. It was a mission that required the Severence!

By the time Emmara returned, she had managed to work herself into a state of distress. The elf put her bag on Vraska’s bed before turning to face her.

“What’s happened?” she asked, concern clear in her expression.

“Nothing,” Vraska replied, “He hasn’t moved, or changed, it’s just… I got a job through but I don’t want to go. What if something happens to him? I could refuse but, this is a job only I can do.”

Emmara tried to look at the papers in her hands, but she hugged them tight to her chest. That would be a breach of client confidentiality! Not that she knew who the client was.

“What do you do for a living?” asked Emmara. Vraska looked up at her, suddenly wary. She’d already sat in front of this woman, crying and covered in blood. There was probably very little that could surprise her now, but still, it wasn’t going to endear her to her very much. On the other hand, maybe she could watch Jace whilst she went off and did this? That had to be the best option.

“I’m an assassin,” she replied simply, “Please…don’t share that around.”

“You’re-“ Emmara looked faintly surprised.

“Aren’t you sixteen?” she asked.

Vraska nodded.

“Almost seventeen,” she said, “But, I’ve been working for a few years now. I have a skill unique to even gorgons. It’s how I support us.”

Emmara muttered something to herself. Vraska caught something about children, responsibility and innocence, but decided not to pay it any attention.

“How long is your ‘job’ going to take?”

Vraska cast a quick glance over the papers. She had a name, a description and a location – this was relatively simple if not for the fact this was an Orzhov ministrant.

“A night,” she estimated, “I’ll come straight back. I…don’t want to be away very long.”

Thankfully, Emmara agreed to cover her absence. Vraska came home via the night market at Tin Street with a fresh basket of groceries, prepared to cook for three if needs be. She needed to show Emmara her gratitude and a good meal was certainly one way to go about it. She was certainly appreciative, however it seemed like she couldn’t help herself when she commented how surprised she was at Vraska and Jace’s seemingly adult lives.

“I had no idea how to cook when I was your age,” she mentioned over dinner, “Or run a home…You’ve both grown up very quickly, even for your races.”

“We didn’t have a lot of choice,” Vraska replied. Her lack of bitterness surprised even herself. Somehow she couldn’t bring herself to be angry at the person who was vital to Jace’s survival. Besides, Emmara was speaking from a place of genuine curiosity. How was she supposed to know what they’d experienced?

“Ravnica isn’t the kindest to those without parents,” she concluded.
Emmara stared thoughtfully at the table.

“The Selesnya runs a number of orphanages,” she commented, “We do what we can to aid those who have nothing... I’ve fed and clothed many an orphan over the years”

“Were any of them like me?” Vraska replied, the question purely rhetorical, “I doubt a Selesnyan orphanage would bear the existence of a gorgon. And even if they did, who would’ve adopted one?”

Emmara grimaced.

“I fear you’re right. Perhaps that is something I can discuss when I reach my place at the Guildhall.”

She lapsed into thoughtful silence. Vraska was vaguely curious as to what she meant by ‘reaching her Guildhall’ but didn’t wish to interrupt her train of thought. She’d always got the impression that Emmara was very important among the Selesnya. Perhaps she was going to work at the highest office? Well, if she could improve the guild’s treatment of abandoned children then Vraska was all for it.

“If it means anything,” Emmara murmured, “I would have taken you in. Both of you.”

In that moment, Vraska gained an immense amount of respect for Emmara Tandris.

Jace came round the next day. Vraska, who had been fast asleep on the sofa, awoke to a loud gasp from Emmara in the next room. She hurried into the bedroom to see Jace groggily stirring against his small mound of pillows. Emmara gestured to her to give him some space so she was forced to sit on her bed and watch as he slowly woke up.

“Jace?” she said softly, “Jace, you’re home. You’re safe.”

He made a small noise of distress.

“Jace, it’s me Vraska. You’re in your bed. Emmara is here. You’re going to be ok.”

His eyes opened slowly, wincing against the daylight filtering in through the gap in the curtains. He turned his head a little, accidentally putting pressure on his injuries, and instantly turned it back the other way. Emmara reached out to close the curtain a little further, removing the source of his discomfort.

“T-T…” he stammered a little, his voice a choking rasp. Emmara offered him a glass of water, placing the cup against his lips and allowing him to take careful sips.

“T-Tezzeret,” he tried again.

“He’s not here,” Vraska assured him, “You’re safe. Emmara and I will protect you, nothing bad is going to happen to you here. You’re home.”

He glanced at her, then up at Emmara, then back at her, as if he was struggling to believe what he saw.

“I thought…” he rasped, “I thought I would die.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Emmara assured him, bringing back the cup of water, “You’ll get better, I promise. You’re safe here.”
He looked up at them, his eyes were very red. He tried to take the glass from Emmara but moving clearly hurt too much. He had to settle for taking sips out the glass again. Once he’d emptied the cup, Emmara set it on the bedside table and glanced at Vraska.

“If you’ll allow me to use your kitchen, I’m going to brew something more nutritious to drink. He’s going to have lost a lot of the vitamins and minerals his body needs. Make sure he keeps drinking water whilst I’m gone.”

Vraska merely nodded, too fixed on Jace to come up with a response. Picking up her bag, Emmara vanished off to the kitchen.

Now didn’t seem like the best time to have a conversation about everything that had happened between them. Jace was far too weak and barely able to say much at all. She kept him drinking as instructed, offering gentle reassurances as he tried to get his bearings. From what she could gather, he had planeswalked without really meaning to, perhaps his subconscious had taken control through the pain. He didn’t recall leaving wherever he came from. He thought he was still under Tezzeret’s control. However, in his terror he had managed to return home. In his state of confusion and exhaustion, his magic kept slipping out of control. Vraska glimpsed a dark room, metal tables, cruel metallic instruments, even the tip of a gleaming blade, materialising into her vision before disappearing a second later. His illusions flickered and died as quickly as he made them, one after the other, as if his mind was trying to understand and sort all that he’d experienced. Vraska made sure to be his anchor, to keep him in the here and now and remind him those images were just illusions. She offered him her hand and he gripped it a little too tight for comfort. Pushing back the urge to flee with all her might, she stayed resolute. Doing all she could to ground him, to convince him that he was now safe.

Emmara’s concoction smelt terrible, which probably meant it was exactly what Jace needed. Over the next few hours, they took it in turns to encourage Jace to sit up and drink. Even in his weakened state, he made a fuss about the taste, causing Emmara to add a large amount of honey, resulting in an equally unappetising brown sludge. Eventually however, they got him to eat his sludge without complaint. He whined a little at the smell of their lunch, but Emmara told him very firmly, if he tried eating anything too solid now, he’d only be throwing it back up. He now lay propped up on every pillow and cushion they owned, pulling a face every time they stopped him picking at his bandages.

Jace’s recovery was understandably slow. For the next few weeks, Emmara was constantly coming and going from their house, and Vraska was responsible for helping Jace where he was unable. The first time she helped him in the bath was alarming. The water swiftly turned an alarming shade of red, but thankfully it was merely dried blood and his wounds had not opened anew. It took over a week for Jace to graduate from nutritious sludge to normal food. Emmara insisted on plenty of leafy vegetables, going as far as coming up with a meal plan that they could follow. By this point, Jace was so tired of sludge that he didn’t even turn his nose up at greenery Vraska knew he didn’t like. A few weeks after his return, he was finally able to move about. He tottered about their apartment, trying not to put pressure on anywhere tender. The gashes had taken much longer to heal than any normal wound. They were now forming thick scars that Jace would prod discontentedly at in the mirror before Vraska told him not to agitate them.

Despite how much time they had spent together recently, they still hadn’t talked. Not about what had happened to Jace. Not about what had happened between them. They had discussed many irrelevant things. Whilst Jace was still semi-conscious, Vraska would read books to him and later she would squeeze next to him on his bed and they would read together. Yet as Jace got better, their meaningless conversation became very strained. Something Emmara was quick to pick up on.
“I have a suggestion,” she announced, as Vraska handed her a cup of tea.

“It’s more of a demand,” Emmara continued, looking between them both. They looked back at her in surprise.

“There’s only so much adolescent turmoil I have time for. I want you to go sit on your beds and talk. I will wait here and make sure you don’t come out until you’ve got everything off your chests.”

Their surprise promptly turned to alarm.

“How will you know we’ve said everything?” Vraska asked.

“Oh I’ll know.” Emmara smiled and Vraska immediately was forced to wonder what powers a hundreds-year old elf might have. They shuffled into their room and Emmara closed the door behind them with a cheery wave.

Vraska took a seat on her bed, wondering if this was what it was like to be grounded by a parent. She shuffled up against the wall, watching as Jace joined her, curling up on his bed and holding a pillow. Their eyes met before they shared furtive glances at the door. It sounded like she had walked away but neither seemed to know how she would tell when they were done.

“We talked a lot over the last few weeks,” Jace mumbled, “But before that, not a lot.”

It was nice of him to acknowledge it.

“I yelled at you a lot,” Vraska mumbled, “But before that, and after that, we barely saw each other.”

Jace looked down at his pillow. He buried his chin in the cream fabric and replied:

“You were right to yell at me.”

Vraska sat up a little straighter. What was that?

“I didn’t realise. I didn’t think,” Jace continued, “I was too scared. I only cared about making things easier for me.”

That made sense, but somehow, at least in Vraska’s mind, it didn’t justify how he’d treated her.

“But I thought about everything you said,” he continued, “Whilst you were caring for me, here. Everything you shouted. And-and I deserved it. I was thinking so much about me. I didn’t realise that what I did had an impact on you. After all we’ve been through… I know how you think about yourself. I know what it was like for you to-to live by yourself. I might be the only one who knows. But I abandoned you regardless. That isn’t what friends do. I’m an awful friend.”

Now she felt terrible for making him feel bad.

“I shouldn’t have shouted,” she replied, “I knew your mentor was being horrible to you. I shouldn’t have raised my voice at all. I was just adding terror to-“

Jace interrupted her.

“No! No, you needed to. I didn’t expect you to yell and that’s what finally opened my eyes to how horrible I’d been. Just because someone hurt me, doesn’t mean I’m allowed to hurt you. No one
should be allowed to hurt you. I really did hurt you, didn’t I?”

He glanced up at Vraska. She couldn’t help but nod.

“I thought you were going to replace me,” she confessed, “I thought you’d got tired of me and wanted to swap me for someone prettier.”

Jace looked appalled.

“No, why would I ever do that?”

“Because I’m a monster,” Vraska mumbled, “Because I’m a gorgon and not a pretty blond elf. Because all I can do well is kill people.”

“That’s not true,” Jace objected, “None of that is true. I mean, you are a gorgon, but that doesn’t affect whether I want to be friends with you. Anyone who’s met you would know you’re not a monster. People who call you that are ignorant or stupid.”

Vraska managed a small smile. This was one of the reasons why she needed him around. Because no one else would say something like that. When he did it with such conviction, she was sorely tempted to believe it.

“Since its us versus the rest of Ravnica on that, maybe we’re the stupid ones in trying to deny it,” she replied.

“No,” Jace insisted, “No, they haven’t met you. You’ve done so much for me over the last-last few years. You looked after me whenever I got hurt. You were my safe place to come back to and…I neglected you entirely. I’m really sorry. I didn’t want to break any promises. I didn’t mean to leave you alone, or forget to spend time with you, or make you think you were horrible. But I did, so I’m so so sorry…”

He inched forward on the bed, it looked like he wanted to join her on her side. Vraska immediately shuffled towards her pillow, allowing Jace to sit beside her. He offered her his hand and she took it, slowly but deliberately entwining their fingers together.

“Can you forgive me?” he asked, clearly nervous.

Vraska looked at him for a moment. Her heart immediately said yes at the pathetic look on his face, but a more rational part of her still wanted answers.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

He looked down at their hands between them on the covers.

“From when?” he mumbled.

“From the start,” Vraska replied, before remembering her manners, “Please.”

Jace took a deep but shaky breath. He looked like he wanted to say no, like he was dreading even thinking about it. But he looked at her and his expression became resolute.

“I definitely owe you that much but-but, it’s hard to say.”

“Take your time.”

Jace nodded and swallowed heavily. He took a moment, squeezing her hand a little tighter.
“Tezzeret… he did teach me things. I learned so much but-but… He turned the training into me doing jobs for him. Which I thought was going to be fine. It was what we were doing before, gathering information, blackmailing, but…He was never happy with anything I did. And when I came back not having met the standards he never told me, he hurt me. This got worse when he made me do things with my powers that I’d never done before. I thought it would be neat at first, we were both assassins, but, have you ever seen someone after their mind has been destroyed?”

Vraska shook her head, she couldn’t imagine it was pleasant.


He clenched his free hand in his robes, shaking slightly.

“I didn’t think my magic was that dangerous… but, but I can cause something worse than death. Living, but with no conscious thought, no identity, no personality, no logic…. People forget how to live…how to breathe… I hurt so many people. I don’t want to hurt anyone else. N-Never again.”

“You don’t have to,” Vraska reassured him, “You don’t have to hurt anyone ever again. He can’t force you to.”

“It was me or them,” he explained, “I-I felt like he would kill me if I didn’t do what he wanted. And if I didn’t go back to him, he might hunt me down. Come to Ravnica and hurt you to get me to do what he wanted. I-I couldn’t let him hurt you. I care about you so much and I couldn’t stand it if you got hurt because I was weak.”

“Protecting yourself doesn’t make you weak,” Vraska commented, “But, I understand.”

“I thought over what you said about the device… He never wanted it. After-after when you yelled about me, my last mission, I learned what he really wanted. He needed a mind mage to protect him against his own boss, who is a planeswalker with the powers of a god. I was supposed to stop his boss getting into his mind, and get into his boss’ mind but… but I wasn’t good enough. The dragon was better mind mage than me and-and that made Master Tezzeret so angry he-he…”

Jace looked down at himself, where the scars on his chest lay. His eyes begin to well up with tears. Vraska hesitated for a moment, before giving his hand a little squeeze. She wanted to put an arm round him but she wasn’t sure she should let go of his hand.

“It’s not your fault. He was a terrible abusive man…how did he expect a teenager to beat a dragon?” Vraska tried to comfort him.

“I-I don’t know,” Jace cried, “I tried really hard but-but the dragon…his mind was so vast and powerful and just being in his presence. I was so scared. But Tezzeret, he-he said that was my whole purpose for existing and I had failed so he had this mana knife and he…”

He started sobbing and Vraska gave into the urge to let go of his hand and put an arm round him. He wept into his pillow and all she could really do was tell him that he would never need to go back. She would protect him to the end.

“You’re home now,” she assured him, “You don’t need to go back. Once you’re feeling better… I’m sure there’s so many interesting things you can do on Ravnica. And-and we can spend more time together.”

He rubbed at his eyes, trying to scrub away tears.

“Yeah, we can. But…It’s not fair that you’re always comforting me,” he sniffled, “I didn’t want to
worry you but I made everything so much worse. I want to be here for you too.”

“You’re the one who almost died, twice. You deserve some comforting.”

“You cried a lot and I just left.”

He had a point.

“I was angry at you, but I was mostly angry at me,” Vraska explained, “I thought it was my fault. My fault for not being enough for you. You always chose to spend time with Emmara over me. Of course you’re allowed to have other friends but… I…don’t have anyone except for you. You’re the only one who looks at me and sees a person.”

She looked down at the covers, shame settling in fast.

“I always thought I was supposed to be the strong one, but, as soon as you went I fell apart. I was alone with my thoughts and my thoughts aren’t kind.”

They sat in silence for a moment, mulling over each other’s words. Vraska felt like she’d said too much. The fact that Jace knew what he’d done wrong was an immense relief, she felt a little better about accusing him now. And the fact he’d explained himself? She’d be lying to herself if she thought she hadn’t forgiven him already.

“We need to stick together,” Jace commented, “We’re better when we are.”

“And wrecks when apart,” Vraska agreed, “Look at the mess we made of ourselves.”

Jace gave a hiccup-like laugh.

“We should talk more… Whenever you have bad thoughts about yourself, tell me, and I’ll make sure you know how amazing you are.”

Vraska managed a little laugh of her own. This was what she had missed so badly, his sweet optimism.

“And when you’re confused and conflicted, you have to tell me,” she replied, “We can always talk it out. I’m always here for you. No matter what.”

“I’ll be here from now on,” Jace promised, “I’ll be here when you need me. Always. We’re a team.”

They shared slightly fragile smiles. Emmara had been right. They really did need to talk this through. It was funny almost how much better a single conversation had improved her mood. She felt like a weight had lifted off her shoulders. He was here. He was staying. He was safe.

But, just in case he worried, she certainly would.

“I forgive you.”

Jace beamed and promptly buried his face in the pillow again. She held him through the last of his tears. Sharing so much had emotionally drained them both and left them feeling vulnerable and somewhat silly. They occasionally shared a nervous giggle. The fact they’d sorted years of anguish in an afternoon made them feel like they’d been very foolish. What’s more, when they returned to the living room, Emmara had already left.

“She’d never know if we didn’t talk,” Jace gasped, as if he’d really believed she had some sort of
magical detection power.

“She’ll probably work it out when we stop crying and avoiding each other.”

“Oh, that make sense.”

They glanced at each other. They both looked exhausted. The dark circles under their eyes spoke volumes for the suffering they’d endured over the last few months. Jace’s eyes were red and puffy from his crying, both their cheeks were pink from the awkwardness of their talk.

“Coffee?” suggested Jace.

“Coffee.” Vraska agreed. They had a lot of catching up to do.
After fleeing the Consortium, Jace has some choices to make. What is he going to do with his life now? Where does he even start? How about with new skills, new work and perhaps, a new person in his life?

"Why are you drawing on the ceiling?"

Jace looked down from his precarious position atop the sofa. He had a can of paint in one hand and a long brush in the other. He had chosen cream-coloured paint because it was closest he could find to their slightly off-white ceiling. The sigils he was drawing were obvious, but he hoped the colour would dry paler and look like it did on the tin. He wobbled a little, glad he’d placed a ruined blanket over the sofa as he spilled a little paint climbing down. Vraska had emerged from their room and was now surveying his work with a look of mild concern.

“I’m creating another ward,” he replied, stepping down to the floor, “Don’t worry, we won’t be able to see them when they’re dry.”

His initial wards were very simple. He’d enchanted their flat with three spells. The first was a simple ward that stopped magic passing through their walls. It didn’t prevent planewalking, but it did stop ordinary teleportation and other forms of magical probing. No one would be able to read their minds through the windows or walls. The second was a basic burglar alarm, for when someone tried to physically break in. The only difference from an Izzet-build alarm was that the ward would mentally alert him when the break in happened. The last of the first batch was on the door. If anyone they hadn’t personally invited came to the door, they would immediately forget why they had come and were compelled to leave.

The new one was a lot trickier. It would be really annoying if they kept setting it off so he had to attune it to their own unique types of magic. The ward was designed to let him know of any magic usage in their house that wasn’t theirs. However, he didn’t know the extent of Vraska’s powers, and he was discovering new abilities between them both every day. He’d done his best, but if someone with similar powers to theirs arrived, then they might be in trouble. However, he had to do everything he could to keep them safe. There were so many powerful entities out there in the multiverse, the walls of their flat no longer made him feel safe. So he didn’t cave under the paranoia, he was attempting to recall every protective measure he could.

“Do you think he’ll come after you?” Vraska asked. She settled on the floor beside the coffee table as he clambered back up onto the sofa.

“I don’t know,” Jace confessed, “But I’m not going to give him the chance. I’m going to make this place our sanctuary.”

He didn’t think Tezzeret knew where his home was. He’d already been told that the ‘invitation’ had been sent by following the location of the device. Vraska had already informed him that the device was no longer in the flat, and in fact self-destructed. Tezzeret could no longer follow its signal to them, so that was one danger removed. He didn’t think he could stop planeswalkers getting into their home, but he could certainly stop anyone trying to get in or finding them in the
first place.

“What about the dragon?” Vraska inquired.

“I don’t think so, I don’t think he cared who I was.”

The dragon seemed to think he was some sort of plaything of Tezzeret’s. He wasn’t wrong, but not anymore. Jace was back home and here to stay. He’d missed everything about home. From the food, to the coffee, to the comfort of his own bed. Most of all, he’d missed Vraska. He’d yet to meet anyone else like her and had missed their conversations, their reading sessions, their simple adventures, even the occasions when they’d hurt other people. Whatever became of his magic, he would never be as great as her. Vraska was so much stronger than him, not just physically, but also in strength of spirit, of will. She would never have made such a mess of her social life. She would never have abandoned people that meant so much to her. Vraska had never made a mistake that could have been avoided so easily if he’d actually just come home whenever he was here.

Yet she’d forgiven him. Liking him even though he’d made her despise herself, something she had always struggled against. She smiled at him despite the fact he’d made her cry. She hated crying in front of other people, and she’d done it not just in front of him, but also Emmara. Always claiming that she wanted to be the strong one, she nevertheless gave strength to him. Vraska inspired him to push the limits of what he could do, what he could be. Together they’d gone from street rats to home owners, from having nothing to everything they needed. If he hadn’t met her…well, he’d probably still be scavenging in the hostile parts of the city. He would likely never have dared try for anything more. She was his determination, his drive to be better. She was his home, and he would endeavour to be his best for her.

As he finished up his runes, Vraska went to get dressed for the day. A few months ago, Jace had opened up their wardrobe to find that her collection of hand-me-down dresses was gone. He had worried that she had thrown them out. Throwing those dresses away would have been a mistake when she looked so beautiful in them. When he saw her in that tight green dress, all soft silk and brown lace… His reaction had not been entirely appropriate. The bodice of her dress had been far too big. When she sat beside him, being that much taller, he’d seen more than he was willing to admit. She’d looked so good that he couldn’t form sentences. He’d considered resorting to telepathy, but if she’d read his thoughts?! Gods, that dress, sometimes he still thought about how she’d looked that afternoon.

He knew why the dresses were gone now, but their disappearance hadn’t helped his predicament. Vraska had acquired similar dresses that actually fit her, enough that she could wear them all the time. Jace felt weak. Weak to slender curves, lean muscular arms and so much exposed skin. She wore her scars as beautifully as her new attire. She seemed to have abandoned her usual loose-fitting tunics and leggings. The scars crisscrossing her back and shoulders were exposed to the light and she only looked more magnificent for it. She looked like a survivor, a gorgeous, wholly too beautiful survivor. Jace was weak. Thank goodness he was the mind mage. If she could read some of his thoughts well…she’d probably slap him, or at least blush a lot and run away. He was going to have to get used to her new fashion choices, otherwise he might ruin their friendship by accidentally letting his thoughts slip.

Getting down off the sofa, he put his paint and brush in the kitchen, before returning to restore the sofa to a usable state. As he removed the ruined blanket, he disturbed the throw beneath. There was a rustling sound, like that of paper, followed by the noise of something fluttering to the ground. He immediately went to look for the source. On the floor, were three pieces of paper.

They were utterly covered in graphs and diagrams, readouts from machines and some sort of
frequency table. He turned the papers this way and that, trying to make head or tail of what it was telling him. However, whatever way he looked at it, this was far too technical for an untrained eye. There was so much scientific language it might as well be code. Who knew what information could be concealed in all these machine-generated squiggles? He wanted to decipher it. It was like a mystery, a mystery he really wanted to solve. What was this and what was it doing in their flat?

“Vraska?” he called out.

“Yes?” she replied, coming back into the room. Another one of those dresses! He had to get a grip on himself.

“What are these?”

She came over to have a look.

“Oh, those are the readings from Mizzium House on the black wire device you found in the museum.”

The one that had led him into Tezzeret’s path. That was right, she’d gone and had it analysed before it blew up.

“What does it mean?” he asked. Vraska shrugged.

“Dr Marian tried to explain it to me, but I didn’t fully understand. You could probably go ask her?”

That afternoon they went to Mizzium House. Jace had been to one of the local Izzet workshops, but that had been the Red Rod Tower on Red Street. Vraska informed him that there were in fact three around Tin Street alone. The Bolt and Ball apparently had a very rude manager, so she preferred the Mizzium House. Jace found himself getting more excited the closer they got to the workshop. He hadn’t been excited about anything for a very long time. He’d travelled so much, he’d almost forgotten about the amount of intrigue and discovery you could find a single plane. He’d just discovered there were machines right here on Ravnica that could analyse any sort of device. He had to know how they worked!

“Oh!” exclaimed Vraska, as they reached Mizzium House. Jace stared at her, wondering what had caught her by surprise. Mizzium House was a little workshop tucked behind a much larger furniture store. Its front wall was entirely made of glass, thick bands of bolted metal reinforcing the thick panes. There was an Izzet symbol made of stained glass on the door, as well as a small sign, handwritten, proclaiming HELP WANTED. Inside, there was a spotless gleaming lab. Even from outside, Jace could see the shining metal benches, the delicate glass instruments displayed in neat rows, and large machines with many brightly coloured buttons. He wanted to know what they all did.

They entered the workshop to see a tall minotaur lady with coils around her horns. She was leaning over one of the metal benches, pouring over an array of paperwork. When she heard them arrive, she looked up. She recognised Vraska immediately.

“Good morning hon. Got something else for me to look at?”

“Good morning Dr Marian,” Vraska replied, “Not exactly. Though, we were wondering if we could book an appointment, or some of your time, to go through the results you gave me before? My roommate loves to assemble and reassemble machines, tinker with devices, and he would love to go through what these readings mean. We’ll pay of course.”

For the first time, Dr Marian looked at Jace. On instinct, he felt out with his mind. She was
frustrated, a little tired, and there was a deep-seated worry simmering under the surface. She was anxious about her shop, her assistant, and her guild status. The paperwork was an unwelcome surprise and her future was looking very precarious.

“Or I could help,” he suggested, “I’m not Izzet, but I’ve worked with an artificer before. I’m handy with tools and careful. I learn very fast.”

She considered him for a moment.

“Who did you work with?”

Jace glanced at Vraska. What was he supposed to say? She wouldn’t know whoever he said.

“I’m not sure I’m allowed to say,” he murmured, making sure to look as nervous as he felt, “He- He…”

“The Azorius took him in for abusing his assistants,” Vraska interrupted, “It was only a few weeks ago.”

“They said I shouldn’t say anything they didn’t have in writing,” Jace finished, “I don’t want to get into trouble. I’m just glad he’s finally gone where he can’t hurt us anymore.”

Dr Marian made a pained expression.

“I’m so sorry to hear that hon. I’d be happy to give you a try out. We need the hands round here. If you know your stuff, I’d be happy to show you how the readings work.”

Jace bounced on his heels, delighted at this turn of events.

“I’ll do my best I promise!”

Vraska clearly liked Dr Marian and Jace was inclined to trust her judgement. He was a little nervous when she had to leave him to go to work. However Dr Marian was very kind and patient with him. Apparently, he wasn’t the first young assistant she’d taken on.

“Ral was a bit younger than you when we met,” she told him, “He’ll be coming in tomorrow. Maybe you two can work together.”

Jace looked forward to meeting her assistant. In the meanwhile, she took him round the lab for his trial. She was amazed by how quickly he picked up her processes, though he certainly had an advantage that her other assistants hadn’t. If something looked a bit too technical to be worked out logically, and he hadn’t fully grasped her demonstration, he would carefully extract the necessary information from her mind. He made sure not to delve any further than he needed to. What if he accidentally hurt her? That would be a poor way to treat her after she’d been so kind. Lying to her hadn’t felt great, but it was partially true?

By the end of his trial, he had agreed to come help Dr Marian out for two days a week in exchange for learning her craft. He went back home feeling happier than he’d felt in weeks. He was home, Vraska liked him again and he was going to learn so much! He was going to unravel the mysteries of those readings. Maybe, once he had more skills, he could use them to support himself. He had plenty of money for now but it seemed unfair that Vraska was working whilst he was having fun. Maybe if he was very useful to Dr Marian, he could help her out with keeping her workshop, and then she could pay him? He hadn’t tried too far but he had glanced at her paperwork. Dr Marian had received a rejection letter concerning her appeal to keep her workshop’s current level of funding. She couldn’t afford to keep it open without guild support but other parties were interested
in her workshop. She could keep ownership of her shop and get less funding, or merge her workshop with another, keeping it going but losing ownership. The doctor vehemently refused to merge. She hated the goblin she would be forced to work with. However, she loved her workshop and didn’t want to see all her hardwork come to nothing. Jace felt immensely sorry for her. Maybe he could do something?

For now, all he could do was make her working day better. He came back the next day, ready to learn more about machines, and was promptly introduced to her assistant.

“Jace this is Ral,” Dr Marian announced, “He’s been my assistant for the past few years. Ral, this is Jace, he’ll be helping us out a few days a week. Why don’t you show him your latest work?”

Ral looked about a year older than him. He was tall, a head taller than Jace, with dark hair and rather handsome chiselled features. He was dressed very Izzet, with plenty of red and blue stripes, and had large amount of machinery strapped around his person. Jace looked up at him and tried to extend his magic once more. He felt where Ral’s mind was and gave a little push.

“Ouch!”

He felt like he’d been zapped right between the eyes! He rubbed his forehead, as if struck by a bolt, but there was no mark or burn. Mental electricity?

“Are you alright?” called Dr Marian.

“He’s fine,” Ral replied, “Just stubbed his toe on the bench. We’re just going out the back so I can show him the big job.”

Before Jace could say anything about this, Ral grabbed him by the shoulders and steered him towards the furthermost doors. He tried to shake himself free, panic steadily rising, but every time he tried to slip out of Ral’s grasp, there were sparks. What kind of mage was he? Lightning that could stop mental magic?

“What the hell was that for?” Ral demanded, rounding on him as soon as they were out of earshot of Dr Marian.

“Why were you trying to get into my mind? You some kind of Dimir spy? What did you do to Dr Marian?”

“Nothing!” Jace replied, “I’m-I’m sorry! I lose control when I get nervous!”

“That’s bullshit,” Ral retorted, “I felt you aiming for me. You’re a telepath.” He took a step forward, backing Jace again a large metal cupboard. Jace became very aware of the conductive properties of metal. Ral could roast him if he wasn’t careful!

“Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to snoop around other people’s minds?” Ral leaned over him, one arm over Jace’s head as he shrank back against the metalwork. Ral’s eyes shone bright with unreleased energy. As their gazes met, Jace felt his breath catch in his throat. If Ral wasn’t so scary, he would be extremely attractive right now. The sparks emanating from his person shot his cheekbones into sharp relief and made his bright blue eyes glitter with power. He was a gifted mage for sure. If they were under slightly different circumstance, being pinned against a cup- No! No! Ugh, what was he thinking! This was not the time!

“Listen here Pipsqueak. If I find you’re here to make trouble for me and Marian. I’m going to tie you to the coils and stick a bolt where the sun don’t shine. Understand?”
Jace nodded very vigorously.

“I’m sorry!”

“Good, now hurry up and follow me.”

By the end of the day, Jace decided that Ral’s anger had been entirely reasonable. Usually people didn’t find out he was in their minds. However, if they did, they would probably get angry too. Ral had calmed down over the day, unable to criticise Jace for his ability or technique. By the end of the afternoon, he even thanked Jace for handing him the tool he wanted. Jace got the impression that Ral didn’t mind his presence, he just didn’t want to be shown up in front of Dr Marian. He was bossy and clearly wanted to be in charge. Asserting his greater height and experience, he ordered Jace around but at least he no longer shouted. Jace didn’t want another job where he had to live in fear. If Ral turned out to be a problem…well, he’d politely excuse himself. However perhaps he could endear himself with time?

“Did you have a good time at Mizzium House?” Vraska asked as he arrived home and joined her on the sofa. She leant her book on the arm of the chair and waited for him to respond.

“Dr Marian’s assistant is more powerful than he looks,” he replied, curling up in his seat, “He’s got mind magic like mine. He caught me and got mad.”

“Ral?” Vraska inquired. He nodded.

“Yeah. I wish I hadn’t made him mad, he looks really good.”

Vraska frowned, evidently confused.

“What has that got to do with anything?” she asked.

Jace wasn’t entirely sure why she was asking. It was a shame that he’d pissed off an attractive boy. What was there to miss?

“If I had made a better first impression,” Jace tried again, “It would’ve been easier if I starting liking him. You know like-liking him.”

Vraska took a moment.

“I thought you were attracted to Emmara.”

Yes, he still was, but that hadn’t gone very well for him so far. Not only did she have a boyfriend, but she had sat him down and told him to give up and stop deluding himself. Not in those exact words, she was too kind for that, but he had finally got the point. Emmara Tandris, the most beautiful elf in all of Ravnica, was not interested and never would be. He was happy to still be her friend though.

“Yeah, but he’s good-looking too,” he replied. And so are you he wanted to say but that would be weird.

“But he was mad at you.” Vraska confirmed. Jace nodded again. It was admittedly the first time he’d liked someone who’d been scary rather than kind, but that made sense. How you looked didn’t reflect on your temperament inside.

“Are you going back next week?” Vraska asked, “Will you stay if he’s still angry?”
“It depends on how it goes. If it gets really awful, I’ll quit.”

She seemed content with his answer. They made dinner together that night. Whilst they ate however, something occurred to him.

“Vraska?”

“Yes?”

“Am I allowed to date?”

Vraska frowned and put down her fork. He seemed to be confusing her a lot today.

“Yes, of course you can date,” she replied, “Why wouldn’t you be allowed to?”

Maybe because she might get sad if he spent too much time out of the home? It had crossed his mind as they were eating. What if he did successfully manage to find someone? What if they wanted their own flat together? Would he still fall apart without Vraska? How would Vraska manage on her own?

“I don’t know,” he responded, “Just wondered how you might feel if I dated someone.”

“Well, I’d be happy for you,” she said, “But, please don’t cut me out of your life just because you fancy someone. Also, if you start bringing people home for the night, please warn me. We only have one bedroom.”

He spluttered on his salad and had to down his glass of juice. She’d clearly been thinking about this too from a more practical angle.

“I-I will! I mean I would. I don’t have any plans to-to bring someone home. But I definitely wouldn’t cut you out of my life. Promise.”

There was another advantage to his trips to the workshop, one that he had neglected to tell Vraska about. He made a deliberate point to remember their seventeenth birthday, going as far as buying a whole cake to celebrate the occasion. His present, however, was far more personal than a trip to the bakery. Dr Marian had shown him how a transmitter worked after they’d gone through the readings. He’d taken the technology and whittled it down to the smallest versions of its component parts. An in, and out and a power source, Dr Marian had said. His work was a little rough about the edges, he’d had to file a lot of sharp corners, but he’d got there in the end. He presented her with a small red box with a ribbon around it.

Inside was a pendant, made of silver wire and tiny steel pieces, all clasped around a single crystal. The crystal was dark green on Vraska’s pendant and deep blue on his own. Each pendant was tear-drop shaped, the crystal placed as the base. The shape came from a mixture of prettiness and practicality. The wire frame of the tear-drop was slightly flexible, enough to be pinched between thumb and forefinger. The pressure, combined with the user’s magic, would cause the crystal to send a pulse of mana to its partner.

“It’s so beautiful,” Vraska exclaimed, “You made this yourself?”

“Yes, though I had some help with the fiddly parts,” he replied, “Do you like it?”

“Of course, thank you,” she said. She slipped hers out of the box and immediately strung it round her neck on its silver chain. He was already wearing his and he fished it out of his robes to show her.
“I thought, it’s pretty, but it’s also a way of letting us know if we need each other.”

He showed her how the pulses worked. It wasn’t a perfect device. It certainly wouldn’t work between planes, and it didn’t give any indication of the other person’s whereabouts. However, if they knew each other’s location, and one of them sent a distress signal, then they would be able to come to their aid.

Vraska’s present to him was in two parts. The first was a leather-bound journal with page dividers and different sections. They both had a weakness for fine stationary and Jace instantly started dreaming up all the different notes and observations he could write in there. The second gift was slightly more confusing – a set of clothing unlike any he’d seen on Ravnica. At first he thought it was a pile of blue fabric. However upon unfolding it, he also revealed a beautiful broach, resembling a swallow, and a pair of sandals.

“I’ve got somewhere I want to show you,” Vraska told him, “When winter comes, let’s go on holiday.”

He had wondered where Vraska disappeared to during the winter months. Their flat was generally empty at the weekends, and he’d just assumed she’d gone down to the Undercity to escape the snow. He’d been completely wrong. Vraska had found a plane he’d never even heard of and apparently it was far too warm for him to go there covered in robes. She’d planned a long weekend away and a new outfit was the only beginning.

As winter approached, he decided he should probably let Dr Marian know that he was going to be away. He still only worked at Mizzium House two days a week, but he would be missing one of them. It was his intention to try and reschedule so he could get his work done another day. However, when he passed the furniture shop, he saw something that negated his need to rearrange entirely.

Mizzium House was in ruins. The glass front wall was shattered and strewn across the street, flooding the gutters with sharp glistening shards. The metal reinforcements were bent and buckled from impact, twisted metal folded almost double into the remains of the shop. The benches had been reduced to chunks of metal, delicate little instruments scattered across the floor in many glittering pieces. Many containers of fluid had been knocked to the ground, their contents still faintly hissing on the floor. The coffee machine was missing, so was the water cooler. The door to the back room was hanging off its hinges, even the ceiling fan hung from its wiring.

Jace picked up his pace, making a beeline for the workshop to see what had happened, who could have done this. There were a large number of Boros officers clustered outside, some were sweeping up glass whilst others stood around looking intimidating.

“Oi, Pipsqueak.”

A little shudder passed through him, like a shock from static. The call was purely mental. He had no doubt who was talking to him, but where was he?

“Where are you? Are you ok?”

“Alley beside the fish shop, come quiet.”

He retreated back towards the furniture store. In the alley between the store and the workshop was a dingy little fried fish shop. He’d eaten from there once. It was pretty good, just rather dark and creepy as the surrounding buildings blocked off all daylight to the shop. Ral was waiting outside, leaning on the wooden fish-shaped sign that announced the shop’s presence.
“Are you alright?” Jace asked immediately, “What happened to the shop? Did you get hurt?”

Ral shook his head.

“Goblins came in the night. Dr Marian lives above the workshop, but she got out and she’s now safely with her aunt and uncle. I came back and hung around because I didn’t want you getting picked up by Boros idiots.”

“Thank you.” Jace looked him over. He knew better than to pry into Ral’s mind. He was certainly in one piece but he looked rather shaken. His clothing was askew and for once he wasn’t wearing his mizzium gauntlets. Jace couldn’t help but notice he had a dragon tattoo snaking up one arm. It had red scales like the Izzet guildleader – was Ral so into his guild he’d got its leader permanently drawn on his skin?

“So, it was goblins?” Jace was glad everyone was unhurt but that didn’t explain what had happened here.

“One of the Tin Street gangs,” said Ral, leaning back against the sign and the dirty brick wall, “They left their mess all over Marian’s best equipment. Marian reckons they were set on her. She’d been warring with old Yevver at The Bolt and Ball for months now, and the higher ups want them to merge labs. She says Yevver has connections with Krenko’s gang and that’s why this happened.”

Yevver must be the rude goblin who had insulted Vraska. Jace frowned.

“Is he going to get arrested?”

“No idea.” Ral shrugged, “Probably not. Not like he’s going to tell anyone he ordered a hit. The doctor’s family is Boros, so they might push for an investigation, but who knows. She doesn’t have the money to rebuild and her funding was being cut anyway… I think this is the end.”

He was trying to sound indifferent, but there was a definitely mournful look in his eyes.

“What are you going to do now?” Jace asked. That look of misery turned to one of smugness at a speed only Ral could manage.

“Oh, I’ve got a scholarship at Dragon’s Perch lined up. New year starts in the Spring, so I just got to cope until then. They’re paying for my food and my digs because I impressed them that much.”

“Congratulations,” Jace managed. He had no idea what Dragon’s Perch was, but judging by his boasts, this was probably quite an achievement for an Izzet guild member.

“Yeah,” Ral continued, “All the best guildmages in Nivix went to Dragon’s Perch, so I’m probably never going to hang round here anymore. This is goodbye Pipsqueak, I’ll be going places soon.”

“Well, good luck.” Jace wondered if he’d miss him. He’d certainly miss Dr Marian and the Mizzium House workshop. Maybe not so much when it came to Ral and his ego.

He didn’t expect to see Ral again after that encounter. He went back home and waited for Vraska to return so he could tell her about what happened. She was understandably angry, going as far as suggesting they accost Yevver themselves. Jace however, wasn’t willing to go hunt down a man based on a theory. Ral was smart, but he may not have all the facts. Besides, he wasn’t doing to go about threatening people anymore. He couldn’t go back to that. Vraska seemed dissatisfied with this but she listened to him and didn’t go hunt the goblin down.
The events put a little dampener on their preparations to go away. However, when Vraska took his hand and led him to the most beautiful beach imaginable, he forgot the workshop completely. He ran circles around the secluded cove, marvelling at black sand and water so clear he could see the sealife underneath. After a long day building wonky sand replicas of Ravnican monuments, and splashing in the waves, they camped out under the stars. Between them, they started a campfire out of driftwood and toasted the bread they bought at a local market. Their dinner consisted of charred bread, spiced meat and local fruits liberally coated in honey. As they started to get drowsy, Jace buried Vraska’s feet in sand. She gave him a look that told him he was being childish but adorable. He blushed and sat back down. This was the most fun he’d ever had on another plane. This was so much better than travelling for work!

It was unfortunately work that meant they had to go back to Ravnica. Vraska had jobs to do and he needed to work out how he was going to fill his time now. He wanted to keep learning, exploring all the options Ravnican culture had to offer, but that was hardly conducive to making money. He knew there were people out there who got paid for solving mysteries. Private investigators, they were called in stories. Usually those people were Dimir, but maybe he could be one? How did you get started? He was going to need more research.

Over the next year, Jace got his revenge on the coffee table. Now shunted to one side of the room, it now bore the beginnings of a lab, complete with coffee cups and strange coloured liquids. He had put a mat on the floor, so not to ruin the carpet, but bits of equipment often escaped to other parts of the house. He often found stray pens or craft knives in the washing up, each of his slippers always ended up in different rooms and more than once he’d been banned from mixing alchemical reagents in the bath. Vraska was fine with his experimenting, she often found it very interesting and joined in on his investigations, but she didn’t want him to wreck the house. This was understandable. Once Jace started taking in and repairing unknown devices, there was always a chance that something might go wrong. He set up wards whenever he was working on something that might go bang, but the wallpaper on this side of the room was looking a little ragged.

He hadn’t quite managed to become a private investigator – not in the story book sense anyway. He had done investigations for people. When he got bored, he put ads in the Tin Street Gazette, asking for potential clients to send letters to his mail box at the post office. He’d had a few very interesting jobs. Jewellery robberies, a case of mistaken identity, helping a merchant find her daughter, but mostly people wanted to know whether their spouses were cheating on them. Jace really hated that kind of job and now flat out refused them, more than halving the amount cases he received. He didn’t want to be responsible for the break down of people’s relationships. Neither did he really want to follow people around, break into their minds and homes, especially when they often turned out to be innocent. During the cases where the subject was guilty, Jace witnessed more ‘shady’ culture than he might like. Apparently, some people thought it was perfectly ok to make their loved ones suffer.

“Why would they do that?” he asked of Vraska one evening, “If you love someone, you should be treasuring them always, not doing horrible things behind their backs!”

She agreed with him.

Jace had decided to spend the other half of his time on the more experimental side of mystery-solving. He would frequent some of the less scrupulous markets, even dodgier than Tin Street in the early hours of the morning. He would make deals with Izzet scrap trawlers and Golgari findbrokers, buying up bits of machinery and magical items that had been thrown aside as waste. He’d take them home, work out their purpose, before restoring them to their former glory. Sometimes this took an afternoon, sometimes, in the case of a particularly mysterious clock, it took months. He would then sell his renovated items to collectors, museums, and anyone with the zinos
to pay. Solving mysteries for people pushed him to the limits of his social skills, stealth and moral judgement. Identifying and restoring these items pushed him to the limits of his knowledge of magic and engineering. Overall, he felt challenged and that was just how he liked it.

One rainy summer morning, he stopped by the post office to check on his mail box. He hadn’t put out an ad recently, but sometimes people saw old advertisements and got in touch. Jace liked the post office immensely. It was an amazing feat of Dimir organisation. Everything was neatly put in its place, from the rope dividers matching the stripes on the carpet, to the little rails attached to ceiling, gliding packages over the heads of customers and passing them to couriers heading out on deliveries. Tiny insects, or insect-like machines, patrolled the rails, their beady blue eyes taking in every address, every stamp, every little pouch of paperwork. Off to one side was a separate array of desks, colour coded to denote their separation from the main post office. It was here that local residents could file for permits and licenses. The Azorius symbol had been engraved into the glasswork of those booths. Though, if you were observant enough, you could see the Dimir emblem imposed over the top, like the Azorius triangle had sprouted multiple pairs of legs. A large round parcel, wrapped in bright silver paper, zipped overhead as Jace entered the Tin Street branch. He took his place in the queue for postal services, taking in the neat racks of postage labels, air mail stickers and requests for large stock transportation.

When he reached a kiosk, and showed them proof of his identity, he was passed two brown envelopes. They showed no sign of tampering, but that didn’t mean the Dimir didn’t know what was inside. Luckily for him, he wasn’t a very interesting person to them. Brown envelopes were the cheapest type you could buy at the post office, so he wasn’t surprised to find two identical letters. The first was another annoying potential-adultery case. The second however, was far more mysterious.

**Dear Jace Beleren,**

This was odd because he had not given his name on the ads. He called his would-be business the “Tin Street Private Investigation Bureau” because it had sounded cool. Also, no one should have been able to recognise him because he never met clients as himself. He always wore an illusion, or at least remained mysterious with his hood up.

**I am a great fan of your work and would very much like to meet you in person. I am currently on the case of hunting down a missing person. They went missing from their place of work almost a year ago now, and I believe it will take someone of your exceptional talents to find them. Meet me at the archon fountain in the park off Jewellers’ Avenue, tomorrow, 11am sharp. Time is of the essence and I trust you won’t disappoint.**

**Yours sincerely,**

**LV**

He took a moment to sit down on a bench, staring at the unfamiliar handwriting. A missing person case? He hadn’t received one of those for months. If they had been missing that long, and someone was still trying to find them, then the victim must be very important. Plus, the more urgent a quest, the more he could charge. He took the letter home, quietly optimistic for the next day. Enigmatic letters, disappearing victims, possible shadowy work places, he felt like a real mystery was about to unfold. Once he’d got more details, he’d share it with Vraska. She loved reading about old crimes in her Golgari books. She’d undoubtedly be riveted by a real life person disappearing from their own work place.

This would be exciting, he just knew it!
Planeswalkers

Chapter Summary

When Jace meets the woman of his dreams, Vraska can't help but be immediately suspicious. If she being overly-cautious? Or have the stars truly aligned and given Jace what he's always wanted?

“Vraska! Vraska! Vraska! Where are you? Vraska! Vraska!”

That was four more ‘Vraskas’ than she had been expecting. Something exciting must have happened. Vraska poked her head out of the kitchen where she had been sharpening knives. Her usual blades already lay gleaming on the worktop but she’d decided to do their kitchen set whilst she was at it. Jace however didn’t seem remotely interested in her tool maintenance. He was already sat on the sofa waiting for her to come join him. Carefully putting the last bread-knife back in the drawer, she went into the living room, to see what sort of state he’d come back in. Thankfully, he looked fine. If not a little red in the face, presumably from running all the way home. His robes were a little askew, but once again, the running.

As she sat down, she finally spotted what was different about him. The wild excitement wasn’t anything special. She’d seen him just as excited about old books, new artefacts and a bucket full of seashells. The lipstick, however, had not been there this morning. There was a smudge of deep red makeup on his cheek. What, or who, had he been up to?

“Vraska!” he greeted her.

“I heard you the first few times,” she chuckled, “What’s going on? Made a discovery?”

“Kind of,” Jace replied, “Well, she discovered me.”

She. Here they went again. Vraska took a deep breath. What sort of person was it going to be this time?

“Who are you talking about?”

Jace bounced a little in his seat from sheer excitement. The corner of the throw fell off the back of the sofa from the movement.

“Well I got this letter,” he began, “To my post box, like when people usually want my help for an investigation.”

Vraska nodded, everything checked out so far.

“And apart from the usual rubbish, I got a letter from someone who really liked my work,” Jace continued, “And she wanted to meet in the park, to discuss a missing person case. So I went there today like she wanted and-and-“ His voice had got progressively faster as he spoke, leaving him rapidly out of breath. He took a moment to simply breathe.

“And she was really nice and really really beautiful!”
The way he said beautiful indicated he wasn’t thinking of the flowers and sunsets kind of beautiful. More like what you could get up to after seeing the flowers and sunsets if you were that way inclined. Vraska had gone to the library and tried to find books on the subject, to better understand what Jace’s brain was currently doing. The library had been less than helpful, and the young adult fiction section even less so, but she’d grasped this much.

“Who was she?” Vraska asked. Nice and beautiful didn’t describe an entire person. Emmara was nice and beautiful and it definitely wasn’t her.

“Her name is Liliana Vess, and she’s a planeswalker like us!” Jace replied eagerly, “And she says she admires my work and she wanted to meet me!”

As soon as Vraska heard the word ‘planeswalker’ she immediately froze in alarm. You didn’t just happen across other planeswalkers. They were so rare that if your life collided with another’s, there had to be some meaning to it. Vraska couldn't believe it was simply for a date.

“Have you met her before?” she asked.

“No,” Jace replied, “She only sent me a letter yesterday.”

“Have you seen her about before?” Vraska pressed. This was so obviously suspicious, she was surprised Jace hadn't gone running a mile.

He merely shook his head.

“How do you know she’s an admirer of yours? Has her name come up in any of your other cases?”

“No, she hasn’t…” Jace looked like he was deflating slightly. Vraska didn’t like to burst his bubble, but this seemed so utterly shifty, it had to be a trap. There was no way an attractive female planeswalker would just turn up in Jace’s life out of the blue for no apparent reason.

“How old do you reckon she is?”

Jace took a moment.

“Err, maybe twenty-three? Twenty-four?”

That only sealed the deal for Vraska. Something was wrong here.

“Jace,” she said seriously, “I promise I’m not trying to make you sad, or ruin your excitement, but I don’t think this lady is all she says she is.”

He looked crestfallen.

“But she kissed me.” He touched the spot on his cheek. Vraska sighed.

“You are a very intelligent person, just think about this for a moment. With your head and not whatever other parts of your body are involved in this situation.”

Jace blushed but nodded.

Vraska took another deep breath.

“Why would an adult planeswalker, who no doubt has time to go to many worlds and meet many people, decide to specifically find and seduce an eighteen year old boy?”
Jace looked slightly comfortable, but Vraska continued:

“Firstly, that’s creepy. Secondly, why would she even know about you if she hasn’t been involved in any of your cases, your work, or anywhere you’ve been recently?”

“You think she’s set a trap?” Jace replied. See, he was clever enough to think this through, if he just stopped and looked at the situation.

“Yes, a very good trap for a hormonal teenager who has a thing for idolising beautiful and powerful women. You were pursuing Emmara whilst working for your old mentor. Perhaps you let something slip about her?”

“You think Liliana is working for Tezzeret?” Jace recoiled in his seat. He drew in on himself, curling up against the sofa cushions as if the walls had suddenly starting closing in about them. Vraska offered him her hand and he took it quickly.

“I’m sorry, but yes, I do,” she replied, “It’s too much of a coincidence. What case did she say she wanted you to look in on?”

“A missing person case,” Jace stated, “For a person who’d gone missing from their work place just over a year ago. She didn’t actually say anything about the case whilst we were in the par-” He cut himself off.

“I went missing from work just over a year ago,” he suddenly gasped, eyes wide.

Vraska nodded, her expression slightly grim. It appeared Tezzeret had finally tracked Jace down and he was exploiting his very human weakness to get him back.

“We—we could be overthinking it?” Jace suggested, “Coincidences do sometimes happen?”

In this case, Vraska doubted it very much.

“Did you try to look inside her mind?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, I did,” Jace said, as if suddenly remembering something, “I couldn’t get to it. There were hundreds of screaming voices in the way.”

He could have mentioned that earlier!

“And that didn’t put you off?” she said incredulously. Having hundreds of screaming voices in your head was not normal! Surely that would put you off having bed-based relations with a person!

“She did kiss me,” Jace mumbled, as if that somehow justified everything. Vraska couldn’t help but huff. This whole being horny for random people thing really needed to stop! It was turning an intelligent man into an idiot! Was there a way to stop this? Should she just leave the house for a little bit? One of the library books she’d read suggested there were multiple ways for men to ‘blow off some steam’ whilst they were alone. Did Jace need to do that?

“Are you meeting her again?” Vraska demanded, her frustration creeping into her voice a little.

“We were supposed to meet by the fountain tomorrow.”

“Right, we’re doing our own investigation,” concluded Vraska. She sat up a little straighter in her seat, fixing him with a look of determination.

“We’ll sneak up on her and try and decipher what she’s actually here for. If she’s harmless, fine,
you can go and meet her. If not, we’ll leave without her ever knowing we were there.”

It didn’t take much persuasion for Jace to agree to her plan. She had instilled fear in his heart once the topic of Tezzeret had been brought up. Vraska was fairly sure this was why he had agreed to her investigation. Jace wanted to know how scared he should be, if he had finally been discovered. Vraska was inclined to think yes. She was a naturally wary person, she would always admit that, but this was far too much to put to chance. In another book, she’d learned that people who experienced attraction often had a ‘type.’ Jace’s type was definitely ‘Beautiful People That Were Older Than Him and Had Incredible Magical Power’ This Liliana seemed to fit the bill perfectly, which made her the perfect trap if Tezzeret was using one of his many planeswalker workers to bring Jace back.

The park where they’d agreed to meet was the old Selesnya park they’d once both tried to sleep rough in. Last year, the Orzhov had claimed the land as their own, apparently due to some misfiled contract. They had promptly destroyed the elegant topiaries, replacing them instead with gleaming statues of various Orzhov figures complete with plaques explaining their importance. Needless to say the residents of Tin Street and the surrounding area had not taken this kindly. As they entered the park, Vraska saw the first statue had acquired a new paint moustache and a wicker road cone on its head. Someone had replant the nearby flowerbed with huge vines covered in glistening pink hybrid-fruit – somewhere between a pear and a peach. They had even placed a sign saying ‘FREE FOOD FOR THE POOR”, to stick an extra finger up at the new Orzhov landlords. It looked like someone had tried to hack the vines down but the blade of the axe was still buried in one particularly thick bit of vine.

The archon fountain took pride of place where a beautiful natural water feature had once been. Vraska remembered drinking from the beautiful little water feature, the Selesnyan magic keeping it free of pollution and other muck. The archon fountain was a much grander gaudier affair, visible over the top of its nearby hedgerows. It was one of these tall bushes that Vraska and Jace ensconced themselves in, waiting for the planeswalker’s arrival. Vraska coated them in a layer of shadows, Jace clearly had thrown up an illusion of their own. As long as they stayed quiet, she shouldn’t be able to spot them.

Liliana Vess only kept them waiting ten minutes. She arrived on the dot of ten, sitting on one of the park benches as if it were her personal throne. Vraska narrowed her eyes at her, seeing clearly now why Jace had been quite so overwhelmed. She was beautiful, in a very seductive fashion. She wore a silken dress that only covered the bare minimum. On first glance, Vraska would have wondered whether they actually fitted her. Whatever their design, they clearly fitted her purposes. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder how her breasts didn’t escape her clothing every time she took a step. Though if you had taken the time to get that many tattoos, you would probably want them on display.

If asked, Vraska would say she was older than twenty-four, maybe by a few years. However as she directed her magic to the woman’s shadows, the truth became abundantly obvious.

“Jace,” she hissed in alarm. His response came back telepathically so not to be caught.

“Yes?”

“She’s a necromancer.”

“What?”

Vraska had never felt so much necrotic energy coming off one person - and she’d killed liches. No one in the Undercity, not even Madame Zdenka or any of the devkarin aristocracy, felt this
necrotically powerful. That probably came from being a planeswalker. It was true that their magic was heightened by their ability to pass between worlds. However, being a necromancer meant two things that only deepened her concern. Firstly, necromancers didn’t age like normal people did. Liches tended to look young and beautiful forever, if not progressively more undead. She had certainly heard of other Golgari mages who used their necromancy to extend their lives. For all they knew, Liliana could be hundreds of years old. Considering her power and all the time she’d have to take to gain that… Yes, Vraska was almost certain that Liliana was older than she looked.

Secondly, Vraska had never met a kindly necromancer. Madame Zdenka didn’t count because as far as she was aware, Zdenka didn’t do any necromancy and didn’t seem aware that she’d even died. There was something about using the undeath of others for your own gain that made you inherently selfish. The Golgari, of course, used death all the time for reasons that benefitted all of Ravnica. Most of Ravnica’s food was grown in corpse-filled compost. Undeath, however, was a different matter. Life and death were a natural cycle, and if you wanted to break that cycle it was usually for the gain of one than many. Regardless, this woman was not Golgari. If she was disturbing the graves of people’s loved ones, she was likely doing it for her own benefit.

“That’s really bad isn’t it?”

She’d momentarily forgotten that she’d let him into his thoughts. Jace could talk telepathically without sharing his stream of consciousness, but she didn’t have that aptitude. She had no telepathic skill of her own and could only hold these silent discussions when he was in her mind.

“Yes, it’s really bad. Trust me Jace, you don’t want to get involved with a necromancer. Especially one who might be hundreds of years old.”

“She looks really good for hundreds of years old.”

“Which makes her only more dangerous. She’s more powerful than any lich I’ve met, and I have seen a lot of liches in the Undercity. I am not trying to sell you short, I promise. But there’s no way a horrendously powerful necromancer would turn up on Ravnica, specifically to seduce you, and have good intentions about it. If she really wanted a romantic partner, she’d probably have one by now.”

“You’re really worried about this aren’t you?”

He didn’t need a response to understand her concern. There would surely be a partner for Jace out there, and they would be as beautiful and powerful as all his dreams combined. However, a very old and powerful necromancer didn’t show up in your life by chance, and the fact she was perfect for seducing Jace specifically set off every alarm bell Vraska had. If he could just find someone his own age, who didn’t have the potential of working for a shadowy cabal of planeswalkers, that would be much better. Also, preferably someone without hundreds of screaming voices in their head!

“I’m glad you think I can find someone,” came Jace’s thoughts, “But, you do have a point. This really was too good to be true.”

He had the entire multiverse to find someone, he’d get there eventually.

They snuck out of the gardens as quietly as they’d come, stopping by their favourite coffee shop on the way back. If Liliana had thoughts about being stood up at her meeting, they did not find out that day. For the few next weeks, they remained on high alert, looking out for a glimpse of purple silk or perhaps a zombie waiting in a dark alley. Yet, Liliana seemed to have taken full offence and simply vanished, possibly from Ravnica itself. Vraska liked it best that way. She now had two
planeswalkers on her list of people to protect Jace from, and it was considerably easier if neither of them were on this plane.

Jace seemed to calm down over time. Not in levels of general excitement, but in levels of being attracted to random dangerous strangers. Vraska found a Boros cape in their laundry after one particularly icy night. On another occasion, she found a pair of boxer shorts that were certainly too big to fit Jace. Deciding that this wasn’t her business, she let Jace wash and return them. As long as he was safe, she didn’t care what he got up to in his spare time. According to the books, adolescence was a time where you worked out what you liked to do with your body. If Jace was accomplishing that, good for him. She was more concerned as to why she didn’t seem to be going through the same steps as well.

It was easier not to think about that when she had work to do. The autumn months were always the busiest when it came to Ochran missions. A lot of things changed in autumn guild-wise. She’d discovered over the years that multiple guilds shuffled up their leadership - their boards, committees and councils, around this time. It was also the beginning of the cultural year for many hobbyists. These factors led to more rivalries that simply had to be solved by murder. Autumn was the most profitable season of all. It therefore made sense that, just shy of their twentieth birthday, Vraska received her biggest mission yet.

Someone wanted an entire Azorius family dead. They had put a contract out on a total of nine people all for one significant price. As far as Vraska could tell, the main point of contention was an Azorius senator who was attempting to pass a controversial decree enabling senators to look into their employees personal records. This was, of course, an incredible invasion of privacy, but Vraska didn’t see why this meant a whole family had to die. Her targets were the senator, her husband, their three adult children, in addition to the senator’s brother and sister-in-law and their two adult children. That was a lot of death for a single non-existent decree, so they were clearly keeping some sort of secret. Whatever the case, Vraska did not take much persuading to rid the world of a few more Azorius. The fewer senators believing they could control other people’s lives the better. Besides, it had been a while since she’d had a real challenge. She was going to have make these Azorius disappear in a way so not to alert their relatives and send them deep into hiding. Her first targets of choice were therefore the family members most distance from their relations, so news didn’t spread fast.

With nine people, spread across the Tenth District, she had to be quick and subtle. One of the senator’s children had moved out into the greener edges of the Tenth District. Her files listened his occupation as ‘Guild Artist’ leading her to wonder what the Azorius defined as art. Art was about creativity and self-expression, two things that the Azorius rigorously stamped out with their obsession with legislation. The mystery was solved as soon as she entered the grounds of his opulent lakeside home. The Azorius liked statues. Statues of historical figures, statues of sphinxes, and statues of particularly heroic looking soldiers astride their griffin mounts, all marble and all rather imposing. The walls of the house were pasted with pictures so the artist could create the most accurate depictions possible. Vraska passed through a room simply filled with marble blocks, each and everyone bearing a parchment label displaying their seal of quality, origin, and most importantly it seemed, their approval to be used in various projects.

Targets who already owned a large number of statues were very easy to make disappear. She found the artist, dressed in only his underpants, reclining in front of a large portrait of himself whilst reading a book. It was certainly an undignified pose to be your final resting state, but Vraska found the idea quite amusing. The man was petrified before he even had a chance to react. His eyes had widened a little, but he didn’t even have time to drop his book before he realised he had company. The novel was unfortunately lost to the calcification process, but on closer inspection it didn’t look like she’d missed out. More interesting was the selection of items in the side-table beside him. As
Vraska pushed the chaise longue to the edge of the room, where the artist now reclined among his other statues, she noticed the small black table. Returning to it, she found a leather card case perched underneath a cracked stained-glass lamp. On first glance, she thought it might be a wallet. However, as she undid the small buckle that kept it closed, she revealed a selection of solid wooden keycards, each consisting of two thin wooden panels, sandwiching a sliver of metal. Every card was engraved with the Azorius symbol and an individual code consisting of letters and numbers, fifteen digits long. They certainly looked like a hotel keycard, or a security pass. Unless this man owned an entire hotel, he certainly had a lot of keys. So what were these for and why were there so many?

On impulse, she decided to take the card wallet with her. These had to be good for something. And, if she couldn’t work it out herself, well, she knew a private investigator that would be very eager to help out.
Chapter Summary

Tension between guilds has reached an all time high. In the run up to their most creative of festivals, the Izzet have been causing trouble for the population of the Tenth District. Emmara joins Vraska in their flat and they think about it means to be a guild member.

Chapter Notes

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“Is Jace into archaeology now?”

Vraska took a moment to assess the state of their living room. In her own defence, she had hidden all the bits of rock that had been there this morning. There were rocks under their beds, rocks in their kitchen cabinets, rocks in their wardrobe, rocks under the sofa. Yet no, more had managed to find their way into their flat during the few hours she’d spent working this afternoon. She sighed deeply, clenching one hand in the skirts of her new Zdenka-made dress.

“He’s become somewhat obsessed with this pattern,” she informed Emmara, gesturing at the closest pile of rubble. Plain to see under the light of their ceiling lamp, was an intricate set of carvings, largely consisting of interlocking triangles. Every rock she’d had the pleasure of tidying away bore the same pattern. According to Jace, these rocks had come from all over the Tenth District, meaning this was a mystery he absolutely must solve. His ‘lab’ in the corner of the living room had grown so much over the years, they had decided to put a curtain round it so they could hide it when they had guests. It now took up a solid third of the living room, and Vraska wasn’t entirely sure how he managed to squeeze himself in there through all the stonework he’d collected. Vraska wasn’t sure how much she was allowed to judge. She had amassed a rather peculiar collection of her own. Ever since she’d been tasked with killing an entire Azorius family, she’d come into possession of a large collection of wooden cards. Each family member, of which there were nine in total, had possessed an identical leather wallet full of coded Azorius-emblazoned key cards. She had been assisting Jace in his stone research, largely in the Undercity, in exchange for him helping her out with identifying what the wooden cards were for.

Neither stonework nor keycards however, were remotely useful when they had a guest. Emmara was the only one who visited, but Vraska was house-proud enough to want their home to be in a decent state when she arrived. Dinner with Emmara wasn’t necessarily classy. They didn’t own a dining table, and Emmara usually came over because she needed a break from the ceremony of her conclave. It turns out, after a certain amount of ceremonial banquets and formal welcoming dinners, all you really wanted to do was put your feet up, have a take-away, and watch the Steam Festival fireworks from a distance. Vraska and Jace’s flat was perfect for that and they appreciated her company. Emmara was here a little earlier than intended, Jace wasn’t even home yet, but
Vraska was happy to have her here. Well, she’d be happier if the flat wasn’t covered in rocks. She’d done her best to kick some under the sofa, and put some in the fridge, as she went to make them both tea.

“I don’t mind,” Emmara commented, as she noticed what Vraska was doing, “It’s nice that he’s got a new project.”

“He’s been on this for months now,” Vraska replied, returning with two mugs of tea. They sat on the sofa, surveying what had been a functional new coffee table. It now bore stone, stone and more stone.

“I don’t mind, just… I did clean up this morning.”

Emmara laughed a little before they both lapsed into contemplative silence. Vraska could faintly hear the preparations for the Steam Festival going on in Tin Street. The Izzet celebration was something of a inventors show, involving a parade that included floats, music and plenty of fireworks. Last year, someone had made a mechanical replica of Niv Mizzet, complete with fire-breathing, and paraded it all over the Tenth District, causing massive property damage. Vraska was thankful they lived just far enough from Tin Street not to be on the parade’s main route. They were high up enough to see the fireworks from their windows, or entrance-landing, if they were feeling brave enough.

“Jace hasn’t considered joining the Izzet, has he?” asked Emmara, evidently listening to the clash of metal floats being assembled too.

“He worked in an Izzet lab for a little bit, but I don’t think so,” Vraska responded, “He hasn’t shown leanings towards any particular guilds.”

Emmara let out a thoughtful ‘hmm.’

“I was thinking of inviting him into the Selesnya,” she stated, “Things are getting troublesome and we could do with some fresh minds. I’d invite you of course, but being Golgari comes with your job I suppose.”

Vraska nodded. In all honesty, the Selesnya was one of least likely guilds that Jace would want to be part of. He enjoyed artifice and experimentation, working on an individual basis, rather than in a group or team. These didn’t really tie in very well with Selesnyan’s love of nature and communal everything.

“He’d probably want to help you, but I don’t think he’d join up,” she replied, “I’m fairly sure he wants to remain guildless. It keeps biases out of his research.”

Emmara made another thinking noise but Vraska had already moved on to the other fact she’d picked up on.

“What’s been causing enough trouble to bring in outsiders?” she asked.

“The Izzet mostly,” Emmara sighed, “We keep getting emissaries from Niv Mizzet claiming we’re impeding the path of progress by maintaining Ravnica’s natural spaces. We refuse to let them run their machines through our sacred places and it’s making them mad. It wouldn’t be a problem, if they weren’t already ignoring our refusals and incurring the wrath of our guards.”

Ah. Vraska imagined a lot of Izzet mages had found themselves filled with arrows. Emmara’s explanation did remind her of something though.
“I’ve heard they’re encroaching on the Undercity too,” she commented, “It was all the talk of the markets. Apparently, a large group of Izzet researchers came into Golgari territory for one of their experiments. When asked to leave, they instead caused a large explosion, killing every Golgari present and the surrounding wildlife.”

“They have no respect for nature.” It was the first time Vraska had heard something akin to bitterness in Emmara’s tone.

“And therefore no respect for our guilds. It has been said that every side has been mobilising for battle ever since the Guildpact was broken. You only have to keep up with the news to see how much things have accelerated of late. Everyone who has an army is mobilising, even the Selesnya, and everyone who needs one is amassing followers at an alarming rate.”

Vraska had noticed she’d been getting a lot more work recently, even though it wasn’t autumn.

“You think it’ll come to war?” she asked.

“I hope not,” said Emmara, “I will do everything in my power to prevent that. But I cannot control the actions of the other guilds.”

That was worrying. Her guild membership was purely coincidental. Her entire approach to the Golgari was very mixed. There was nothing but resentment in her heart for their leadership and the devkarin. She often thought, being the only gorgon with the Severance, that if anyone was going to finish Jarad, it was going to have to be her. Whilst she rather liked the sound of that, there was no way she would be able to pull it off. It was hard to hide in the shadows when everyone else could see in the dark too. Also, who knew what extra special magical powers the Guildmaster might have? She wasn’t going to get too cocky about her powers.

Whilst she hated the aristocracy, she desperately wished she could do something to help out the Golgari’s lower castes. There were undoubtedly hundreds of communities out there, just like Dredgefold Docks, full of people with nowhere else to go. There were craftspeople like Madame Zdenka, pushed out of their trades, their homes, their livelihoods because they didn’t meet the bigoted standards enforced by their ‘betters’. How many thousands would never receive an education? How many millions would never see the fruits of their labour? The topsiders said the Golgari were where the worst in society went to die. But what happened when you were the worst of the worst? Vraska gave a little shiver, her hair curling in on itself. It was frustrating to be so individually powerful but barely able to change the lives of others. Being an adult hadn’t even changed that.

“Are you alright?” asked Emmara, noticing her reaction.

“I’m fine,” Vraska replied, “Just thinking about guild things.”

“Me too,” said Emmara, “I’m worried the Izzet will use this festival to further whatever their agenda is. Festival-damage is a good way to excuse wanton destruction.”

She had a good point.

“I guess we can keep an eye out when we watch the fireworks later,” said Vraska, “Then we’ll at least see it when it happens. We can be witnesses.”

Emmara turned to her, looking somewhat surprised.

“You have a strong sense of justice for a…” She bit her lip.

Emmara shook her head.

“No, I was going to say ‘assassin’.”

Vraska supposed that could be considered odd. Someone who killed for money thinking about justice. Well it might seem unusual to someone who’d never tried the profession herself, but everyone wanted to use their skills to benefit society. When your sole skill was killing people, well, justice was the only way to go about that. On the other hand, she probably didn’t want Emmara to find out she killed outside of work.

“It’s complicated,” she concluded, “I’m very selective with my targets.”

They lapsed into silence again. There was a loud banging from somewhere and the creak of a crane, just visible through the window. An airship passed by trailing streamers in Izzet reds and blues. It was weird to think that something as relatively-innocent as a festival could lead to full out war. Vraska couldn’t help but share in Emmara’s anxiety. The markets of the Undercity were full of stories of Izzet atrocities, of dead loved ones and ruined homes. Now she knew they were also fighting with the Selesnya, this festival no longer seemed quite so exciting. What would she do if there was a full-on war in the Tenth District? Would she fight? Or would she try and drag Jace down to safety in the depths of the Undercity?

The lift up to their apartment made its familiar screech, followed by the jangling of keys in their lock. Both occupants of the sofa turned as Jace made his way into the apartment, sweeping back his hood before taking in the scene.

“Oh,” he said, at the realisation they were both present.

“Hi. Emmara, you’re here early.”

“I was done at the conclave earlier than predicted,” she responded, “I was just admiring your rock collection.”

“It’s my latest project!” he exclaimed, hastening to join them. He sat on one of the largest piles of rock, causing a small cascade of sand to pour over the carpet.

“Vraska and I are studying patterns in old stonework! I’ve found the same pattern all over the Tenth District. The same geometric carvings with repetitive combinations, in buildings constructed by every guild! Did you know all the stone in this area came from the same quarry?”

“I didn’t,” she replied, sounding a little nonplussed at his new-found passion for masonry.

Vraska leaned back on the sofa and smiled as Jace gave Emmara his full speech on stonework. She enjoyed it when Jace found something to be passionate about. His excitement was contagious and she loved to listen to him talk about his latest fixation. Even if he ruined their carpet with rocks. Mysterious engravings were a lot more interesting than some of his previous obsessions with theoretical magic, or science, or whatever the Izzet wanted to call it. She’d done her best to keep up but she didn’t really see the point in theorising about what wasn’t really there.

“Jace, I have something for you,” Emmara said, pulling a drawstring pouch from one of her long sleeves. She opened it to reveal a wooden symbol, much like the one Vraska had used to call for her aid many years ago, but this one had been fastened into a broach. Once again, it took the shape of a leaf, carved in minute detail so every vein was visible on its surface.
“Another communication piece?” he asked, turning it over in his hands.

“A gift, from my Guildmaster,” Emmara elaborated, “Trostani is looking for keen minds to assist the conclave in these troubled times.”

Jace shifted on his wobbly pile or rocks. He looked a little uneasy, grateful, but definitely rather awkward.

“I’m not really one for politics,” he replied, clipping the broach onto his robes nevertheless, “But I’m thankful. This is a generous gift.”

“It might be time to start looking into it,” Emmara continued, “Politics, that is. Trouble is coming. The guilds are on the rise again. The Guildpact held them together but that power dissolved long ago. Now they are testing how far they can reach, how much power they can gather.”

“How much they can push their place in society,” Jace concluded. Emmara nodded.

Vraska merely sat and watched. This was an odd way to recruit Jace into the Selesnya, nevertheless she didn’t think it would work.

“It’s already begun,” Emmara stated, “Vraska and I were talking about it before you arrived. The guilds are already jostling for power.”

“The Rakdos?” Jace asked. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder why he’d chosen that guild. Yes, they had an appetite for bloodshed but she hadn’t heard anything especially controversial coming from them recently.

“No, the Izzet,” Vraska filled in, “They’re taking over Selesnya and Golgari territory.”

Jace looked between them, faintly alarmed.

“Can’t the Azorius stop them?” Jace suggested. Vraska gave a little contemptuous huff and Emmara merely shook her head.

“To Niv Mizzet, their decrees are nothing but scrap paper, with no Guildpact reinforcing their authority. The dragon refuses to listen to Trostani either.”

Jace frowned a little.

“Well, I can try to help you. But, as I said, I haven’t gone into politics at all and…I’m not sure what I, or we, can do.” He glanced up at Vraska as he spoke.

“You could join the Selesnya?” Emmara suggested. She gave him a smile that would have once melted him like butter. Thankfully, he was long over his teenage crush by now. He didn’t even give the question that much thought, judging by the speed of his answer.

“I’m sorry, I can’t join the Selesnya. I don’t think our lifestyles would… our ethics are very different.” He sighed.

“I’ll help however I can, but I don’t think I’ll join a guild anytime soon.”

Emmara’s smile became noticeably less bright. There was a moment of anxious silence, in which neither Jace nor Emmara looked at each other, both now very interested in the furniture. Vraska took it upon herself to break the tension.

“Did you see much of the Steam Festival preparations on your way back?” she asked Jace. His
whole demeanour immediately brightened.

“Yes I did. I think this year’s theme is airships! There’s huge great sky-boats all the way up the Transguild Promenade.”

“That should be great to watch,” Vraska said, trying to inject some cheer back into the room, “Though I wonder how they’re going to negotiate the ships and the fireworks?”

Knowing the Izzet, the answer was going to be ‘not at all’. The three of them chatted about festivals past and the differences they’d observed between guilds. Emmara had travelled as far as other districts, and she described in earnest how different the celebrations were there. The way she described the other parts of the plane sounded like she’d been vis-ting another world. This led Vraska to wonder - what festivals did other worlds celebrate? There had to be some interesting ones out there.

As afternoon faded into evening, Jace was put on take-out fetching duty as he was the only human amongst the three of them. Vraska had tried to collect from their favourite place before and been turned away. Emmara, dressed in her Selesnyan regalia, would draw far too much attention. So it made sense for Jace to do the honours. In his absence, Vraska tried to shunt some rocks underneath the curtain that surrounded his lab, maintaining conversation all the while. Emmara had become a little less animated since Jace’s refusal, but the longer they talked about subjects other than guilds, she seemed to get over her disappointment. By the time Jace returned, Vraska had gathered plates, cutlery and lap trays. She often considered a dining table but, especially with Jace’s ever-growing lab, they simply had no place to put one. She cleaned off the coffee table the best she could as Jace promptly covered it in bags, packets and boxes of delicious smelling food. They ate until they could stomach no more, and still had plenty of leftovers for lunch tomorrow.

“I think the fireworks are starting,” Jace called from the kitchen as he packed the remnants of their meal away into the fridge.

“Or something might have just exploded.”

They hastened out onto balcony-come-platform that joined their flat to the elevator. Leaning up against the railing, Vraska could indeed see colourful sparks in the distance. There was a raucous amount of noise coming from the direction of Tin Street. The party must have already begun down below. There was much whooping, singing and the occasional fizzling of smaller pyrotechnics. Jace climbed up onto the railing beside her and perched on the top. Emmara stood, as dignified as ever, on his other side.

They watched on as a procession of glittering airships passed overhead, blasting fireworks at each other conducting mock battle in the sky. The nearby crowds whooped and cheered at every blast, crying out names – Blast-Wardens, Weird-Keepers, Nivix-Old Guard. Were those teams? Departments? Labs? Vraska didn’t know but the spectacle was certainly something. The sky was alight with every colour under the sun, Jace eagerly pointing out which metals produced which colour as they burst forth into the night. The largest airship of all, painted up red with great wooden wings strapped to the deck, joined the ships careening about the sky. This one issued great gouts of flame, setting alight one of the smaller vessels. Dragon-fire, Vraska thought to herself, as she watched the fiery wreckage of an airship descend somewhere near the Rubblebelt. The Izzet were honouring their Guildmaster. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what all the other guilds thought of this pageantry. She’d witnessed various Golgari festivals, but never been close enough to the guildhall to see any sort of monument to Guildmaster Jarad. Not that the lich deserved one, but the devkarin would beg to differ.

The fire caught the attention of what looked like a patrol of Azorius skyguard. Jace was swift to
point out the procession of griffin-mounted guards who were flying like dark spots against the hazy smoke-filled sky. They watched as the guards hovered round the fire, before it was extinguished in a great cloud of grey smoke. However they weren’t alone for very long. Tiny flying specks started to surround the griffin-riders, swarming them like many dark-backed beetles.

“Imps,” Emmara commented, “And devils. The sky is busy tonight.”

The Izzet ships swooped gleefully over the Tenth District, utterly ignorant to the Rakdos versus Azorius conflict they had left in their wake. Vraska sighted a blaze of fire quite separate from the celebrations and thought perhaps an angel had joined in the fray to assist the outnumbered Azorius. She’d never seen the sky quite so crowded.

They watched long after the chaos had died down, all fires extinguished and imps thoroughly incinerated. Emmara took her leave in the early hours of the morning, taking the lift back down with a weary but graceful wave. Jace and Vraska went indoors, locking the door up behind them, glad that the trouble had stayed far away from their doorstep.

“I’ve-” Jace cut himself off with a large yawn. He scrubbed at his eyes and tried again.

“I’ve got something to show you,” he said, “Couldn’t really do it with Emmara here. She wouldn’t approve.”

Intrigued, Vraska sat down on her bed, retrieving her night gown from under the pillow.

“What is it?” she asked, catching his yawn and stifling it behind one hand.

Jace rummaged about in his robes and pulled out a leather card case, one of the many Vraska had brought home from her big Azorius mission.

“One of my contacts put me in touch with an old cartographer on Ivy Lane. The man makes maps by trade, now guildless, but he’s ex-Azorius. Worked as maintenance in New Prahv.”

Vraska put down her nightgown. She could see where this was going. Had he done it? Had he finally found the purpose of her keycards?

“Turns out he’s got a good stash of old maps, and architectural plans, especially for Azorius properties. He took one look at these and his memories went haywire.”

Jace shook the keycards and they rattled a little in his hands. He sat down on his own bed, facing her.

“These are access passes for New Prahv. Every single door in the entirety of New Prahv has a code, and those codes-“

He flipped open the leather wallet. Vraska immediately recognised Jace’s neat handwriting between the Azorius crest and the code. He had written “Tradesman Entrance”.

“Are these fifteen-digit codes here,” Jace continued, “I got to look over a set of floorplans, and I’ve labelled all of these up. Your targets had access all over the Lyev Column, especially, the legislation archives. You can cut a clean route straight into their records and back again without tripping a single door.”

Vraska sat bolt upright as he tried to hand the wallet back. She had access to the archives of New Prahv?
“I’ve been told these will be worth millions on the black market,” Jace informed her.

She didn’t respond, silently taking the pass back as her head was filled with sudden possibilities. Lyev was the governmental column of New Prahv. It was where new laws were designed and legislated. Where governmental orders would be written, approved and signed off, ready to be inflicted on the hapless citizens of Ravnica. Their archives would be full of old legislation. Who had made them, who had approved them, the Azorius probably kept a copy of everything in triplicate! That was so much information just ready for the taking, all kept conveniently in a single location!

“Err, Vraska?” Jace waved at her. She suddenly remembered to blink.

“Are you ok?” he asked. She hastily took her bearings.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she responded, “Sorry…blanked out a little there. How many identical sets of cards do we have?”

“All of them share the same fifteen initial cards,” Jace replied, still eying her as if she was acting strangely, “However three wallets have an addition twelve that the others don’t.”

“Right.” Vraska’s heart was still racing at the possibilities. She’d be able to find out everything! From the identity of the people who suggested the Golgari raids, to the name of the guard who had beat her against the concrete floor!

“If I keep a copy, and you keep a copy, of the larger wallets, we can sell the rest,” she concluded, “You do want a copy right?”

Jace pulled a face as if trying to put forth a display of reluctance and failing miserably.

“Yeah, I do. Who knows what we could find in those records.”

She did and she could barely wait. She would assemble a list, names, roles, locations and hunt down every single individual responsible for the torment in her past. Finally, finally she had her route to revenge! They would suffer as she had suffered. They would cry as she had cried. It was finally time! Fourteen years after she’d escaped that detention camp, justice would be served!

“Vraska?” Jace said, a little tentative now, “Why are your eyes glowing? Also, your hair is going a bit, err, crazy?”

Torn back to the here and now, she calmed her hair which had indeed begun to writhe about her shoulders. She shifted it so it trailed down her back, swept aside in a more composed state. As for her eyes, she hadn’t even felt the power surge, but there it was.

“Apologies, I just got excited. I can make good use of these cards.” She smiled at him in the dim lighting of their room, punctuated by the occasional flash of a belated firework.

“Thank you Jace. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

He looked a little confused but smiled back just as widely.

“Anything,” he replied, “I’m guessing this isn’t Ochran business?”

She shook her head, her smile twisting into a smirk.

“Oh, no. It’s very personal.”
Spies

Chapter Summary

Vraska discovers more than she bargained for in the archives of New Prahv. Jace meanwhile finds himself in deep trouble.

Chapter Notes

Want a version of War of the Spark where Jace gives Vraska back her memory? Don't want to wait until we get to War of the Spark in this story?

Why not try "The Reunion" written by yours truly? Find it through my AO3 profile or on my tumblr!

New Prahv was no less intimidating in the dead of night. It remained, constantly lit, a pillar of unyielding order against Ravnica’s skyline. For all its illuminated glory, it still managed to have enough shady back alleys to satisfy the needs of those the Azorius abhorred. These side passages were of course regularly patrolled, but the Azorius had such a rigid schedule, it was easily exploited. Vraska kept to the shadows as she stared upwards at the towers looming overhead. Their glow blotted out the stars, as if the Azorius could even keep the night sky in check. The occasional griffin passed through the light bouncing off the gleaming marble. The Azorius triangles stood stark on every surface, glittering faintly above the constant searchlights. It was ugly in the most geometric fashion. For all the time and money that must have done into these sheer marble walls, they hadn’t even had the creativity to make it look good. Vraska waited for a pair of heavily armoured guards to pass her position before slipping onto the next path, taking her straight to the Tradesmen’s Entrance.

Her heart gave a little shudder as she pulled out her set of keycards. If this didn’t work, well, she’d have got her hopes up so high for no reason. She hadn’t been able to stop thinking about this. It had demanded all her attention ever since Jace had discovered what the cards were for. She was going to leave it at least a week, however she had been unable to last that long. Three nights after the Steam Festival, she armed herself to the teeth, threw on a cloak, and left whilst Jace was getting ready for bed. Now she stood before a low set of double doors, wide enough to fit a cart but with little headroom. There was indeed a fifteen digit code engraved into the woodwork. With one slightly shaky hand, she pressed the appropriate card to the Azorius sigil on the door frame.

It instantly lit up blue, causing her to release a breath she hadn’t even realised she was holding.

The doors opened silently on their hinges. The passage beyond was bare stone, lined with uniform doorways. Vraska slipped inside, darting to the shadows, drawing them about her like a cloak. The corridor was eerily quiet. Dirt tracks on the ground indicated the progress of wagons but no fresh footprints disturbed their trails. Considering the sheer amount of guards that they had patrolling outside, you would expect there to be some in here too. But no, this corridor was blank and bare, not even a faintly-glowing Azorius emblem to mark the way. Vraska progressed up the
passageway on silent feet. She hadn’t seen a map, Jace hadn’t been allowed to take it out of the cartographer’s store, but according to him her keys marked a route all the way to the archives and back. They were even in order of which door she had to open next. Her task was simply finding which door matched the codes in her stolen pass case. She had the distinct impression that this would be a near-impossible task if she couldn’t see in the dark.

Bringing the shadows with her, she scanned the ceiling for wards, sensory runes, anything that would alert someone to her presence. An unlit lamp, bolted to the ceiling caught her attention. A tiny speck of blue at its centre led her to believe that it was more than simply a light source. However, it did absolutely nothing as she passed by. Broken? Or perhaps it needed light to trigger.

Her first door was at the very end of the corridor. It stood apart from the rest, not only in its location, but by its slightly fancier design. It had a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin’s head and another tell-tale Azorius symbol. She pushed the next card against the emblem and the door unlocked. It was almost too easy. She’d had more trouble breaking into people’s houses. The ease in which she was passing through a Guildhall was unnerving her immensely. This should be more difficult. This was the Azorius, the government! Even if she had a set of keys, this was suspiciously simple. Was she not supposed to be able to get past the guards outside?

Out of the tradesmen’s area, she found the marble grandeur she’d been expecting of New Prahv. Here, lamps dotted the marble walls in small alcoves, casting half circles of light over the carpeted floor. She could hear the methodical thump of marching feet – guard on patrol, though very far away. Her next key was one marked “Ground Floor Stairwell” followed by another stating “Fifteen Floor Stairwell”. The next direction was certainly upwards, she just needed to find the stairs. She kept to an alcove as she listened to the trudge of armoured footfalls. Three people, she thought, and they were getting ever more distant. She kept close to the walls, keeping out of the semicircles of lamp light. There was only so much she could accomplish with shadow here, but she didn’t trust those lamps not to sense her presence.

The Lyev column was extremely methodical. Every door was numbered and sign-posted with identical silver plaques so no one would ever doubt where they were. The carpets were emblazoned with coloured lines, like routes on a map, directing occupants to various rooms and the columns many facilities. This made navigation extremely easy. Briefly, Vraska encountered the guards. She slipped behind a statue of a tall Azorius senator with a handlebar moustache as she heard the footfalls suddenly get louder. She was correct in thinking there was a trio on patrol. Two heavily armoured guards and one law mage paced past her position, completely ignorant to their danger. She waited until they were out of earshot before progressing towards the staircase. The door opened on thankfully silent hinges. Ignoring the half a dozen elevators, she instead opted for the stairs. The lifts would no doubt be filled with alarms.

Fifteen flights of stairs were a lot. Vraska couldn’t imagine the Azorius senators huffing and puffing up and down so many floors. That explained why they needed so many lifts. She took a short break in the shadows of a set of folding tables someone had left in the stairwell. Someone else had slapped a notice onto the front-most table declaring this to be in violation of workplace health and safety laws and that the tables should be removed immediately. Atop of this, another note had been added stating this to be the wrong sort of health and safety form and to acquire the correct paperwork at the Health and Safety Board Reception on the twenty-eight floor. Beside the first two notes was a circular sticker proclaiming this to be the jurisdiction of the Supplies and Maintenance Board, and to instead visit them on the forty-eight floor. Gods, being in this guild must be dire. They couldn’t just move the damn tables? Well, she couldn’t really complain, she needed to catch her breath before continuing through this austere hellhole.

The fifteenth floor looked exactly like the ground floor, but with a slightly different shade of blue
in the carpet. The doors had brass nameplates rather than silver, perhaps denoting a higher level of importance. Vraska passed by a large trolley full of books positioned outside a set of glass panelled double doors. A cursory glance showed her these were educational text books aimed at children. The sight disgusted her perhaps more than it ought to. Every guild started at childhood, but still, did these children grow up believing they were superior to every other guild? Or did the self-importance come later?

She was forced to use several keys in quick succession, passing through metal-lined doors and skirting underneath the radius of several swivelling censors. A large brass plaque announced that she had found the “Great Legislative Archive” dating this collection from thirty years ago until the present. If they needed an entire archive just for the last thirty years, Vraska could barely imagine how much of this column was taken up with millennia of paperwork.

Vraska had been in many a library. She’d spent whole afternoons wandering the shelves in Dimir-run public collections. Her closest was only a short walk from home, boasting the largest array books this side of the Sixth Precinct. Yet even that could fit in this archive, building, parking spaces and all. You could house a small community in this room alone! She could picture hammocks hanging from the tall bookcases which extended straight from floor to ceiling. There were enough chairs and tables to outfit a precinct’s worth of dining rooms, and a dozen of the surrounding cafes! Even the walkways between shelves were three times the size of her kitchen. The sheer scale demanded by thirty years of laws left her feeling tiny in comparison. Gods, how was she ever going to find anything in this!

No. This was the Azorius. Of course, they were going to have a system. However, that didn’t mean she was going to be able to follow it straight away. If an Azorius archive was going to have order, they were going to have some sort of key or guide if they didn’t want their scholars getting lost in here. So, where would they put it?

The library was utterly silent as she picked her way through the widest most-central aisle. Pitch dark, the amount of space was unnerving. She’d navigated many a home in the dead of night. Even the narrow alleys of the Undercity didn’t unsettle her quite so much. She knew what to expect in the Undercity. There was comfort in walls and alcoves, plenty of shadows to use and concealed spots to dive into. The shelves were somewhat similar, but they were so far apart it felt like she was walking down a small street, not a row of bookshelves. Keeping close to the furniture, she advanced one hesitant step at a time. Her heart was racing in a way it hadn’t in a long time. She’d been killing for years! Why was this place getting to her so badly? Had she built her expectations too high? Had she been too excited for this opportunity that it was now wreaking havoc on her nerves? No! This was just a library. She had got in here undetected and she would get out undetected. She just had to find what she needed first.

As she reached what she believed to be the room’s centre, she heard footsteps coming from ahead. Hastily stepping back between a line of shelves, she drew the shadows close and watched as a single figure emerged, meeting the centre from the opposite direction. The human bore a shuttered lamp in one hand, lifting it high above her head to take in her surroundings. The position of her arm lifted her cloak just high enough for Vraska to get a glimpse of the tunic and armour underneath. Vraska’s heart leapt a little. This woman was as much of an intruder as she was. She was not Azorius. Beneath her dark cloak were the unmistakable hues of red and white, her armour had a coppery sheen to it. She was Boros. Now this was interesting. Did she know how to navigate this archive? Vraska decided to follow her.

The stranger circled the central table before seemingly finding nothing to assist in her search. She visibly sighed before choosing to go right down a aisle that Vraska had yet to venture down. She followed, swiftly and silently, the Boros woman’s footsteps more than enough to cover her own
movement. They snuck down the left hand side, arriving at a circular desk sat in front of yet another entrance to the archive. Here the Boros picked up a heavy tome off what Vraska could only assume was an archivist’s work station. Flipping it open, she made far too much noise, certainly more Vraska was comfortable with. However, it seemed she had finally found something useful. She traced a page with a spare hand before setting off into the shelves. Waiting for her footprints to disappear out of earshot, Vraska darted over to the desk.

“I knew it.”

Vraska drew her sword, charging up a spell as the Boros woman emerged from the shadows, clearly not as far as her footfalls would indicate. She too had a blade drawn, her short sword gleaming fire-like in the light of her lantern. With a toss of her head, the woman’s hood fell off, revealing a heavily scarred face, framed by neat short brown hair.

“I admit, I wasn’t expecting a Golgari,” she commented, her voice barely above a whisper.

Vraska wasn’t sure why she hadn’t petrified her yet. But the woman hadn’t actually attempted to hurt her yet. She seemed curious, and even a little amused.

“I wasn’t expecting a Boros,” Vraska replied, “What is a soldier of justice doing skulking around another guild’s library?”

The woman smiled, the action looked slightly painful as it tugged on a thick white scar that roped across her upper lip, reaching up to the outer corner of her right eye.

“I could ask you the same,” she said, “What is such a gorgeous resident of the Undercity doing snooping around up here?”

Gorgeous? Was that some kind of joke? She didn’t understand and so decided to ignore it.

“We don’t all live in the Undercity,” she commented, her voice barely above a hiss, “Wouldn’t you expect a Golgari to break the law? A Boros, on the other hand.”

The woman chuckled and sheathed her sword. Vraska did not follow suit, still utterly confused by this sudden turn of events.

“I don’t judge,” the stranger shrugged, “I just do right by my own principles. You’re here for the same reason I am. You need something in these archives the Azorius don’t want to admit to. A crime perhaps, that the Azorius don’t want to confess. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

So she was here for reasons of justice? This had all gone very weird. Vraska hadn’t prepared to interact with a like-minded individual in the middle of her information heist.

“What are you looking for?” asked the stranger, “This isn’t my first time in here.”

Did she trust her? The fact she was Boros meant that Vraska would have instantly gone ‘no’ under any other circumstances. However, she didn’t seem to be your typical Boros officer. The fact she was snooping around these archives after dark, and she had done it before, meant she clearly had a very liberal approach to the law.

“A paper trail,” she replied, “A list of signatures, or people, who were involved in the Golgari purges starting eighteen years ago. Specifically, on Dredgefold Docks.”
The woman’s eyes widened. Not only did she recognise the case but she looked suitably appalled.

“You were in those?” she asked, “You can’t be much older than, what, twenty?”

“I was four when they started,” Vraska stated, letting her do the math, “Seven when they killed my mother. Eight when they dragged me off to torture in a cage. I’m here for my kind of justice but I need names first.”

“Oh flaming angel wings,” the woman took a step towards her before thinking better of it, “Shit, you got your work cut out for you. Come on, I’ll show you where they file their orders.”

“What about you?” she asked, not following just yet. She had shared now it was the Boros’ turned.

“These no-good pencil pushers took bribes rather than punishing the man that killed my partner,” she replied, she reached up to touch her scarred face with her free hand.

“He tortured us. He broke her. The finest wojek in the Tenth, so beautiful that angels dared not look upon her. I’ve been coming here for years now, looking for proof, but it’s cut off every paper I’ve found. I can help you though. Swear on my badge and blade, I’m not going to turn you in.”

“Thank you.” Vraska felt her shoulders relax slightly and finally sheathed her sword.

“Javy,” said the woman. Vraska blinked at her.


“Vraska,” she replied back, “That’s all.”

Javy smiled.

“Nice to meet you Vraska, come on, I think I know exactly where to look.”

Out of everything Vraska expected to find in the archives of New Prahv, a ally was certainly not on of them. She and Javy picked through the shelves until they found a long list of names and signatures relating to the legislation that criminalised the Golgari and another list more concerning the purges. Javy was suitably horrified at the barbaric treatment of innocent civilians, In exchange for her helping her find the documents, and more than a little overwhelmed by her sympathy, Vraska offered to assist her with her own revenge.

“You’re real sweet,” Javy replied, “You know where The Bean Border is?”

“Tin Street, I know it,” Vraska replied. They spoke in whispers as they made their way back to the entrance.

“Meet me there, three o clock, two days’ time. I feel like we could have a real good chat.”

They went their separate ways. Vraska content to take her way, no idea how Javy had got this far whilst wielding a light source. Slipping out of New Prahv was just as easy as getting in. There were a few more guards about in the dead of night, but even they seemed hopeless in the face of a master of shadows. Papers stuffed into her cloak, Vraska took her time, taking the familiar route back home. Her nerves had been as highly strung as piano wire in there, and meeting Javy, well...this night had been too full of surprises for her to relax just yet. She was still buzzing when she got back, creeping indoors, cursing the thud of the heavy lock on their door. Gods, she was shaky.
“Mph,” said Jace as she came into their bedroom, clearly having woken him up with the door,

“Are you ok?” he murmured into his pillow.

“I’m fine, go back to sleep,” she assured him.

He was snoring before she even had time to pull off her cloak. The adventures of the night were more than enough for her to sleep through the dawn, long past whenever Jace got up, and well into the day. With no contracts currently lined up, she felt justified in having a nice long lie in. There was a good chance she’d mess up her sleep schedule with this but she couldn’t bring herself to care. As she dozed in and out of consciousness, she could faintly hear the ruckus coming in and out of Tin Street. Tomorrow, she would meet Javy at the coffee shop but for now, well, she needed some me-time to compose herself and get a grip over everything that had happened. Right now, she needed sleep.

CRASH

She sat bolt upright.

“Jace?!” she called, fearing the worst. That was much louder than a collision with the coffee table. The last time he’d made that much noise, he’d almost died.

“I’m ok!” he shouted back. Regardless, she hastened into the living room. The sight that greeted her was one of destruction.

The rocks were gone. That was the first thing she noticed. Under any other circumstances, she would be glad that their house was now free of errant bits of rubble. However, it wasn’t just the rocks that were missing. Jace’s entire lab set up was gone. His books, his equipment, his strange devices, his bottles of mysteriously labelled fluids. That crash had been him trying to remove the curtain from the ceiling and promptly knocking over stepladder he’d got from goodness-knows where. His research notes, both in books and loose, had been packed into a large wicker basket they’d bought for the purpose of picnics. He looked like he was about to go out, or had just come back. His cloak was dusty, no doubt from transporting so much rubble. Which only led to more questions. Starting with:

“What are you doing?”

Jace looked up at her. His eyes were wide with panic.

“I need to destroy everything! I need to get everything to do with my research out of the house and then I’m going to wipe all my memories of ever having done it!”

Wait, what?

“Slow down,” she told him, “Sit. One step at a time, why are you destroying everything? What happened?”

He sat obediently on the floor. She joined him, taking in the bare space where years of diligent study had once been.

“You know the rock thing I was working on?” Jace asked her. She merely nodded. How could she not be aware of the research? She’d gone and found him plenty of rocks out the Undercity. Their home was full of them!

“Well it’s more than just architecture,” Jace continued, “It’s a puzzle. A maze built into the very
foundations of Ravnica itself. I’m not the only one who’s noticed. The Izzet have too. That’s why they’ve been charging into places belonging to other guilds.”

Vraska stared at him. A maze built into Ravnica? Who would create such a thing? Ravnica was constantly being built over, layer after layer, it was the reason they had an Undercity in the first place! How old must this maze be?

“I followed the Izzet,” Jace continued, “And I was right. It’s a maze, those patterns were routes, but the Izzet are head of me. They think they know what’s at the centre, what the reward is for completing it.”

That didn’t sound good.

“It’s power, they think it’s a weapon the Firemind could use to control Ravnica. I—I went into his mind.”

“You went into Niv Mizzet’s mind?”

This was only going from bad to worse. The Izzet were trying to track down a weapon to take over Ravnica with and now Niv Mizzet would surely know that Jace had been in his mind. Had Jace not learned anything about the minds of dragons after he’d failed so badly last time?

“Yes!” Jace sounded a little shrill, as if fear was truly setting in now he’d said it out loud, “That’s why I have to get rid of my research! He saw me. I got away before he could break into my mind, but he knows who I am. He could easily find out where I live. I have to get all my research out of here and wipe my memory so no one can learn what I did!”

“Breathe, deep breaths.” Vraska gave him a moment. He was certainly in danger but he needed to take a moment and think about this logically. Yes, getting rid of his research was a good idea. Removing any traces from their home would stop them coming in here, but…wiping his own memory? Surely that was a step too far. What if he needed those memories? What if the Izzet found this power regardless and he was the only who understood the maze enough to stop them?

“We can burn your notes,” she said, “But don’t wipe your memory. You might need it.”

He shook his head furiously.

“There are telepaths in the Izzet, and goodness knows who else is interested in this! I have to get rid of those memories!”

“But do you need to erase them entirely?” Vraska replied, “Can you seal them away somewhere? Put them in something and hide it?”

Jace looked at her as if suddenly inspired.

“I could do that but… they would just find the hiding place in my mind.”

“They wouldn’t,” she assured him, “You store your memories, and I’ll hide them, on another plane where no one can find them, even you. If I think you need them back, I’ll go and get them.”

He nodded vigorously.

“And I’ll put the memory of you suggesting this in there too. Ok, let’s burn these and do that straight away.”
Vraska went to find a suitable memory vessel as he started a fire in the hearth. After getting dressed, she opted for a small metal lock box she’d found on one of her many travels. It was a little rusty but it had two locks and was completely air tight. She didn’t know the physics of putting memories in a box, but this looked like the sturdiest thing to hide them in. She returned to find Jace was already piling his notes on the fire.

“Do you know everything that’s on them?” she asked.

“Yes, I have them memorised, for now.” He looked up at the box in her hands.

“As soon as that box is reopened my memories will escape and try to find their way back to me. They can’t do that if the box is opened on another plane. You must make sure no one opens it.”

“I will,” she promised, “Is there anything unrelated that you did this morning that you might accidentally forget?”

He gave it a moment of thought.

“I promised to visit Emmara later,” he said, “Remind me if I forget?”

She nodded before helping him pile the rest of the notes onto the fire. There was something saddening about seeing all that hard work go up in flames. As she watched the parchment curl into ash, she reminded herself that it wasn’t gone forever. Soon she’d be safeguarding it so the Izzet didn’t hurt Jace or their home. Still, watching Jace remove his own memories was a deeply unsettling experience. He clutched the little steel box to his chest in one hand whilst pressing two fingers to his forehead with the other. An expression of great pain passed over his face and he let out a small cry that had Vraska battling her instincts to go comfort him. Fearful that she would ruin this delicate spell, she was forced to keep her distance until a trail of blue magic followed Jace’s fingertips from his forehead to the box. The light filled the empty space within the box before it snapped shut, sealing with a mechanical thunk. Vraska darted forward, seizing the box before he could be tempted to open it.

“Jace?” she asked tentatively. He looked up at her.

“Vraska,” he stated, sounding a little confused, “Why am I on the floor?”

She opened her mouth to explain and then caught herself.

“You fell over taking down the curtain,” she said, pointing at the stepladder. It felt bad to lie to him like this but it was what he had wanted.

“You were about to go see Emmara,” she reminded him. His expression immediately brightened and he got to his feet.

“Oh yeah, almost slipped my mind. Thank you!”

“No problem…I’ve got a job to do. See you later.” This felt weird and wrong. She merely watched as he put on a fresh cloak and gathered up his bag.

“See you later!” he called.

“Bye.”

Vraska found herself staring at the box, at a loss for words. In her hands were years of research. Research that could change the face of Ravnica, for good or ill, it seemed only the Izzet could
decide now. She grabbed a cloak of her own, deciding there was no better time to make good on her promise. Still, this didn’t sit right with her. The Izzet were trying to find a power to take over Ravnica and Jace had given up the knowledge he needed to stop them. No. This was his choice. He wanted the memories gone, so…

She sighed, disappearing from Ravnica in a swirl of shadow.
Conspirators

Chapter Summary

Jace doesn't come home after losing his memories. Vraska makes a new friend.

Chapter Notes

Want more Ral Zarek content in your life but don't want to wait a few chapters? Find his backstory in "Best and Brightest", the story of his childhood in the Terrors of Tin Street AU!

When Jace didn’t come home after visiting Emmara that day, Vraska had to remind herself that Jace was an adult man who could look after himself. On occasion, said adult man wouldn’t come home at night and would look very sheepish when he returned the following morning. Vraska usually took this as a sign that he’d met someone at a library, or a bar, and decided to go elsewhere with them for the night. He’d been doing it for years and the only sign Vraska had seen of any trouble was when he came back with the occasional bruise. Jace had told her the bruises had nothing to do with fighting, but Vraska wasn’t convinced. Generally speaking, Jace’s absence in an evening wasn’t a cause for alarm. As soon as she got back from burying the little steel box full of Jace’s memories, she decided to have a lazy day to settle her nerves. However, her anxiety came back with a vengeance when no sheepish-looking Jace returned to their flat that morning. She told herself that something couldn’t have gone wrong if he was just visiting Emmara. If he hadn’t made it to Emmara, she would have undoubtedly come looking for him. No, Jace was fine. There was no way he’d get hurt at Emmara’s house and he was probably still there. Maybe they’d gone stargazing again or something. Besides, if he was in distress, he had his pendant on him. They had yet to ever need the beautifully made signal jewellery, but she was sure Jace would remember it was there.

She pushed aside her concern as she prepared to meet Javy the wojek at The Bean Border coffee shop. Vraska wasn’t entirely convinced she wasn’t walking into some sort of trap, but Javy had seemed earnest and she wouldn’t have her list of names without her. However, that didn’t stop Vraska strapping a few knives in unexpected places and bringing her most inconspicuous cloak. She decided to bring the list with her, tucked inside a novel and stored safely in her satchel. This could either go very well or absolutely terribly and she needed to be prepared for both scenarios.

The Bean Border was a guildless shop at the furthest edge of Tin Street. Vraska had been there once or twice, however she and Jace favoured Bolt from the Blue, an Izzet-run place a little closer to home. When she arrived, she was pleased to see it was relatively crowded for a week day. The chatter of mothers with prams and elderly couples with grandchildren, would be plenty of cover to allow them to speak freely. The Bean Border was bright and airy, completely unlike Bolt from the Blue which was dark and utterly cramped with coffee-related machinery. The walls in this place were lined with hanging flower baskets and random pieces of art depicting the Ravnican skyline. There were baskets full of newspapers, colouring sheets for children and a liberal coating of pencils - some having rolled under the tables and now sat jammed under the skirting boards. It was,
overall, the last place you’d expect an officer of the law and an assassin to be meeting up. Perhaps that was why Javy had chosen it. She was already there when Vraska arrived, sat at the very furthest table beside a door marked ‘Staff Only’. She had two black coffees on the table before her and a cluster of tiny pastries on a plate. Despite the fact she was wearing plain clothing, she was still very recognisable from their meeting in the archives, largely in part due to the scars on her face.

Once at the back of the café, Vraska felt safe to take down her hood. There were too many humans in here for a gorgon to walk in and not to cause a stir. However mysterious cloaked figures were just another part of Ravnican life. Everyone in here appeared to be keeping to themselves, so she felt comfortable exposing what she was at the back of the store.

“Glad you found the place,” Javy greeted her as she sat down, pushing over one of the coffees.

“I live round here,” she replied, “Though I admit I haven’t been in this shop for a while.”

The coffee was good, though not quite as strong as she was used to. On the plus side, there didn’t seem to be any Boros guards coming to arrest her. They didn’t tend to be subtle about these things, so she was fairly sure they were safe. She chose the chair furthest from the staff entrance, which Javy didn’t seem to pay much mind.

“You wanted to talk?” Vraska asked the wojek.

“No need to be so formal,” Javy replied, “I just thought we might benefit from having a chat with a like-minded individual. The guilds won’t give me what I want. The guilds won’t give you what you want. Sometimes its nice to have a patient ear about.”

Was that all? Vraska had been expecting a mission of sorts. Javy seemed to be sympathetic to her cause. Perhaps she could make her own mission?

“You’re not planning to do anything about it?” she asked. Javy frowned a little.

“I’ve been trying, believe me. I’ve been trying for years now. No one will take me seriously without the evidence bribes changed hands. The Azorius seemed to have pretty much scrubbed their records.”

“There’s easier ways to go about getting justice,” Vraska replied, “Without needing to go through any paperwork.”

Javy smiled as if humouring her, taking a pastry off the plate and biting into the corner.

“You know I’m employed as an officer of the law right?” she said through a mouthful of jam.

“And I’m employed as an assassin,” Vraska retorted, keeping her voice suitably low, “The sort of people I work for don’t care about guild authorisation.”

Javy put down her pastry, leaning across the table a little and dropping into a conspiratorial whisper.

“You’re not kidding right? You’re actually-“

Vraska nodded.

“Well, I’ll be,” Javy leaned back again, “I better make some enemies in the Undercity if all their hired blades are so pretty.”
Once again, Vraska did not know how to deal with the sudden compliment, so decided to ignore it. Maybe Javy was a bit like Jace and was going through a phase of being obsessed with people’s appearances. Though she was a lot older than Jace was. Did that happen again later in life?

“I think our ideas about justice may be a little different,” Vraska continued, “But, they aren’t mutually exclusive. Is it not the job of the Boros to remove crime from the streets of Ravnica? For the protection of its citizens?”

“Pretty much,” Javy replied, clearly wondering where she was going with this.

“Well, what happens when a criminal is beyond the reach of the law?” Vraska pressed, “How do you remove them then? How do you achieve justice and protect those they’ve hurt?”

Javy pulled a face.

“That’s the crux of the problem.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Vraska shrugged, taking a small sip of coffee, “Don’t the people of Ravnica deserve to be free of their oppressors? Don’t they deserve to be protected from the worst of society? If the law can’t give them justice, well, we just have to go outside the boundaries of the law.”

Javy sighed, going back to her pastry. Her brow was bent with clearly conflicting emotions.

“You’re talking about loss of life,” she stated. Vraska smiled over her coffee cup. She had thought about this extensively over the years. There was no way she could lose this discussion.

“Yes,” she acknowledged, “But we kill weeds so flowers can thrive and grow. They’re all plants but we are fine killing those who harm others. Our gardens are so much better when the weeds are removed. Wouldn’t our streets be better too if we removed a few weeds as we went?”

“I can’t deny that,” Javy grumbled, “And it’s always the worst sorts of people who make themselves immune to the law.”

“People this world would be better off without,” Vraska agreed, “Doesn’t everyone deserve to live without the fear of those sorts of people? Wouldn’t it free up so much time for officers of the law? With the un-convictable people gone, you could spend more time taking away the people the law can hold. It’s all positives from where I’m sitting.”

“Is that how they do things in the Golgari?” Javy asked. Vraska wondered if she should point out that there was jam on her face. Instead, she settled for shaking her head.

“No, the Golgari act according to the whims of its Guildmaster like any other guild. Golgari law exists to benefit the devkarin elves and crush the rest of us into submission. There was no outcry at the destruction of Dredgefold Docks because that was a place the devkarin forced those they despised. The Azorius essentially took out the rubbish for them.”

Javy looked suitably angry, but her sigh was one of resignation.

“But what about those you can’t kill?” she asked, “That lecherous Orzhov bastard… he’s got more gold teeth than brains but I know he’s going to have taken out a contract or two. I’m never getting revenge that way.”

Vraska couldn’t help but smirk.
“Our meeting was very fortunate then, because you’ve found the one assassin in Ravnica who can break Orzhov contracts.”

“What?” Javy spoke a little louder than she intended, attracting the attention of a passing staff member. She hastily apologised and lowered her voice to a whisper.

“You can do that?!”

“I’m somewhat controversial in the Golgari,” Vraska replied, also in a murmur, “That’s why I live above ground. You know what a gorgon’s gaze does, correct?”

Javy nodded.

“Well mine does a bit more than that. When I petrify a person, I cut them off from all earthly tethers, be it their phylactery, or their ghostly contracts. Did you hear about Pontiff Rosa from the Church of the Golden Dawn?”

That was her last Severance target, she’d completed that only last week. The death had got some coverage because she’d buried the statue in the large piles of gold that Pontiff Rosa had been extorting from her clergy.

“That was you?” Javy breathed, “You… Razia’s flaming ass, you stop them becoming ghosts?”

Vraska nodded.

“Do you want some help with the man who killed your partner?”

Javy’s eyes went wide.

“Can I bring a sledgehammer and smash that bastard into bits?”

Vraska couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“This is your justice. Feel free.”

They agreed to meet up in the Smelting District that very evening. As they picked out a route to the Orzhov forger’s home, Javy filled Vraska in on all that had happened between them. The wojek had been on what she had thought was a simple patrol around the Smelting District. She and her partner had gone to investigate a suspicious noise and discovered an old blacksmith’s forge had been turned into an operation to mass-forge coinage. They’d reacted like any good Boros would and called for reinforcements, intending to shut down the premises. But the owner had got to them first. He’d strung them up like animals for slaughter, relishing in their screams as he tore apart their skin with a horse whip. By the time their reinforcements arrived, Javy was barely aware of her surroundings and her partner had lost consciousness. When she awoke in her barracks, she had looked everywhere for her partner, and found her in the morgue. The medics told her she’d made a miraculous recovery. Yet without her partner, it felt like a part of her was missing. Something she’d never been able to fill in to this day. Without her, Javy had lost all her ambition to rise up the ranks of her guild. She’d been a wojek for over a decade now, resisting all opportunities for promotion.

“I feel like I lost my passion,” she told Vraska, “My passion for everything. But I guess there’s one thing I really want. I want to see that bastard smashed to tiny little pieces. I want him destroyed like he destroyed my life.”

Vraska decided not to ask where she had obtained a sledgehammer. Fortunately for the of both
them, Foundry Street was loud all day and night. No one would question the sounds of a hammer in a precinct centred around metalwork and masonry. Their target advertised himself as Mr Banik, a pawnbroker and jewellery merchant. His house was at the far end of Foundry Street, sat between a small smithy and a pub. Both were very busy with workers coming and going, shouting at their friends and, in the case of the forge, wheeling in heavy crates of what looked like iron ingots. She and Javy approached hoods up. The pawnbroker's had already closed for the day but it was apparent that Mr Banik lived above his shop. A wrought iron staircase ascended up the back of the building, removing them from sight of the surrounding premises.

“How do we do this?” asked Javy, “I’ve done enough busts but-“

Vraska held up a hand for silence.

“Let’s not alert him. I’ll get the lock.”

She’d had the same set of lockpicks for the last five years and they had yet to fail her. Javy looked vaguely uncomfortable at the fact she could so easily break into a house, but said nothing about it.

Mr Banik’s home was extremely luxurious. Homes above shops were nothing strange, but this one was fitted out like the living quarters in an Orzhov cathedral. Gilt paintings lined the hallway, displaying scenes of nude angels slaughtering armoured soldiers. The carpet was thick enough to swallow even Javy’s boots as they advanced towards the sounds of a kettle boiling. The ceiling had been painted to look like stained glass, coloured lamps taking the place of where glass panels would be. Mr Banik clearly had lofty aspirations, for when they stepped into his living room, they were greeted by the strangest sight.

Between a large velvet sofa and a pair of matching armchairs, was a large circular altar. Emblazoned with the Orzhov sun symbol, it was covered in wilting flowers and small tithe bowls, exactly the same as you might find in a basilica. Once again, the ceiling had been painted to look like a dome, a circular ceiling light used to give the impression of a curved roof. The hearth was filled with prayer books and pamphlets on how tithes were collected and used. In one corner of the room, beside the heavily curtained window was a golden statue, its hands filled with coins – real or fake Vraska couldn’t tell. At the sight of it, Javy cursed under her breath. Vraska could only assume Mr Banik had a commissioned a statue of himself.

The kettle was still bubbling from an adjacent room. Vraska assumed it was the kitchen

“How do you want this?” she asked Javy, “Want me to get him and put him on the altar.? Gives plenty of room to destroy him and all his excess.”

She nodded, her expression extremely determined. Taking a step back, she lifted her sledgehammer. Vraska took a step into the kitchen.

Even this was covered in gold. The cabinets almost dazzled her with their gaudy sheen. Mr Banik, who she now recognised from the statue, was standing in front of a mug, waiting for his kettle to boil. He turned as Vraska stepped into the room. The kettle whistled loudly behind him but he could not reach for it with stone hands. Vraska took it off the heat, shutting off the stove before any unfortunate accidents could happen.

“Here you go.”

She hefted the stone corpse onto the golden altar before stepping back, allowing Javy full striking range. The wojek crept forward, as barely able to believe her eyes. She touched the stone with one gloved hand, marvelling at folds of his robes, a sculpture with lifelike detailing.
“I’ve never seen this in person,” she said, coming to stare at Mr Banik’s face. He hadn’t even had time to scream. His lips were slightly parted in shock, his eyes a little wide. Apart from that, he looked just as he usually would. Just stone and sideways on a golden altar of his own design.

Javy took a step back, taking a deep breath, a broad grin spreading across her face.

“You might want to back off,” she told Vraska, “This is going to be loud.”

She respectfully increased her distance, smiling all the while.

Javy rounded on the statue, arms flexing as she raised the enormous hammer above her head. She took another deep breath, this one hissing a little through her clenched teeth. There was a moment of silence before she brought the hammer down.

“THIS!” She suddenly exclaimed, bringing the hammer down on the stone face of the man who had scarred her so deeply.

“IS!” She brought it down again, smashing the features so they were unrecognisable.

“FOR!” The head splintered entirely, one ear skidding off the altar and into one of the tithe bowls.

“BLAZENA!”

She hammered at the corpse like a woman possessed. Fragments of stone rained off the sides of the altar like a deluge of hail stones. Vraska reclined on one of the velvet seats and watched as Javy screamed and raged. Tears poured down her face as hammer fall after hammer fall reduced her torturer to rubble. It had been a decade, over a decade since she had lost the woman she loved. All that anger and misery had been bottled up inside her, kept restrained by a desperate need to do things the legal way. To find evidence, to bring her oppressors to trial in a court of law. Yet here and now, she could let it all out. Her rage, her pain, her despair, they brought the strength behind each hammer blow. Each yell of Blazena’s name. Each scream for justice. It was time for Javy to get her revenge. Vraska found herself tearing up a little at Javy’s impassioned cries. This was what she had wanted to achieve ever since she beheaded two tailors and presented their remains to the kraul they’d victimised. This was catharsis. This was justice. People should die the deaths they deserved, and their victims deserved justice.

“How do you feel?” she asked, as Javy stopped screaming and took in the rubble she’d left behind. There were multiple large dents in the altar, many of the delicate tithe bowls had smashed on the ground.

“Fucking fantastic,” Javy replied, panting hard. She turned to Vraska, eyes alight with joy, wiping away tears on the hem of her cloak.

“It’s like, there was a weight on my back I didn’t even know was there,” she continued, “And it’s gone. I pummelled him with it. I wrecked him.”

She gestured at all the rubble and dust that had once been a living man.

“Blazena, if you’re up there,” she looked up at the fake-glass ceiling, “I fucking did it. I destroyed it. Rest. Rest and dream. You deserve it.”

“She truly had the best partner of all,” Vraska commented. Javy gave a little hiccup, wiping her eyes a little harder this time as she welled up again.

“Come on you, I’m buying you a drink. I know a place that does the best Apple Smiters in the
“What’s an Apple Smiter?” Vraska asked. It sounded like an alcoholic drink but not one she’d ever heard of or tried. Admittedly, she hadn’t tried much alcohol. Only when she ate out and it came with the meal. She didn’t really like wine that much, but something apple flavoured shouldn’t be too bad.

“Oh, you’ll like it,” Javy assured her, “Perfect way to celebrate a job well done.”

“I look forward to it then.”

Four Apple Smiters later, Vraska was feeling both hyper-active and very sleepy. Javy had been right. She did like the drink. It was like drinking apple pie. In all honesty, she thought, as Javy tried to throw nuts and catch them in her mouth, there needed to be more pies that you could drink. Drinkable pies were definitely a gap in the market. Someone should look into that. She leaned back in her seat, enjoying the apple flavoured buzz at the back of her throat. Javy got up and came back with a large beer and yet another Smiter.

“You should meet some friends of mine,” Javy commented, slumping back down, “I was going to tell you earlier but, kind of got distracted. Good distraction, best distraction but… I kind of meant to tell you about them. We’re not a formal thing, but we call ourselves the Malcontents. We’re just a group of people brought together by our guilds being massive idiots.”

“Like us?” asked Vraska, taking a sip of her fifth. Still tasted like drinkable pie. Gods, Jace would go mad for these.

“Yeah just like us,” Javy replied, slurring her words a little, “People who’ve been real dicked over by the higher-ups. People who need your type of justice. I was going to tell you earlier, ‘cause we have a meeting tomorrow, but-but distractions.”

“Where are you meeting?” she asked.

“The Prism,” Javy managed, leaning her elbow on the table and her head in the hand. The other hand was too full of beer.

“Next to the Bolt from the Blue, Tin Street, you know it probably.”

“Yeah I do.”

“Their Smiters are pretty good, but not as good as this place. But they do do Cherry ones there… Also the folk there, the Malcontents, they can help you find your bastards.. The ones on your list. We do a favour thing. Do a favour, receive a favour… I owe you pretty much my life. I reckon I could find at least…”

She stared at her own hand, tried to count but then realised she would drop her beer.

“At least five. I bet you I could find at least five.”

“Should I bring the list with me?” Vraska pressed a hand to her mouth to prevent a burp.

“Yeah,” Javy replied, “Make a copy in case you get your drink on it. Malcontents like a drink.”

As Vraska swayed her way home, she considered that maybe she had liked a drink a bit too much that evening. She was infinitely glad that they had a lift up to their flat because stairs were far too hard right now. Not entirely sure how much apple pie she had drunk, she tottered into the living
room, closing the door loudly behind her. She hung up her cloak, lightly patting the hook where Jace’s should be. Not home yet. Why was that.

Well, that was a problem for tomorrow’s Vraska.

She fell asleep atop her blankets, fully clothed.
Vraska has a terrible day, not made any easier by head-splitting hangover. Fortunately, the evening proves far more... revolutionary.

Why.

Vraska groaned into her pillow, wishing the world would stop being so loud. Seriously, why had everyone decided to be just that bit noisier today? Why couldn’t they just let her sleep in peace! Attempting to pull the blankets over her head, she soon realised that even the blankets weren’t cooperating with her today. Why was she on top of the blankets? The blankets were meant to be on top of her. Rectifying that, she buried her head under both blankets and pillow. Somewhere outside, a wagon trundled loudly along the cobble stones, causing her to swear and clutch her head. The outside world was gods-damn awful today. She was staying right here.

An unknowable amount of time later, Vraska felt something cold directly above the back of her neck. She swatted at it, her hand colliding with something that felt like a breeze. She rolled over, with the full intent of glaring it into non-existence. However, there wasn’t a thing there. There was a ball. A ball of glowing blue energy that hovered close to her face. She tried to slap it away for being too bright. Couldn’t it tell she was sleeping? Well, was asleep. She wanted to be asleep. Why wouldn’t the floating ball of light let her sleep?

She swatted at it again, this time her hand made contact with the centre of the ball. A familiar voice filled her head, loud enough for her to audibly groan.

“Hi Vraska. I just wanted to let you know that I’m fine I haven’t been home for a bit because Emmara got kidnapped and I had to go save her. It was the Rakdos who did it but I am sure they were being manipulated by the Dimir. We’re fine now so there’s no need to worry. Back later, bye!”

Oh good. Jace was alright. The ball of magic faded as soon as his message had finished. It would have been nice to know where exactly he was. However, she didn’t exactly have the capability to go hunting for him right now. She’d never had a migraine this bad. It was like someone was trying to cut through the back of her head with a saw. She slumped back and firmly placed the pillow back over her face. Later. For now she needed to sleep this off.


Vraska cursed as she tottered out of bed. She realised then that she was still wearing the clothes she’d worn yesterday, complete with knives, which had pressed painfully against her as she slept. The day was still far too noisy, but someone was at the door and doors needed to be answered.

As she crossed the living room, she remembered the wards Jace had put on their house. He’d put up a deterrent meaning that anyone who hadn’t personally been told where they lived, shouldn’t know where they were. Also, anyone who didn’t know who lived here, would instantly remember something very important they had to do and go elsewhere. The wards had proved very effective over the years. They had zero cold callers and certainly no junk mail. However, that did lead to the
question of who was at the door. Usually it was Emmara. It was probably Emmara again. Wanting a talk or a cup of tea to help recover from her kidnapping.

Just to make sure, Vraska checked through the peephole in their door.

It was not Emmara.

Standing there was a man in the most obvious Izzet garb imaginable. He had some kind of mizzium device strapped to his back, goggles that were more fashionable than practical, and gauntlets that looked like they could crush tin cans in one squeeze. He seemed to have zapped himself one too many times, because his hair stuck up at sheer angle, seemingly of its own accord. It was streaked with premature grey, or maybe he just dyed it like that.

She fixed him her best non-magical glare.

“Can I help you?” she demanded, opening the door to the extend the latch would allow.

At the sight of her, he frowned.

“Who are you?”

Vraska’s stare got steadily more unimpressed.

“I live here, can I help you?”

The man checked his gauntlets which seemed to be displaying some sort of rough map of the street. She felt like utter crap. This was not the time for their first ever cold-caller. Besides, she knew this place was meant to be hard to find. How had some random Izzet mage stumbled across them like this? The man checked his gauntlet once more before looking back at her. He seemed less certain than before.

“I’m looking for Jace Beleren,” he stated.

“Are you now.” Vraska gave the man a once over. So, he’d gotten over the aura Jace had put on their house. Which meant he was magically powerful. He was looking for Jace in particular, and Jace didn’t exactly hand his name out freely. Either some kind of scheme was going on, or Jace had met this person and given him his name. Probably in a bar.

“I was informed he lived here,” the man continued, “I want to talk to him. About…our research.”

The pause was incredibly suspicious. Was that some kind of euphemism? Research, really?

Vraska sighed.

“He’s not here. I don’t know where he is. If you’re one of his night-time adventures, I should let you know he’s been kind of distracted lately.”

“One of his…” The Izzet man now looked very confused.

“You heard me,” Vraska replied, “Who do I say visited if he does end up around here?”

“Err,” replied the man, “I will find him myself.”

“Well, good luck with that.” Vraska promptly shut the door in his face. Gods damn it Jace. Emmara would have been nice, but she did not need this whilst her head felt like an entire drum kit! She went back to bed, grumbling.
Half an hour later, there was another loud knock at the door. Vraska swore in three languages, only one Ravnican, and strode to the door. If this was that Izzet mage again, she was going to petrify someone. Probably that Izzet mage. She peeked through the viewing hole in the door. It was not the Izzet mage. It wasn’t Emmara either, and that totalled all the strangers who knew about this place. Instead, it was a tall pale man in a long black cloak. What she could see of him was dressed formally in a pair of smart black trousers. However, he wasn’t wearing any shoes. Vraska scowled. Anyone who came to their door looking like an assassin or a Dimir agent was going to be treated like one. She opened the door.

Great.

Now she had to deal with disposing of a statue whilst terribly hungover.

She had solved the mystery. As she lay on the sofa, taking the occasional sip of water, she wondered what had led her to drink so much. Probably because it tasted like apple pie, but still, she hadn’t even thought of what might happen the next day. What was worse she couldn’t remember what time she was meant to be meeting Javy and her Malcontents today. Did Javy even say a time? She couldn’t remember a time coming up so how was she supposed to go? The location was easy. The Prism was a bar next to Bolt from the Blue, owned by the same Izzet family. It got lit up every evening with a whole array of tubular lights that made it look somewhat otherworldly. Admittedly, it was a fancy place. Fancier than wherever they ended up last night. She would probably have to dress nice to go there. Ugh, why did she do this to herself? How was she supposed to compose herself whilst feeling like this?

After several glasses of water, a single glass of orange juice and some toast, she decided on a bath. The warm water was a relief and would go a long way to making her more respectable for later. Whatever she ended up drinking at the bar, it certainly wasn’t going to be alcoholic. There should probably be something there that both tasted good and didn’t make her ill. She had to assume the meeting was going to be in the evening. Most people would have work during the day, and even if others worked irregular hours like her, well, most bars didn’t open until late anyway. If she showed up and no Javy? Well, she already had what she wanted. Perhaps later she could copy out the names and signatures, just so she had more copies spare.

After bathing, dressing, and then generally lying about for a bit, Vraska finally felt ready to face the day. She picked up her list, a book and a handful of stationary, intending to go into the lounge and start copying out names and titles. As she made to open her bedroom door, she suddenly caught a whiff of something strange. It was an acrid burning smell, like something was melting, or a particularly unsafe gas fire. She opened the door and instantly revealed its source.

“What are you doing in my house?!”

Pens went flying. Her book fell to the ground with a dull thud as she drew two knives, chucking one directly at the Izzet mage kneeling in her fireplace. It hit him on the arm but bounced off one of his thick mizzium gauntlets, denting the metal but doing no damage. The second knife struck higher, into an unprotected bit of arm. The man from earlier swore loudly and backed off, blood dripping onto the carpet. She’d intended to have him drop whatever he was holding, but he didn’t appear to be holding anything.

“You can’t talk! Why do you have a dead body in your house?” he retorted, shielding his eyes behind his intact arm.

“You broke into my home!”

Vraska’s eyes flashed gold but in a burst of lightning, her spell was deflected, ricocheting into the
wall and leaving scorch mark on the wall paper. With a hiss of frustration, she charged at him, gaze burning bright. He leapt up from beside the fireplace, letting out a wave of crackling energy, that immediately set the throw on the sofa ablaze. Vraska launched her third knife at him as he dodged yet another petrification spell. It struck him in the chest and he gagged. Vraska turned to the sofa just in time for water to come gushing from the ceiling. She had no idea they even had sprinkler charms in here but apparently they did. Maybe Jace had added them. Regardless, she had a good for nothing mage to petrify.

She advanced, backing him towards the door and the stone Dimir agent who still stood by the coat rack. He was bleeding heavily now, utterly ruining their carpet, as if the sprinklers weren’t going to do that already.

“What are you doing in my house?” she hissed. He kept countering her petrification spells and that only made her even more furious.

“Answer me!” she demanded, “If you don’t want to end up like your friend there!”

She gestured at the statue.

The Izzet mage tried to cast something but it just sparked and fizzled off the water in the air. A small button lit up on his gauntlet and started flashing red. He swore.

“This has been great and all ,” he said, “But I’m leaving now. Bye.”

There was a flash of lightning, and suddenly he was gone. Vraska swore as the sprinklers finally felt like they had doused the room enough. She immediately started pacing, trying to work out what was missing. What he possibly could have stolen. She was livid. Her temper not aided by the fact that people weren’t supposed to be able to teleport in and out of their house. That was another one of their wards! Unless, no, unless that bastard Izzet mage had planeswalked out of there. But what was a planeswalker doing poking around their fireplace? Nothing in the room was missing! Not the clock, not the furniture, not the few thoroughly soaked books that were lying round. Not even the tiny apple tree Emmara had given them. Vraska tore round the kitchen, opening and closing all the cupboards in case he’d been in there. No. Nothing was missing! She returned to the scene of the crime and glared at the fireplace. There it was. Clean and empty. She couldn’t remember when last she’d cleaned it but there didn’t seem to be anything wrong with it. What was all this about!

The man had said he was here to see Jace about their shared research. There was no Jace and no research in the house! They were going to have words whenever he next came home. If something was missing, Jace should surely spot it. Plus, he needed to rework those wards.

Vraska spent the rest of the afternoon extremely restless. Paranoid that something was gone, she searched the entire house making sure every possession she knew about was still there. She counted books, mugs and even cutlery. Went through every trinket they owned and found nothing amiss. What was he doing?! Why was that mage in their house? Where was Jace when she needed help with these things! Thoroughly freaked out, she grabbed at her pendant and felt for it with her magic. She sent three pulses, squeezing the wiring each time. A distress call. Maybe a bit of an overreaction but someone had been in their sanctuary, their safe space, and she was not dealing with it very well! If that mage could get in, who else could? Had their wards broken? Could they be attacked at any moment?

Jace was supposed to send a single pulse back in reply to say he was coming. Yet he didn’t. There was no acknowledgement, no reply, she couldn’t even be sure the signal had got to him. It should, if he was on Ravnica, have got to him. But what if he wasn’t on Ravnica? Or he’d lost his pendant,
but… Ugh, she wasn’t coping! First a hangover, then a burglar and now this! This was too much for one day. Too much!

It was a definite relief when she realised she didn’t have to spend all day in their broken sanctuary. As evening approached, she put on her best dress and picked out a handbag that had been too small for her to use before. Sweeping her hair back so it went in one direction rather than many, she was glad to finally leave their flat, locking the door firmly behind her. For all the good that would do. She walked with perhaps a little too much haste towards The Prism. Hoping that Javy would already be there, she really didn’t want to have to make awkward small talk whilst in her hyper-anxious state. Fortune, it seemed, smiled on her that day, for Javy was sat outside The Prism in what looked like the smoking area. She was dressed in her full wojek uniform, complete with sword strapped to her back.

“Hey!” she greeted, rising from her chair, “You feeling alright after yesterday?”

“I’ve recovered,” Vraska replied, swiftly joining her.

“You scrub up great,” Javy continued, “Though what’s happened? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Not ghosts,” Vraska stated, “It’s, well, someone broke into my house. I fought them out but, I can’t work out why he was there. Nothing is missing. I’ve searched the entire place but I can’t work out what he’s taken. He must have taken something.”

“Do you want me to look?” Javy asked, folding her arms authoritatively, “I mean, I am a professional investigator.”

She hadn’t considered that. Looking into burglaries was literally Javy’s job.

“Do you have time?” Vraska asked.

“We’ve got an hour,” Javy confirmed, glancing into the bar behind her, “I came here early because I completely forgot to give you a time yesterday. Just sort of been hanging around to see if you’d turn up.”

“Well, if it’s not too much trouble, I’d be grateful if you could take a look around.”

They returned back to her flat. Javy seemed mildly impressed by the lift leading up to their top-floor residence, and even more so when they went inside.

“You’ve got yourself some nice little digs here,” she commented, “Live with someone?”

“I have a housemate,” Vraska commented, watching her pace the living room, “He’s out right now.”

Javy hmm-ed her agreement, stopping before the fireplace.

“So he was here?” She pointed at a spot in front of the hearth. Vraska nodded.

“You’ve got slight scorch marks in your chimney,” said Javy, taking a knee and peering at the stonework, “Not from fire, but from some sort of discharged energy.”

“The burglar was clearly Izzet,” Vraska explained, “He had guild colours, mizzium gauntlets and everything.”
“That makes a lot of sense.” Javy began tracing lines with a finger about the fireplace. Vraska also knelted to get a better look. She followed where Javy pointed and saw an array of minuscule scorch marks, like a blast radius centred around the grate.

“Forcefield of some sort,” Javy commented, “Centred around the base of this fireplace. Those sorts of spells are utilised for containment. If you ask me,”

She stuck her arm up the chimney and when it returned, it was very grimy.

“I’d say he took the contents of your fireplace. Unless you only clean the bottom of the chimney and not all the way up?”

“No, we’d do all of it.” Vraska frowned.

“Why take the ash out of the fireplace? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“The Izzet have a sizeable population of madmen,” Javy concluded, wiping her sooty hand on her breeches, “Your fireplace is pretty empty now so I don’t imagine he’d come back. If he does, let me know. I’ll put a warrant out for his arrest.”

“Thank you,” Vraska replied, “For taking a look.”

“No problem. What are friends for?” Javy rolled her shoulders back, one of her knees audibly clicking as she got back to her feet. Vraska couldn’t help but stare at her. Javy considered them friends? She hadn’t had a new friend in such a long time. Well, maybe she had two friends now? What a thought.

They returned to The Prism as the sky began to darken. The night market was setting up as they wound their way past carts and wagons. Despite it being the midst of the working week, there was still plenty of revelry going on. Loud music burst forth from a large tavern overlooking the shops and people were coming and going from the bar on the ground floor of the Rakdos hotel. Fast food vendors offered them various fried foods on sticks as they squeezed through a small cluster of tents, each bearing signs offering services such as palm-readings, card fortunes and divination naps. Javy snorted at the sight of them, mumbling something about unstable premises and the lacking of warrants. When they finally got to The Prism, they were greeted by a pair of heavily armed bouncers wearing mizzium plated armour. They seemed to know Javy well for they let them in without question, regardless of the large queue that was already forming outside.

Vraska was led down a flight of narrow stairs, lit by a glowing strip of pink light. Underneath, all number of posters had been attached to the wall. She paused occasionally to take in the great collage of names and advertisements. Posters for musical acts with names the likes of “Electric State of Mind”, “Niv’s Boys”, “Flux Me Up” and “B.O.L.T.” plastered the brickwork. pasted one on top of the other as musicians came and went. There were lost and found posters, some for stray pets, others for missing equipment. Vraska was slightly taken aback by the sheer amount of personal ads, just pinned up for everyone to see. Did everyone need to know that a fun-loving goblin was looking for another fun-loving goblin, for curious experimentation, and perhaps some inventing too? Or that a Miss H was offering pleasurable experiences in exchange for valuable machine components. Admittedly, she’d never considered what the Izzet did outside of their labs. She assumed, much like anyone else, they ate dinner after work, relaxed a bit and went to bed. However there was definitely more to Izzet culture than she realised.

“Never been in a club before?” Javy asked, noticing her attention to the wall.

“No, never,” she replied, a little distracted, “Just…learning.”
“Well if you like learning about other guilds, there’s plenty downstairs. Follow me.”

Vraska followed. They went through a semi-lit archway, half its strip lighting flickering faintly as it ran out power. Through a shimmering ribbon curtain, they emerged into a small lounge full of circular leather sofas, built round small tables, each bearing a singular brightly coloured lamp. There was a bar at one end, manned by a muscular vedalken, shirtless except for his bright red leather waistcoat.

“Well, I’ll take two then. One for me and one for my new friend here.”

She gestured at Vraska as she spoke. Vraska was still surprised by being addressed as a friend.

“Two milkshakes coming right up,” said Levi. He began to twist nobs and dials. There was a gurgling sound and milk suddenly poured into the glass tube, out of the wall and into the machine.

“Vraska, this is Levi,” Javy said, “Ex-Azorius, now Izzet. They didn’t appreciate his love for bartending and brewing his own drinks like the Izzet did.”

“And leather,” Levi interrupted, “Don’t forget the leather. I had enough trousers wrecked by those bullying snobs, and have I ever received an apology? No! Guess I didn’t fill out the right form of repeated assault!”

“And his love for leatherwork,” Javy acquiesced, “Levi, this is Vraska. She’s Golgari. She got caught in the Undercity purge eighteen years ago when she was only a kid.”

“Ah shit, I’m sorry,” said Levi, turning to face Vraska, “I was just a clerk when it happened, there was heck all I could do, but I’m sorry. Believe me.”

Vraska merely nodded, not quite sure how to process this. No one had ever apologised to her about the loss of Dredgefold Docks, especially not someone with ties to the Azorius. Luckily, she was spared the need to respond as the machine gave a mighty clunk. Levi picked out two glasses from underneath the counter. A tap had protruded from the gleaming metal box and he swiftly filled the glasses full of pink foam.

“Two milkshakes my good ladies.”

“Thanks Levi.” Javy slapped a few zinos on the counter.

“Anyone else around yet?”

Levi gestured over the bar to the far corner. There, sat on one of the circular sofas, were three figures. Javy thanked him, handed Vraska a milkshake before gesturing her over to where the others sat. As they got closer, Vraska’s eyes adjusted to the oddly coloured lighting. The three figures were a human in obvious Rakdos garb, a Simic hybrid with moth-like antenna in their hair, and a very familiar minotaur.

“Dr Marian?” she exclaimed as soon as she was sure. The minotaur turned round, recognition
dawning on her face.

“Vraska?” she gasped, getting to her feet, “My, hon, how you’ve grown! You’ve shot up like a rocket at Steam Festival. How are you?”

Vraska abandoned Javy for a moment to go greet her, no introductions necessary. Dr Marian looked the same as ever, though perhaps with a few more grey streaks in her fur. The coils round her horns had rusted slightly, and her clothes were a little dirty. Otherwise, she looked the same as she did the last time they’d met - five years ago.

“I’m as fine as I can be,” she replied, “How about you? Jace told me what happened to your lab. How have you been doing?”

Dr Marian shrugged.

“I’ve been going, as they say. Been shunted between labs left and right. You think someone with a doctorate would be treated with greater respect, but no, can’t keep a contract longer than a few months. If I could find that blasted goblin… ugh, It’s been five years, you think I’d be over it by now.”

The Simic hybrid put a hand on her shoulder, giving her a comforting smile.

“It’s ok Marian. Our guest wouldn’t be here if she didn’t share our frustrations. What else is this place, but a location to share our woes?”

Their woolly antennae brushed together as Javy approached.

“I didn’t know you knew the doctor,” she commented to Vraska, “But it saves me an introduction I guess. Thst is Tasia, surgeon of the Simic Combine. They are largely nocturnal, I’m glad you managed to get back here Tasia.”

The hybrid gave a little curtsey, hands wrapped in their lace skirts. They weren’t dressed like any Simic Vraska had met before. If asked, she would say Tasia was dressed for a wedding. They were covered in white lace from their capelet to their slippers. There was a corsage of faintly quivering flowers around their wrist, and a crown of seashells in their hair. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder if their cape was clothing or wings. They did not move, but they seemed as moth-like as her antennae. Perhaps Tasia had once been an elf, the long slanted ears and angular features led her to believe so.

“Tasia, this is Vraska, assassin of the Golgari Swam,” Javy finished.

“A pleasure to meet you,” said Tasia, “I am here for the sake of my dearest fiancé. He went to beg his parents’ approval on the eve of our wedding and never returned. He was a surgeon too you know, one of the Simic’s finest. His parents hated the idea of him living above the waters… no one believes me when I say he was abducted. But they said to him, better drowned than married to a surface dweller. My guild does not listen. My guild does not care.”

It seemed traditional to exchange stories. They were the Malcontents for a reason.

“I’m honoured to meet you, Tasia,” Vraska replied, giving a small half-bow after their formal curtsey, “The Azorius ordered a purge on Golgari territory when I was a small child. They took my mother, my home, my freedom. They have never once acknowledged the suffering they caused. Neither have my guild.”

Tasia placed one delicate hand over their mouth as Javy began to gesture at the Rakdos woman,
still sat at the table.

“It’s fine Javy, I can introduce myself.”

The Rakdos woman got up, gently easing her way around Tazia. She was a large woman, wearing black and red striped breeches and a corset that barely contained her bust. She had a full sleeve of tattoos down both of her arms. Most of the sleeves were taken up by large red roses, blooming over her bulging muscles, however the occasional word was interspersed amongst the flowers, too small for Vraska to make out from a respectful distance.

“The name’s Ruby,” she said, offering Vraska a hand to shake. Vraska hesitated.

“Sorry,” she murmured, “I mean no offence. I’m not very good with touching. Prison scars.”

Ruby withdrew the hand, a smile curving her black-painted lips.

“Understandable. I get it. We all have our scars. Mine? Don’t tend to show them off in a place like this. All you need to know beautiful, is that I’m a teacher, and if you ever need my particular expertise, here’s where to find me.”

She pulled a business card seemingly out of nowhere. Vraska took it as Javy groaned.

“Ruby, please.”

“I call them like I see them Jav,” Ruby retorted, “We’ve got a beautiful young lady here, clearly been through some rough shit. But even the most thorny rose deserves to bloom if you know what I mean. So who am I to deny her that chance?”

“On your first meeting though?” Javy objected. Vraska looked over the business card. One side it simply said ‘Ruby’ with a metallic embossed red rose. The other side said “The Scarlet Rose Academy. 72 Jewellers Avenue.”

“What do you teach?” Vraska asked, none of the wiser from her card.

“If you want, I’ll explain later. We’ve got a bunch of new arrivals coming in.” Ruby gestured over Vraska’s shoulder. The little group turned. Indeed, five people had just come down the stairs. Two were dressed in Selesnyan robes, one had a post office uniform on, so probably Dimir, and the final pair of women were holding hands – one gown-wearing Orzhov and the other an armoured Boros.

Vraska found herself toured round the room as yet more people arrived. Soon there wasn’t time to exchange stories. Javy reeled off names like she was barking off role call. It didn’t take long for the lounge to completely fill – Levi serving up drinks at an inhuman speed. By the time every sofa was filled, there were about thirty people in attendance. Certainly more than Vraska had expected. There was a general hubbub of chatter, people greeted each other, shared commiserations and generally asked after each other’s welfare. She seemed to be the only newcomer to the group, whilst Javy knew absolutely everyone. It was clear that the wojek was in charge here. To the point where, once the room was deemed sufficiently full, she nodded at Levi to close the door and raise the lights on a small stage at the far side of the room.

“Good evening Malcontents!” Javy called, clambering up onto the stage. Her voice boomed out, no magic needed. There was a general chorus of greetings from her audience.

“Thank you very much for joining us here at The Prism. We will have this lounge to ourselves for the evening, but feel free to enjoy the dance facilities above. Levi has kindly agreed to run the bar this evening, please give him a big hand.”
There was a light smattering of applause which Vraska joined in on. She sat near the front, having been left there by Javy. She was perched next to Marian, who was staring up at Javy with admiration in her dark eyes.

“I won’t hold you for very long,” Javy continued, “But, I would like to make a few announcements. If you’ll forgive me, they are somewhat personal, however I believe our group has reached a turning point in its career.”

This was met with silence. It became clear to Vraska that everyone here may have come to simply have a good time. Or at least hang out amongst like-minded people. Perhaps to mourn their losses and seek comfort in others? It had therefore surprised them that Javy had something planned.

“I am very pleased to announce,” Javy exclaimed, “That Orsten Banik is dead!”

There was a ripple of shock throughout the lounge, mutters breaking out amongst the sofas.

“As you all well know, I had been pursuing Banik for over a decade. I sought justice for my dear Blazena, trawling through papers and files, trying to prove the corruption of those who had let her killer free. But no more!”

Javy paused to take a deep breath.

“Yesterday, my eyes were opened to the fallacy of my situation. It was the guilds who had denied me justice, and it was the guilds that I sought justice from. Whilst I played by their rules, whilst I ran round in circles obeying their laws, I was never going to get my justice! How could I hope to triumph in a system that was already stacked against me? Yesterday, I met with a woman who opened my eyes to the truth our law and order systems wish to hide from sight. Yes! Even as loyal officer of the Legion, I can see clearly now that the law takes away the very thing it promises us – Justice.”

There were many murmurs in the audience now. Vraska watched as people turned to each other – Marian shared a look with Tasia, clearly wondering what had gotten into their leader.

“That woman is here amidst us! Vraska, please, join me up here.”

What?! Vraska got to her feet, head reeling. What was Javy doing? Why hadn’t she warned her about this? However she obeyed, enthralled perhaps by the passion in the wojek’s speech, how clearly she had taken her words to heart. The audience murmured amongst themselves once more as she took to the spotlight beside Javy.

“And she will share the words she said to me, to you all. To inspire a new type of justice for the Malcontents of Ravnica!”

Vraska stared at her.

“What are you doing?” she murmured, trying to be subtle about it. She wasn’t used to having this many eyes upon her. She was an assassin! She was meant to go unseen! Yet here she was, in front of thirty people!

“Just tell them what you told me,” Javy murmured back, “Give a speech. Inspire them. Like you did me.”

“You could have warned me beforehand,” Vraska hissed in reply.

“Too late now,” Javy replied, beaming at her audience, “Introduce yourself, your suffering and
then say something cool.”

She stepped nimbly off the stage.

Fuck.

What was she supposed to do now? She couldn’t do speeches. She wasn’t a leader! All those eyes were staring at her. What did they see? A monster surely. A monster who couldn’t live up to the expectations that Javy have given them. Oh, why did Javy have to do this? What was she supposed to do? What was she supposed to say? She looked at Marian, silently begging for help, but all the minotaur did was give her two enthusiastic thumbs up. Well, here went nothing.

“M-Malcontents of the Twelfth District,” she addressed, her voice rising with a slight tremble.

“My name is Vraska, of the Golgari Swarm. I am first and foremost, an assassin, and a guild member second. As you can quite plainly see, I am a gorgon. We are not the monsters the Golgari would have you believe. Our race has been much maligned over the years. Devkarin propaganda, spawned from their need to reign superior over all Undercity residents, has sullied our reputation beyond belief.”

She took a deep breath. She’d almost gone off on a tangent there.

“That is why the massacre of Dredgefold Docks went largely unnoticed,” she continued, back on track, “I’m sure most of you will have never heard of Dredgefold Docks. It was, for want of a better word, a slum. One of many places that the Golgari shoved the people even they didn’t want. I was born there, and I grew up there, until the age of four – when the raids started.”

No one was murmuring anymore. A shiver coursed down her spine as she took in their rapt attention. This was too much but she couldn’t embarrass herself any further. More importantly, she couldn’t let Javy down. Her second friend in the entire world. Vraska couldn’t disappoint her!

“Guildmaster Isperia issued a law declaring that, by being a member of the Golgari guild, you were a criminal. She gave rights to her enforcers to arrest and confine without trial. They rampaged through Dredgefold Docks, seizing anyone they could get their hands on, murdering anyone who resisted. Innocent dock workers, labourers, fish-wives, the young, the old, the ill, none were spared. My mother protected me for many years, fighting off any Azorius who tried to come for us. But as soon as they discovered a gorgon was resisting them… well, you can guess what happened then.”

Vraska stepped forward into the limelight.

“When I was eight, they came for me. I was alone, unprotected, orphaned. They dragged me, a helpless child, off to a maximum-security jail, bound, gagged, blindfolded. Like so many others, I was crammed into cages full of infection and death. Beaten for sport, tortured for the sadistic pleasure of our captors. One guard tried to break my skull against the floor, simply because he didn’t like the fact I existed. My escape was…nothing short of miraculous. Because other prisoners rioted and I had the merest dregs of strength left. Since that day, no justice has come for me. Those guards, their officers, their managers, all the way to the senators that ordered that raid and Guildmaster Isperia herself! No one has answered for their crimes! Hundreds of Golgari died in those purges, whole communities were emptied and raised to the ground. Where Dredgefold Docks stands is now an Undercity detention centre, where prisoners are drowned if they show any sign of resistance. Ever since I was a child, I knew the law would provide no justice to me, or anyone like me. Justice was a thing you had to fight for yourself!”

Her voice rose in volume as she slowly gained momentum. She could do this. *She could do this.*
“All of you know the pain of losing someone precious to you. All of you know the pain of having your life torn apart by uncaring authority! You know your odds are stacked against you. You know your guilds, any guild, will not provide you with the justice you seek. Javy was the same. When we met, she was playing by the rules of the very people who held her down. She ran in circles like a mouse in a wheel, too blinded by her guild’s teaching to see any way out. And this was not her fault, it is not any of your faults. We are raised with the guilds pulling our strings, controlling our lives down to who we can be, where we can work, what we are allowed to achieve with our lives. To ever get what we deserve, the justice we crave, we must cut those strings. We must go against the very order ingrained in us from birth.”

Another deep breath.

“Javy realised that no one was going to give her justice. She had to seize it herself. And she did, with a little assistance from myself. Finally, Blazena can rest in peace! Finally, Javy can find hope for a better future! Do you all not deserve that chance? Do you all not deserve to find peace? To find hope? You can! You can live and love yourselves once more, like you did before your hearts were ripped asunder!”

“Here, here!” cheered Javy from the front row.

“Malcontents!” Vraska addressed them all, “Can you not see the opportunities that lay before you?! Avenging Blazena required a wojek of the Boros and an assassin of the Golgari to work together! There are so many people here! We have officers, scientists, artisans, performers, from across all guilds, from across all walks of life! Do you not think we could achieve our own justice if we worked together?”

Another step forward. She had an idea.

“Levi!” she called out. The barman jumped

“Yes?”

“Does this bar get visited by the Izzet members of the Tin Street gangs? Could you recognise them if you saw them?”

“Yeah,” Levi replied, “Yeah I could. They’re pretty chatty when they want to be.”

“Could you point them out to Dr Marian?” Vraska continued. Marian jumped a little in the front row.

“I could,” Levi replied, “Yeah, I could find Yevver if he came in here.”

Vraska rounded on Marian next.

“Doctor, the labs you work in. Do they have access to Izzet equipment for underwater exploration?”

Dr Marian looked a little taken aback.

“Yes, the labs at Dragon’s Perch definitely would.”

Vraska smiled at her to let her know she was doing well.

“Could you provide Tasia with the equipment they would need to swim down and find their fiancé?”
Tasia gasped, placing both hands against their cheeks.

“And I can track down the man who hurt Ruby through the doctors’ records!” they exclaimed breathlessly, “I am a surgeon! I can do that!”

There was a ripple of talk through the crowd before Vraska cleared her throat.

“Don’t you see?” she addressed them, “We are all amazingly talented individuals, with unique skills we can use to help each other! We don’t need the guilds to obtain the justice we deserve! We don’t need to wait, in agony, for paperwork that will only be ignored! Cut those strings! Damn those laws! Together, we can build ourselves a brighter better future. Divided, the guilds will control us. United, we are stronger! Together, those that hurt us stand no chance! Be malcontent no more! Claim what is rightfully yours. Justice can be ours!”

It started as a ripple of applause. Then Javy let out a whoop and suddenly Marian and Tasia were cheering. From the back of the room, Levi the barman suddenly shouted:

“Justice can be ours!”

A murmur, then a exhalation.

Justice.

Justice.

Justice.

Justice.

It almost became a chant as dozens of voices whispered together. Vraska stood and watched as Malcontents turned to each other, their eyes bright with fresh ideas. The word falling off their lips as if in prayer.

“Our time has come,” Vraska spoke, softer now, “And sometimes, justice can only come from the grave. I will be your knife in the dark. I will be your petrifying glare. I am Vraska, assassin of the Ochran. Come to me, and I will rid this world of the evil that has hurt you.”

With that, she got off the stage amidst rapturous applause.

Her heart was hammering in her chest. Panting for breath as if she had run a mile, she slumped back into her chair. Javy slid her over her milkshake with an exclamation of

“Holy fuck, what was that?”

People were still cheering, talking loudly and excitedly around them.

“A speech,” Vraska gasped, taking a deep swig of frothy strawberry, “An honest speech.”

“You were amazing,” breathed Dr Marian, clearly overwhelmed by the proceedings, “You should be a politician hon. Gods… you’re right. You’re so right.”

“You’re a natural, that’s what you are,” piped up Ruby, “A gods-given natural. I’m ready for some vigilante justice! Tazia, you really going to look through those records for me?”

“Oh course!” Tazia piped up, “And Marian, can you get me diving equipment?”

“I’ll do my best,” Dr Marian promised, “Even if I have to rob the storage.”
“If you want help with Yevver,” Vraska panted, “I’d be more than happy to, if you don’t want blood on your hands.”

Dr Marian smiled at her.

“I’d like that. But you might get a bit busy with everyone else coming to you to get rid of their tormentors.”

“A favour for a favour,” Javy cut in, “That’s how it’s always been, but now more than ever. Vraska, don’t go killing anyone until you’ve got a name checked off on your list. No matter how excited everyone is.”

She still sounded a little awed.

“What list you got?” asked Ruby, leaning over the table, “Azorius bastards who ordered the raids?”

Vraska nodded, pulling out one of her copies of the list.

“Oh, let me look,” exclaimed Tasia, “I might see a patient of mine.”

Vraska was about to pass them both a list, when suddenly the ceiling shook overhead. The lights flickered and the spotlight overhead died. Levi swore from behind the bar, vaulting over the surface and running up the stairs. The cheer suddenly died as an audible boom rocked the entire lounge.

“What list you got?” said a gruff voice from the back. Javy got to her feet, ready to take charge.

“This is Tin Street, we don’t get earthquakes here,” she stated, “Something is-“

She was cut off by the return of Levi and another vedalken, a woman in a sparkling dancer’s outfit.

“There’s a battle!” exclaimed Levi, “The Selesnya are marching on Rakdos territory! The Boros are right in the middle! People are being murdered!”

“Just-just stay down here!” cried the dancer, “Please, you’re safe here. You can stay until the battle passes! They’re a few blocks away but there’s elementals as tall as towers! It’s not safe out there right now!”

There was another boom, followed by an almighty roar.

“What the-“

The vedalken barely had time to exchange a glance before they were hurtling back up the stairs. Javy followed in hot pursuit, in turn chased by Vraska, Ruby, Marian, Tasia and most of the Malcontents. They poured out into the street just in time see a huge gout of flame pass over the roof tops. The air was filled with the flapping of enormous wings, bringing Tin Street to a halt as merchants and customers alike stared upwards at the huge shadow darkening the sky.

“It’s the Firemind,” breathed Marian, clutching her hands to her chest as if in prayer.

Even the nearby battle seemed to have paused. Vraska could hear no signs of it, any sight obscured by the surrounding rooftops. All sound had been replaced by the immense beat of gargantuan wings. Niv Mizzet? Here? She could scarcely believe it. A giant red dragon emerged over the rooftops. Vraska stared at it intently, just in time to see a frightened bird dart straight through his
left back leg. No, not Niv Mizzet, a projection or illusion of Niv Mizzet. Nevertheless, it was still terrifying enough to bring the whole block under its control.

“Citizens of Ravnica,” boomed the illusion. It’s voice was as deep as a dredge pit and twice as dangerous.

“I have an invitation for you. One I implore you to consider.”

Suddenly there was another gout of flame that certainly seemed very real. Vraska couldn’t work out what that was for but assumed something had happened out of their sight.

“This great city of ours hides a deep secret,” the image of Niv Mizzet continued, “My Izzet mages have discovered an ancient maze that runs throughout the district. It is an Implicit Maze, running through the very streets of Ravnica itself, and it’s true route is unknown.”

A maze? Running through Ravnica itself? This was what Jace’s research had been about! The Izzet had finally cracked it!

“But we know at the end lies great power. In order for this maze to be solved, all guilds must participate at once.”

A mighty wing extended across the sky, blocking out the moon.

“Each guild will send one delegate to run the maze. At the appointed time, our champions will meet at the Transguild Promenade to embark on a race through the maze. We shall see who triumphs, who seizes the power for the guild, and who falls to its danger. Until then, I bid you prepare.”

With another almighty roar, the dragon illusion swept up into the air before disappearing, seemingly into the dark clouds overhead. Vraska stood there in a state of something like shock. This was it. The sum of all the Izzet’s plans. The weapon they could use to take over Ravnica was almost in their grasp. She was surprised that they were inviting every other guild to partake in this race. Was this just to kick the others whilst they were down? The Izzet had surely been preparing for this for months! How was anyone else meant to know the route, or even have seen the symbols, with such little time to prepare? Where was Jace? Had he seen this? Did he even understand what was going on? The matter was already decided. She was going to get his memories and bring them back to Ravnica. He would need them. No one else outside the guilds had such knowledge of the Implicit Maze. Perhaps he could stop a disaster!

She turned to Javy, who was still staring up at the sky in horror. She didn’t know what to say. She needed to bail fast. Finally, Javy turned to her, the glint of dragon-fire still in her eyes. She opened her mouth and at first no words came out. She swallowed, and then tried again.

“I kind of liked your speech better.”
Ten Guilds, each vying for a power none of them understand. Five Malcontents, ready to change their own lives for the better. It's time for a maze to be run and plans to be set in motion. All of which will change the face of Ravnica forever.

By the time she extricated herself from the Malcontents, she’d hastily promised to attend three meetings and agreed that Javy could send her messages in the post. She didn’t have the time to argue or think these things over. She couldn’t just planeswalk away in front of all these people who now knew her. They already thought highly of her, but she didn’t want to them to think she was capable of miracles. No, she didn’t have the time to answer those sorts of questions right now. Finally free of the crowd, she slipped into a side alley. Making sure she was obscured from sight, she turned on her heels and vanished in a swirl of shadows. Niv Mizzet hadn’t actually said when the maze running was starting, however it had to be soon. Jace must be the only non-Izzet person, who had researched the maze, and knew its path through Ravnica. Wherever Jace was now, he had to have heard that announcement, or at least would hear about it soon. Without his memories, he was as clueless as any guild was. Yet, he would want to get involved. Vraska knew he was far too curious to let a mystery like this slip by. He could never resist a puzzle and this one was district-sized. Vraska ground her teeth in frustration as she arrived on the pink-sky plane. She was going to have to rest before she could planeswalk again, losing precious time. However, the delay was unavoidable.

The pink-sky plane was devoid of sentient life. She’d explored its grassy plains for miles, climbed the sparse red trees and sat on tall outcroppings of rock. Not once had she seen an animal here, not even any birds or insects. Digging into the ground, she’d found no bones or signs of ruins, though perhaps she had not gone deep enough. No, the pink-sky plane seemed unoccupied except for its flora, and even that was limited to endless grass and trees with smooth red bark. She’d once found a pond but it was completely devoid of algae or fish. As she’d only ever found the one body of water, she’d made that her landmark. A single tree leant out over the water, its roots protruding in all directions. Nestled under the tree, on the ground side, was a dark hollow, obscured by the long grass. It was here that Vraska had placed the little steel box, packed in and covered by grass. It would be completely invisible to those ignorant of its existence. Not that anyone would come by in a place like this.

Vraska sat by the tree to recover from her planeswalk. She pulled handfuls of grass out of the hollow, revealing the jewellery box within. Taking deep breaths, she sat and stared up at the wispy clouds. What would this maze involve? Jace had found bits of the pattern all over the Tenth. Were they going to have each guild rampage around the entire district? That provided so many opportunities for wide-spread property damage, let alone civilian casualties. She couldn’t imagine there would be any sort of rules or regulation for this thing, no matter how much certain guilds tried. Whilst recovering her strength, Vraska idly wondered who the Golgari were sending. Someone strong enough to survive, but disposable enough not to be missed. Probably not a lich or a devkarin. They wouldn’t risk one of their own. No, it seemed sensible to stay out of the way of the maze. If Jace needed her, she’d act, but she wasn’t putting her neck out for the Golgari.
Once her strength had returned, she made a swift trip back to Ravnica. Landing on the balcony outside their flat, she leaned heavily on the railings. The second planeswalk felt like a punch to the gut. She’d never done that twice in one day and didn’t think she’d do it again in a hurry. Staggering inside, she slumped onto the sofa, clutching the jewellery box to her chest. Did she just let them go now? She had absolutely no idea where Jace was. He’d warned her that opening the box on the wrong plane would lose them forever, but he’d said nothing about them having to be together when it happened. She could wait until the maze started, he’d likely be interested in seeing it start. However, would that be too long to wait? What if he needed his memories before then? She was going to have to risk it.

Returning to the balcony, she leaned on the railing, extending her arms out as if she was releasing a bird for flight. She gently opened the latches. The hinges creaked as she released a swirl of blue energy out into the open air. She watched it stream past roof-tops, over tiles and darting about chimneys. A moment later, it was out of sight.

“This better work,” she said to no one in particular.

Though she didn’t know why, there was a feeling of great importance surrounding these memories. Jace had to know. Jace had to remember. Yet she didn’t know what he would achieve if he did.

The following day, Vraska found herself at the back of Bolt from the Blue, nursing a cup of their strongest coffee - a drink so black you could probably cast from it. She was sat in a leather armchair opposite a woman that, before yesterday, she had never anticipated meeting again. Vraska had very little to do with the Izzet. Jace had never mentioned to her where Dr Marian was now. Yet here she was, five years on, and they were having coffee. Vraska was inwardly thankful that they hadn’t ended up back at the Bean Border. She felt like her limbs were made of lead after two planeswalks in one night. Even though she’d slept since, she was grateful for the powerful caffeine boost. Dr Marian seemed to share her passion for very strong coffee, it also helped that she got a guild discount. Vraska couldn’t imagine being Golgari got you a discount anywhere up here.

“So how have you been doing?” asked Dr Marian, “Sorry we didn’t get time to talk much yesterday, it was all a bit hectic with all those new people to meet.”

“I’m doing fine,” Vraska replied, “Not a lot has changed for me. I still work shifts, still live in the same place.”

Marian nodded, taking a sip of her drink.

“How about yourself?” she asked.

Dr Marian shrugged.

“As I said, bouncing between labs. I’ve got a three-month contract in the Pyrology department at Dragon’s Perch at the moment, but last month I was in the Electrostatics department, and before that I was in maintenance. It’s nice to have a single place of work, but you don’t end up there long enough to get to know anyone.”

“What happened with your lab?” Vraska inquired.

“Had to sell it,” Dr Marian replied, tone turning dark, “Couldn’t raise the money to get it back in working order. Guild did heck-all to help me out. It’s always been the same. ‘Don’t see many minotaurs in the Izzet’ they say. You can tell why.”
Vraska wrinkled her nose in disgust. She knew that feeling well. Didn’t see many gorgons around anywhere. It was almost as if certain guilds decided who they thought were valid and punished everyone else.

“But how’s Jace?” asked Marian, “Ral told me he got him out of there when the shop got wrecked. Are you still living together?”

“Yes,” Vraska said, “We’re in the same place we were five years ago. He’s working as a private investigator now. Unguilded, he prefers it that way.”

Dr Marian looked impressed.

“That reminds me,” she said, “Didn’t think of it until about a year ago. Too late to mention it to anyone.”

She took another sip of coffee.

“In the early days of working with Ral, he told me this story. The boy was an amazing mage, but prone to shoving people away in bursts of rage. Trauma will do that to anyone. Problem was, those bursts came with a lot of lightning, so we were working on it together. “

Vraska found herself idly wondering what had happened to Ral, but let Dr Marian continue her story.

“Ral was telling me how he used to raid the Undercity for scrap. To make ends meet and kit himself up for whatever dangers he’d face. If anyone tried to boss him around, well, they’d get zapped. The exception being two kids he’d once met. A tiny boy and a gorgon.”

Vraska’s eyes went wide. That was him? No wonder Jace had pissed him off.

“Yes, I remember that,” she replied, “He tried to kill us in a dumpster because he wasn’t prepared to share several tons of scrap.”

Marian grimaced a little

“That’s not how he tells it, but I imagine your version is a bit less biased. I just thought, how many other human boy-gorgon girl duos are there around the Tenth? It had to be you two. But I don’t think Ral realised when Jace came to work with us.”

“He’s a lot taller now,” Vraska suggested. She’d seen Ral and not recognised him. In her defence, he had been covered in safety equipment and soot.

“Also he angered Ral within minutes of meeting him, or at least that’s what he told me,” she continued, “He made the mistake of poking at Ral’s mind, not knowing that he was also a telepath.”

“Oh,” Marian looked surprised but pleased.

“Jace is a telepath too?”

“Mind mage,” Vraska elaborated, “He was still learning about boundaries those days. What is Ral doing now?”

“Not entirely sure,” Marian was certainly smiling now, “But he graduated top of his year at Dragon’s Perch. Got the Firemind’s Reward and his portrait on the wall and everything. That
guaranteed him a job at Nivix. What he’s doing there, well, they don’t really let outsiders know.”

She sounded immensely proud. It struck Vraska that perhaps Dr Marian’s role in her ex-assistant’s life was rather maternal. It would make sense, considering that a mad lightning mage who crawled through dumpsters probably didn’t have a parent looking out for him back then. They’d even worked on the symptoms of his trauma together. Vraska resisted the urge to ask what that trauma was. It was none of her business. However, it was good to know another street rat had managed to find love and support, in his own guild no less.

“Oh, if you’d like to see Jace again, I’m sure we can meet for coffee sometime,” she suggested, “Not exactly sure where he is right now. He’s probably very interested in all this maze business.”

“That’s going to be a right ruckus if you ask me,” said Dr Marian, snorting a little as she leant back in her chair, “Not just the maze, but what’s going to happen when everyone’s too busy watching it. Everyone’s going to be so busy watching their champions that who knows what’s going to be done behind the authorities’ backs.”

She didn’t sound entirely disproving. Sure she scowled a little, but her tone lifted at the end of her speech, as if she was about to ask a question. Vraska had a good guess as to where she wanted to go with this conversation, so took it there herself.

“We could get up to all sorts, and I’m sure everyone at your guildhall will be far too busy preparing for the maze, or ruining it for other guilds.”

Correct in one!

Dr Marian sighed deeply, but her gaze was determined.

“Would you really help me take down Yevver?” she asked, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial murmur.

“Oh, of course,” Vraska whispered, “If you don’t want to get your hands dirty, I’m happy to do the heavy lifting. It’s my job after all.”

Dr Marian grimaced.

“I know getting rid of him won’t bring me my lab back. It won’t make the Izzet recognise me as the doctor I am. However, it’s a start. And it’ll make me feel better at least.”

“Small steps,” Vraska agreed, “We’d be making sure he can never wreck anyone else’s lab again. You’ll be protecting other small labs, and their futures.”

She knew a murder wasn’t going to change the face of the Izzet entirely. However, they had a solid foundation. Dr Marian would get to avenge her lab and remove the goblin who had wronged her. And perhaps, with her beloved protégé working at Nivix, maybe they could persuade him to change the Izzet League’s mind.

“Oh, of course,” Dr Marian stated, “He won’t be above trying this again. I’m sure there are other lab owners just like me out there. We’d also cut off a section of funding for the goblin gangs. I just, well, I wish I had something to offer you in return. I didn’t know any of the names on that list.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Vraska assured her, “You helped Jace in a very difficult time in his life, in a way that I couldn’t. I certainly owe you for that. And regardless, I want to see him brought to justice too.”
Their plan was very simple. Dr Marian had been to the Bolt and Ball enough to know Yevver’s work schedule, and the fact he liked to linger late to deal with some of his ‘less official’ business. She wasn’t up to the actual killing herself. She shrank at the idea of blood on her hands, so Vraska assured her there would be no blood. A petrification would do the trick, then they only had to work out where to put the body. Vraska suggested putting it up as a warning to other gang members, but Dr Marian argued that might start a turf war. Her suggestion was far more ingenious.

“Yevver and I were in the same business,” she explained, “We worked with artifice, stripping down, repairing, identifying, that sort of thing. More often than not, we’d get findbrokers and other scrap diggers coming in with old bits of machinery trapped in rock. No doubt buried in the Undercity. We have to strip the rock off sometimes using applications of acid. Most labs have a vat of it in their safe storage.”

Vraska liked where this was going but let her continue.

“Your average goblin fits in a vat quite well,” said Dr Marian, “It’s how most get cleaned out. However, if your stone has the right amount of carbon in it – I can’t believe I’m saying this – We could literally make him disappear. Destroyed without a trace…much like my good reputation.”

“I’m not sure what my stone is,” Vraska replied, “But that sounds like an excellent idea.”

“If in doubt, we’ll find a stronger acid.” Dr Marian seemed confident that there would be a stronger acid. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder how many potentially dangerous substances were stored around Tin Street. Probably too many for her to be concerned about all at once. She was going to be extra careful though, next Steam Festival. She would definitely stay at home and away from any local labs. That didn’t even count whatever the Tin Street goblin gangs hauled around. Vraska was willing to bet there was a store of explosive powder somewhere it shouldn’t be. There was nothing a goblin criminal liked more than exploding and entering.

“So…” asked Ruby, two days later, “How are you feeling?”

Dr Marian took a deep breath.

“Like I’d been carrying lead around all this time, and I hadn’t even noticed,” she replied, “Like I can finally breathe without that weight on my back. I was always worried, what if someone else ended up like me? What if I was the only one stopping Yevver from making enough money to fund some grand destructive scheme? Well, he certainly won’t be doing that anymore.”

“Good girl,” Ruby clapped her on the back, causing her to splutter a little on her ice cream. Vraska sat back in her chair, looking out over the railings towards the Transguild Promenade. There were huge crowds gathering below to watch the race start. However, none of them seemed to have got the bright idea to sit up on a rooftop café away from the warriors, scientists and goodness knows what the champions had brought with them.

“Tell me about the acid,” said Tasia, wings aflutter in excitement as they picked at their sundaes with a long black spoon. It turned out Rakdos ice cream parlours were definitely a thing, and their cutlery matched the guild’s décor. The surgeon had a sundae of charcoal-infused ice cream, coffee flavoured, mixed in with scoops of strawberry, and topped with dark chocolate sauce and a cherry. Vraska had opted for a black coffee and a chocolate ‘bleeding heart’, which consisted of cherry ice cream covered in a dark chocolate heart-shaped shell. Javy, who was keeping a close eye on the proceedings below, had a mountain of vanilla covered in sprinkles. Meanwhile Ruby, who had chosen the place, had just ordered a lemonade for herself and a floral tea for Dr Marian.

“I mean, I’ve seen acid burns,” Tasia continued, “But I’m usually on the fixing and grafting side,
not the actual burning side.”

“There wasn’t really that kind of burn,” said Dr Marian, “Just a really foul smell as the stone bubbled away. I’m glad I had that old safety equipment in my flat, because it probably would’ve gassed us both. Really bad ventilation in that place, the guild really should have shut it down.”

It was certainly Vraska’s first assassination wearing a labcoat, breathing mask, goggles and a hairnet. It turned out Dr Marian was fine with murdering the goblin, but she wasn’t going to let Vraska do it without proper laboratory attire. She was grateful, but that was a slightly odd set of priorities in her mind.

“It must be a god-given relief,” said Ruby, “To know the guy who hurt you won’t do it again. I’d give my right arm for that.” She turned to Vraska.

“You’re a miracle worker you know? Pass me your list if you’ve got it. I’ve got to get in on that magnificent petrifying action.”

Vraska smiled. It was kind of rare to hear her magic praised. It was only usually Jace who did that, but this little group appreciated it far more than she could ever expect. She passed a copy to Ruby, and then to Tasia, who looked very interested over their sundae.

“I’ll swap you,” said Ruby, passing her a bright red leaflet in exchange. Vraska looked at it. On the front page, was the familiar picture of a red rose, laid on its side, and the title “Scarlet Rose Academy.”

“Oh, this is a leaflet for your school,” Vraska commented. Ruby nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah. If you ever need any advice, come and visit me. Free first session with that card I gave you a few days ago.”

“Advice?” Vraska flipped the leaflet over and saw a small map pointing towards the academy.

“The sort of advice you can only get from someone who’s lived the Rakdos life,” Ruby explained, “You see, whilst I am loving all this dance of life and death stuff you’ve got going on - in the Rakdos, we know that life’s just one big performance from curtain up to curtain down at the end of day.”

“Ruby,” growled Javy, but she didn’t turn away from her view of the promenade.

“If you think about it, it is,” Ruby continued, completely ignoring the wojek, “We perform our roles in society, we put on different faces for our friends, our colleagues, our family. Love, Gender, Joy, Pleasure, Pain, it’s all one big performance! We have to act our feelings in a way people expect or they just don’t understand!”

Vraska couldn’t disagree. She never thought she’d find Rakdos philosophy so compelling. She hadn’t even thought there was Rakdos philosophy.

“And sadly,” Ruby continued, “There are people out there who just don’t know how to put on a performance when it really matters. It’s not their fault. They likely grew up around adults too modest to talk about such things. Or they just didn’t have anyone to explain and the libraries aren’t as full of educational literature as they once were. The Scarlet Rose Academy provides a service that so many Ravnicans require. From the birds and the bees to really putting on a show for your partner, or partners, we cover it all!”

What did – Oh, Vraska understood now. Ruby was right. She’d had no one to explain sex-stuff to
her and she’d had to read it all in books. That was really useful! She was definitely blushing now, but still, that was something people like her would need. People without carers or parents or anyone to explain that sort of thing. Or just people who wanted to commit certain sexual acts but didn’t know how.

“Th-Thank you,” she stammered, “I’ll certainly consider it.”

Ruby beamed at her.

“Who knew Lady Death could also be as cute as hell.”

Vraska wasn’t sure what to say to that so gave an uneasy laugh into her coffee.

“You’re flustering her Ruby,” Dr Marian chipped in, “We’re here to relax, aren’t we?”

“Yes, and watch the champions!” Tasia exclaimed, “I heard from the hybrids on reception that Biomancer Vorel is running for the Simic! He’s like one of the best summoners in the guild. I heard he summoned a Skyswallower so big that it ate an Orzhov airship without even chewing!”

“Now that sounds like a show,” Ruby commented, “I haven’t heard anything about what’s going on in Rix Maadi. Politics aren’t really my cup of tea. But the Boss will probably send some big demon or a blood-witch or something. What do you think Javy?”

She called out to the wojek, who was still leaning against the railings.

“We’ve got Tajic,” Javy replied, “That man has seen some shit, let me tell you. Either some angel blessed him at birth or he’s just naturally indestructible. My little sister has the hugest crush on him, don’t see it myself, but he’s a great soldier no doubt about it.”

“I reckon the Izzet will build something,” Dr Marian said, “At least to help their champion out. They’ve had info on the maze longer than all the other guilds. They might try making some sort of super-soldier.”

“The Izzet are advancing people too?” asked Tasia. Dr Marian shook her head with a smile.

“No, I mean weirds, or a construct of some sort. They’ve had all this time, they could build something perfect for the job.”

There was a slight lull in the conversation before Tasia asked.

“What about the Golgari?”

Vraska shrugged.

“No idea. I don’t get involved with my guild hall. I would bet they’re not sending a lich. The higher ups wouldn’t put their undead necks on the line.”

“I’d like to meet a lich,” commented Ruby, “An intelligent undead is really something to-“

Javy suddenly cut her off.

“Quick, they’re starting!”

They dragged their seats closer to the railing, Tasia almost dropping the contents of their sundae into their lap. Javy finally sat down as a figure in Izzet colours ascended the stage. He was a bit too far away for Vraska to get a proper look. That was a price she was willing to pay for safely
being out of the way of the impending chaos.

“Attention Maze-Runners and Delegations of the Guilds!” The man’s voice boomed out, his gauntlets crackling with red energy as he magnified his voice loud enough to be heard over the crowds.

“My name is Ral Zarek, official representative of the Izzet League!”

To the left of Vraska, Dr Marian let out a loud gasp. For a moment, she tore herself away from the ceremony below to take in the minotaur’s reaction. It had to be same Ral – Dr Marian’s ex-assistant was now the League’s official representative! She had to be pleased. Vraska passed Dr Marian a table napkin as she began to well up with pride.

As they watched on, the assembly soon turned to a shouting match. This was swiftly ended by a rumble of thunder and dark clouds swarming in from overhead. Vraska looked up in alarm as, just as swiftly, the weather returned to being sunny once more. Did Ral do that? Was he a weather mage and not just a lightning mage? It seemed a little too much to have control over the sky! She watched on as each guild runner introduced themselves. So the Golgari had sent a troll. Powerful but disposable as she’d thought. Really, Jarad’s administration was becoming more predictable as the years past. She might have even been happy if they’d proved her wrong. Probably because that meant there was going to be one less intact lich in Ravnica. But no, they’d sent a troll.

“Where’s the Selesnya?” Tasia wondered aloud.

They had a point. Vraska scanned the crowd but there were no centaurs, no wolf-riders, not even a robed elf amongst them. Why hadn’t the Selesnya showed up?

“No, there she is!” Javy pointed at a solitary figure who was wending her way through the crowd. Vraska felt her heart miss a beat. It was Emmara, here for the Selesnya, but utterly alone. Where was her escort? Where were her guard? More importantly, where was Jace? She couldn’t see him anywhere, but that was probably to be expected. Who knew who he was pretending to be in this crowd? She watched Emmara introduce herself and finally only one guild remained – the Izzet.

“I reckon that glowy-“ Tasia was cut off mid-sentence as Ral promptly murdered the person beside him. Said person was a amalgamation of different types of swirling energy, all plated up in mizzium, but had seemed to be a living being. The electric glow faded from whatever they were, sucked straight into Ral’s gauntlets. Dr Marian gasped as the being collapsed into a puddle of swiftly-melting ice.

“I am Ral Zarek!” announced the guildmage, “And I am the mazerunner for the Izzet!”

Still an asshole, Vraska couldn’t help but think. She would bet that energy figure was supposed to be the runner, but the lightning mage had taken things into his own mizzium-gloved hands.

Ruby started clapping as Javy gasped at the blatant crime before her very eyes. Vraska glanced at the teacher who seemed to be treating this as one great big show. In a blast of lightning, the maze-running began and chaos reigned down on the Transguild Promenade. Vraska was infinitely glad that they had chosen to be up here.

“Encore! Encore!” Ruby cried out as people started to butcher each other in the race to reach their first gates.

“I like this version of politics,” commented Tasia, “Much more exciting than in the papers.”

Javy looked like she was somewhere between frustration and despair.
“There’s going to be so much mess,” she sighed.

Vraska turned to Dr Marian. She was staring at the remnants of the stage Ral Zarek had been standing on. It was now thoroughly deserted, Ral and his entourage were long gone, leaving only a few stunned citizens in their wake. Dr Marian followed the trail of wreckage they’d left behind and sighed.

“There he is,” Vraska commented.

“There he is,” Dr Marian agreed, “He just sucked the energy out of a level nine weird, and made it thunder.”

Vraska couldn’t tell if she was impressed or worried, perhaps a little of both.

“He’s very powerful,” she assured her, “He’ll probably be fine.”

Dr Marian laughed.

“Oh I’m not concerned for Ral,” she said, though her laugh certainly betrayed her anxiety, “I’m mostly worried for anyone he comes up against. Being hit by that much electric energy, it could wipe out your average battalion I’ll tell you that.”

This only confirmed her expectations.

“A lot of people are going to die for this maze,” Vraska commented, as the chaos began to die down below, “Not just the runners.”

Vraska and the other Malcontents did the sensible thing and decided to stay well out of the way of any maze-running. They lingered in the café for a little while longer, before Ruby and Tasia had to get back to work, agreeing with Vraska to meet at Bolt from the Blue next week. Vraska was swiftly learning that having a social circle involved drinking a lot of coffee. Which was fine, she liked coffee, but the sheer amount of caffeine she’d consumed recently was playing havoc on her nerves.

Where was Jace? He wasn’t with Emmara. She hadn’t seen him the crowds. He hadn’t even sent her another one of those glowing blue message orbs. She thought he might send her something once he’d got his memories back, but no. No sight, no contact, absolutely nothing to let her know whether he was alive or dead. He’d saved Emmara from being kidnapped and Emmara looked like she was fine. Vraska had completely lost track of her in the starting pandemonium. If Emmara was running the maze, then it was far too dangerous to chase after her and ask. But what was she supposed to do? She couldn’t just do nothing! Their distress necklaces were mechanical marvels but utterly useless for actually knowing where the other was. Her inability to do anything was only making her panic worse. She settled for checking locations Jace might frequent, avoiding anywhere particularly violent in case it was maze-business. He wasn’t in any shop in Tin Street. No one had seen him at the post office. He wasn’t in the Orzhov park nor any of the libraries in walking distance from their flat. She went to the bank, but Malena just looked confused when she said she was looking for him. No. Jace had visited none of their usual places recently. This was driving her mad!

She cut herself off coffee, unsure whether her shaking hands were due to caffeine or fear. She returned home and paced their flat – compulsively tidying all the while. Even a bubble bath didn’t soothe her nerves, nor did baking. She’d secretly hoped the smell of lemon cake might have magically attracted Jace home. He did like to turn up, seemingly out of nowhere, when she tried to bake. No such luck this time. She wrapped up and put away the lemon cake for tomorrow before
heading to a terrible night’s rest.

Her sleep was full of nightmares about any number of horrible things that could have happened to him. In one dream, he was crushed by the Golgari troll. In another, his old mentor had found him many years on, kidnapping him and whisking him away where Vraska could never find him. With a multiverse of possibilities before them both, there was a multiverse of options for what could go wrong. In one terrible dream, Jace had given his life to save Emmara and that blue orb was actually his final message, the last she’d ever hear from him. She woke up in tears multiple times during the night, clutching her pillow like he often did in his sleep. Willing her desperation to bring him home.

Losing count of how many times she’d awoken, she pulled herself out of bed just after dawn. Deciding her bed wasn’t helping her, she dragged her blankets into the living room, blinking at the slivers of sunlight weakly intruding between the curtains. She lay face first on the sofa cushions, grunting as she felt something heavy under one of them. She dug around a bit, found three zinos and a leather mallet, before casting them to one side with a solid thud and a clatter of change. Content that the sofa was now lump-free, she wrapped herself up in the blankets. Lying upon the sofa, she decided she looked very much like a cocoon - waiting to hatch a particularly stressed-out butterfly. Or a moth. No, Tasia was the moth… ugh, she wasn’t coping at all.

About an hour later, at least according to the noisy clocktower nearby, Vraska heard a thud coming from their door. She tried to get up before promptly remembering she was a blanket cocoon as she rolled onto the floor. Bleary-eyed and entirely not with it, she felt about for a knife, before realising that she was in her pyjamas and those were distinctly knife-free.

“Vraska!” There was another thud and finally Vraska realised what the loud noises were. That was the sound their lock made! That was the door!

“Jace!” she exclaimed. It came out as a particularly loud mumble in her half-asleep state. She looked up, sweeping her hair from her face as she disentangled herself from her blankets.

He looked as exhausted as she felt. He was covered in dust, blood, muck and what could possibly be slime. His hair was pasted to his face, as if he’d received a soaking somewhere in that deluge of nastiness, and there were deep shadows under his eyes. His hands were quivering as he came and sat beside her on the floor, leaving a mucky trail on the carpet. Vraska thought about complaining but didn’t have the energy. She was just so glad he was back. He was clearly relieved to see her too.

“I’m so glad you’re ok,” he said, as if she was the one who’d gone missing for days on end, “I thought maybe, I don’t know, a lot of innocent people died in the running.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” she replied, “How are you? What were you doing? I-I was really scared. I thought something had happened to you. I thought you might be dead.”

Exhaustion led her straight down the path of honesty with no energy for pretences. For once she spoke first without really thinking. A night of seeing Jace die and die again, was enough to send her emotions into overload.

Jace immediately looked stricken at her concern.

“No! I’m fine I promise!” He reached out as if to pull her into a hug, before catching himself mid-gesture. He hovered there, arms outstretched, looking momentarily awkward before Vraska realised what he was trying to do. She took his hands in each of hers and gently lowered them. They sat on the floor, holding hands. Jace started gently rubbing his thumb against one of her
palms in small circles. Vraska gave a little shiver at the unexpected sensation but it was good reminder than he was here, in person. He was safe. She gently squeezed his hands to show she approved of the gesture. She couldn’t manage an embrace right now. Her nerves were already shattered, bodily contact would send her into sheer panic. But this? This was ok. Nice even. The movement was strangely comforting.

“Th-Thank you,” she said, wanting to explain how much the gesture meant. How she wanted comfort, wanted an embrace, but her mind just wouldn’t let her. She could tell Jace wanted a hug. And she wanted to be able to give him one. It was just, well, she couldn’t.

“I was so worried,” she continued, “Where were you? What happened?”

Jace glanced down at their joined hands and bit his lip.

“Well, err…” He glanced up through his fringe, uncertainty plain in his gaze, almost as if he didn’t quite know what was going on.

“I,” he tried again, “Well, I’m the Living Guildpact now.”

Vraska felt like her brain had shut down. She knew those words. All of them. She knew what they meant, but it was if they were never meant to go in that order. She stared at him as he nervously waited for her reaction.

“You’re…the what?”
Chapter Summary

Change is coming. Both Jace and Vraska try to get their heads round what has happened as the consequences of the maze come thick and fast.

Vraska stared at him. Jace opened his mouth, closed it again, before sighing deeply.

“I’m the Living Guildpact,” he stated, “I know. I wouldn’t believe it if an avatar of Azor hadn’t spoken in my head.”

She was going to need him to back up a little and start from the beginning. What avatar of Azor? What did he mean by ‘Living’ Guildpact? Why was another being in his head?

“Please,” she replied, “Start from the beginning?”

Jace gave her a slightly hopeless look, as if even he didn’t know when the beginning was. He leaned back against the sofa, the shadows under his eyes becoming even more visible in the faint light coursing through the gaps in the curtains.

“Can we sleep first?” he asked, “Or-or can I bathe first, then sleep, and then try to work out what the hell is going on.”

That seemed like the most sensible option. Whilst he went to take a bath, Vraska hauled all her bedding back into their room. She removed Jace’s laundry from his bed, which she’d dumped there because it was her turn with the airer, so he would have somewhere to lie down when he got there. It was his job to put it away, but the floor would do for now. She got back into bed after pulling the curtains closed a little firmer, and waited for him to come back. If they were simply going to sleep, there wasn’t much need to wait for him. However, she felt the need to remain awake until she knew he wasn’t bleeding under all that grime. She wouldn’t be able to tell until he’d washed it all off. Thankfully, Jace returned in one piece and a fresh set of pyjamas. Despite the fact it was dawn, he wished her a good night before collapsing into bed, hugging his pillow tight and falling asleep straight away. It took Vraska a little longer, but at least this rest was nightmare free.

Breakfast was an awkward affair. Not only because they were having it far too late in the day, but Vraska was clearly waiting for answers that Jace rather obviously did not want to give. Yet, as they got dressed for the day and returned to the living room, the tension finally broke.

“Ok,” Jace stated, as if he had come to some sort of momentous conclusion. He sat on the sofa and Vraska, who had been staring at their suspiciously-clean fireplace, instantly joined him.

“I think saying this out loud might help me get my head round it,” Jace continued. Vraska merely nodded, not wanting to interrupt what was very good progress.

“The Implicit Maze,” Jace began, “Was a failsafe left by Azor – the parun of the Azorius Guild, in case the original Guildpact broke down.”

Right. That made sense.
“The patterns I discovered all over the district were the route of said maze. It passes through ten guildgates, one for each guild, and finished at the Forum of Azor. The purpose of the maze is for all ten guilds to run it at once, and then meet at the Forum, to be judged.”

He took a deep breath.

“If the Guilds didn’t learn how to get along by the time they got to the forum, the Supreme Verdict would be delivered. An immense blast that would destroy most of Ravnica.”

“What?” Vraska couldn’t remain silent at that. Total guild collaboration was nigh impossible! Why would you set such a catastrophic punishment for such an impossible task?!

“I know right?” Jace turned to look at her, “No where in the pattern, or the guildgates, did it say that the plane would be destroyed if everything went wrong. Everyone was racing towards their own doom. It’s hard to believe that a guild founder would make it so it was his law or annihilation.”

It was the Azorius founder so Vraska could believe it a little. Still, that was far too extreme!

“When I—” Jace cut himself off, turning in his seat to face her properly.

“Thank you for returning my memories. Without them, Ravnica might have been doomed. If I hadn’t had those, there’s no way I would have been able to get to the Forum.”

“You’re welcome,” Vraska replied, still taking in the magnitude of what had happened. If she hadn’t got those memories, then Ravnica would’ve been destroyed? Gods, this had been a lot more dangerous than even her nightmares led her to believe!

“I realised, just before the maze started, that I had to get all ten guild runners to the forum at once,” Jace continued, “I also had to help Emmara as she was acting without any sort of escort.”

“So you were at the starting ceremony?” she asked. Jace nodded.

“Invisible, but yes. Were you?”

“I was watching from a nearby building,” she replied, “I didn’t want to be in the thick of it.”

“Sensible,” Jace sighed, “But, well, we managed to get everyone in the forum without murdering each other but there was no way they were going to get along. The forum is presided over by an avatar, or similar, constructed of Azor’s law magic called the Bailiff. It ruled that cooperation had failed and started to give the runners the ability to set off the verdict.”

Vraska stayed silent, wondering how the hell Jace had managed to stop aeons-old law magic.

“Then I did something I’d only tried once before, and I think it almost took me out,” Jace continued, “I linked everyone’s minds. All ten maze runners with my own. It was like being torn to pieces, but in that moment, everyone understood what the others were thinking. Everyone could see what meant most to the other guilds, what they fought for. It was perfect cooperation. The Bailiff saw this and the next thing I knew, it was talking to me, saying that I was the Living Guildpact.”

“So,” Vraska was piecing things together now she wasn’t as exhausted, “So, you’re a living form of the old laws. All that magic put into a person?”

Jace nodded.
“Niv Mizzet asked me, in person, whether he could go to war with the Selesnya. I said no, and he just didn’t. I’m the living law of Ravnica. I’m part of this plane now. It’s-a lot of responsibility. I didn’t think anything like-like this would happen.”

Vraska couldn’t disagree with any of that. Jace was the law of Ravnica. Jace was the Guildpact. This was a lot to take in.

“The Azorius want me to set up a government,” Jace continued, sounding less confident the more he spoke, “Like a Guildpact Central Office, where I keep peace between guilds. They’ve already chosen a building but I’ve got to think of what goes in it. I’ve-I’ve got until tomorrow when I have to meet Captain Lavinia.”

That was a lot to decide very fast!

“Can-Can you help me?” Jace asked, “In all honesty, I have no idea what I’m doing. I just didn’t want our home to be destroyed. I didn’t want to rule a plane but-but now I have to!”

His stammering was getting worse. So clearly out of his depth, he begged her with a pleading gaze to make the sudden responsibility a little easier. Once again, he truly looked like he wanted a hug that she could not give him. She offered him her hands with an apologetic smile. He took them immediately.

“We can do this together,” she promised him, “I’ll help you wherever I can. Let’s try and get this building plan done today and then we’ll have one less thing to worry about.”

He nodded in agreement, even though Vraska couldn’t quite believe what they were saying. They had been street rats! Eight years ago, they had no home, barely a zino to their names, and now, not only did they have a home, and plenty of money, but Jace was this world’s government? How did that even happen?! Well she knew how, but that didn’t make it any more likely.

Not knowing exactly where they should start, Vraska found several large sheets of paper left over from Jace’s lab, whilst he made tea and dug out a large box of coloured pens. They covered the carpet in paper and sat on the floor, much like two children drawing pictures rather than two adults planning a government.

“Where do we even start?” Jace exclaimed, staring at all the blank paper before them. Vraska gave it a moment’s consideration before she was equally stumped.

“Do you know what the Living Guildpact is supposed to do?” she asked. Jace frowned.

“Keep the peace between guilds?” he suggested. He got onto all fours and wrote that in big letters across the top of the papers.

“Ok,” Vraska surveyed the large blue letters, “Maybe we could break that down into what this government would need to act on to do that? Like, departments or something?”

She picked up a red pen and wrote “NEW LAW” underneath the first title. Jace then added “INTER-GUILD CRIME” next to it.

“I think that’s what a cross-guild government should do,” he commented, “I mean, if one guild hurts another, we need someone impartial to deal with it.”

“That’s a good idea,” Vraska replied. Jace smiled, evidently pleased at the praise.

“How about a neutral space for other guild-collaboration things?” she suggested. Jace added
“GUILD COLLABORATION SPACE” to their paper in another colour of pen. He then paused, before writing on the complete opposite side of the papers. “HOUSE.”

“House?” Vraska repeated.

“We get a new house,” Jace stated, “Captain Lavinia said there were living quarters in the new building. Big enough to house a family, so we can both live there.”

That was unexpectedly exciting, but not really what they were focusing on right now.

“Well we’ve got three headings,” Vraska continued, “Maybe we add what facilities we need to accomplish those three things? You do the Crime Bureau, as you’re the investigator, I’ll do the collaboration space.”

Jace nodded and they set about scribbling on the large pieces of paper. Vraska broke down the collaboration space into all the rooms she’d thought they’d need. This started with multiple meeting rooms – big enough to house enormous guild leaders like Niv Mizzet and Isperia, but small enough to have some semblance of privacy. They would need facilities to record the meetings, so there should be an office with appropriate storage for note-takers and organisers to safely transcribe and store what had been said. Also a kitchen to prepare refreshments and some bathrooms. Vraska added a new large title to the pre-existing three called “PEOPLE/BUILDING MANAGEMENT.” This would involve the day to day running of the place. From cleaners to receptionists (she assumed there would be a reception), to scribes and hospitality, they would need a lot of people to run this place. They would also need accountants and supervisors, people who knew how to do pay-roll and manage utilities. This was a really big endeavour and Vraska hoped that Jace wasn’t supposed to find all these people himself. She made sure to add FROM ALL GUILDS in big capitals under recruitment. If they hired more from one guild than others then it wouldn’t be a neutral space.

Meanwhile, the now-Guildpact was going to town on ideas for his Criminal Investigation bureau. Vraska glanced over to see he had decided on offices for each of his investigators, an evidence lock-up, an armoury to outfit his cross-guild police force, a staff common room and kitchen, and two meeting rooms solely for investigation purposes. Also he seemed very excited about having a lab. Vraska thought this was a good idea, as the investigators would need someone to look at their evidence and samples to work out what they were. However, when she thought of labs, only one person came to mind. Could she suggest? Would that be favouritism? She wanted a full-time job and they’d need someone who knew how to outfit a lab.

“Can I make a suggestion?” Vraska asked, putting her pen down for a moment. Jace looked up at her. There was green ink smudged across his nose like war paint. She laughed a little, grabbing a tissue and wiping it off for him. He wrinkled his nose at the unexpected gesture but smiled.

“What’s your idea?” he asked.

“I think I know someone who can run your lab,” she said, “I ran into a familiar face whilst you were maze-running. She’s got experience running a lab and has been looking for a permanent job for the last five years.”

She watched the cogs turn in Jace’s head just a for moment.

“Dr Marian?!” he proclaimed. She nodded.

“She’s currently on a three month contract at Dragon’s Perch. But I reckon she’d ditch that if it meant she could run her own lab again.”
Jace gave a happy gasp before writing her name in bold capitals next to his lab idea.

“You didn’t say you’d seen her again,” he replied excitedly.

“You weren’t around for me to tell you,” Vraska stated, “But she’s fine. She asked after you, how you’ve been. I’m sure she’ll be very happy to see you again.”

“What happened with Yeever?” Jace asked. Vraska tried to remain impassive, but her hair curled around her shoulders – a telltale sign that she was slightly smug.

“Oh, he’s been dealt with. He won’t be ruining anyone else’s lives.”

Jace squinted at her.

“Did you kill him?” he asked, “I mean, yes, you killed him, didn’t you?”

There was no point denying it.

“He was involved in criminal gangs,” she explained, “Funding them even. Besides, Dr Marian needed the satisfaction of knowing he was gone. She even asked me to.”

Jace gave a shaky breath.

“If I’m the living law on Ravnica, what do I do if I know you’ve killed people?”

“Assassination technically isn’t a crime,” Vraska stated, “I checked. Murder is. But there’s a fun loophole, probably put there by the Dimir, that you need to have a motive for it to be a murder. As the motive technically isn’t yours, you’re not responsible. And trying to make a living isn’t a crime.”

Jace looked very relieved by that.

“Ok, I’m just not going to mention that you’re an assassin to anyone, if that’s all right.”

“Fine by me.”

They moved onto the law-making side of things. Vraska hoped that this Azorius Captain would step in and aid them on this, because neither of them knew how laws got made. They planned for meetings rooms and council spaces, as well as a lot of archiving for the legal procedures. They would need ambassadors representing every guild. Also, a library of current legislation to work off. This building had better be big, because they were going to need to fit a lot in it, let alone all the offices, bathrooms, storage cupboards and other day-to-day essentials for any structure containing people.

By mid-afternoon, they had filled their pieces of paper and rolled them up neatly – ready to present to Captain Lavinia the following day. Vraska had made a concise document with the bare details of each of their planned departments, in case the Azorius didn’t accept giant pieces of paper that looked like it was written on by school children. Their planning had made them very hungry, so they agreed to go get take-out. If they were moving to wherever the Guildpact offices were, this might be the last time they got to experience a proper Tin Street take-away.

“I think the building is on the Transguild Promenade,” Jace commented, “So I guess we won’t be around here as much anymore.”

They returned home to find someone there waiting for them. Emmara Tandris was pacing the
balcony outside their front door, and looked rather surprised to see them coming from the opposite direction. They invited her in and Jace went to put their take-out food in the kitchen for later – it would be rude to eat whilst they had a guest.

Despite the ordeal of maze running, Emmara looked like her usual radiant self. She had the remains of a cut on her right cheek and one of her hands was bandaged. Apart from that, she simply looked like she’d had a small crafting accident, or tripped on a piece of furniture. Perfect as always, she entered before fixing Vraska with a worried look.

“Can you answer something for me,” she stated, no questioning in her tone at all, “Honestly.”

Vraska was a little taken aback by her seriousness.

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

“Are you like him?” Emmara demanded, pointing towards the kitchen where Jace was now making tea, “Can you go to other worlds? Are you from another world? Do you have powers no one on Ravnica can truly explain?”

“Jace,” Vraska hissed out loud. What the fuck had he done? Planeswalker rule number one! Never tell anyone that you’re a planeswalker!

“Please,” Emmara said, “Just tell me.”

Well she couldn’t do any more harm now could she?

“I am from Ravnica,” Vraska stated, “I was born in the Undercity in Dredgefold Docks, my mother was called Yveta. I’m Ravnican, you can probably find some Azorius records from when I was a child.”

Emmara nodded, but was clearly waiting for the rest of her answer.

“But yes, I can go to other worlds. I don’t go as often as Jace does because I have a job here. I don’t think my powers are particularly exceptional, but I am very strong for a gorgon of my age.”

Emmara looked like she had deflated a little.

“And why did you keep this a secret? Why did you and Jace hide this from me?”

Ah. There was the problem.

“Because when you have a lot of power, people make demands of you. Demands you often can’t fulfil,” she replied, “I admit, I was the one who told Jace not to tell anyone. But that was because an older planeswalker once told me.”

“Here on Ravnica?” Emmara asked.

“No,” Vraska replied swiftly, before she went looking for more planeswalkers and got herself hurt.

“On another world. When I was a child, I managed to travel, planeswalk we call it, out of where I was being tortured. I deliriously skipped worlds like a stone on a pond, until a woman found me. She sang to me from one of her magic scrolls. Her healing was much like the Selesnya’s chants, it saved me from dying and then she explained to me what I was and how I should never tell anyone else. I owe her so much, I passed her message on to Jace as that’s what I thought she’d want.”

Emmara looked very conflicted at this story. As she stood, deep in thought, Jace reappeared from
the kitchen. This seemed to make up her mind.

“Jace,” she turned to address him, “I need something from you.”

He looked a little bewildered but said,

“What is it?”

“I am a proud member of the Selesnya guild. In order for me to do my duty to my guild, I need to be able to share everything with them. I need to commune with Trostani, with the woodshapers and guildmages, with every soul in the Conclave. That is my charge and my guild oath. Do you see?”

He frowned.

“You want to tell them about me. About planeswalkers. You can’t – it’s not something they should know. It’s not something they will be able to understand.”

“I agree,” Emmara gave a little nod, as if acknowledging the truth despite her own misgivings. Vraska watched on, wondering how this revelation had come about in the first place. How had she found out? Why did Jace tell her?

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Emmara continued, “You’re correct that I can’t tell them. You’re both correct, planeswalkers need to be a secret. Their existence being known? That would be a witch-hunt like no other. They can never know. It would kill them know. Just like it’s killing me to know. Jace?”

Vraska took a step back. She knew what she was about to ask. It was a magic only Jace could perform. But to willingly do that to yourself? It had been painful enough when Jace had done it on a temporary basis. But to ask someone to remove your memories completely?

Jace could no longer look at Emmara.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured.

“That’s why you have to help me,” she pleaded.

“I can’t,” he protested, “I can’t touch your memories. I can’t do that to you.”

“You must,” she said, “I can’t live this way. This is too much. Too much for me to keep secret from everyone! I can’t forget it by myself. I can’t do anything about it. It’s just there, in my mind!”

This was painful to watch. Vraska could understand both sides of the argument, but she wasn’t part of the Selesnya. She couldn’t comprehend how hard it was for a member of the conclave to keep secrets from the entire guild. Being part of the Selesnya was about community, sharing, openness… Jace was asking her to go against her core beliefs.

“But it’s the truth,” Jace begged weakly.

“That doesn’t matter,” Vraska said softly, “It’s hurting her too much. It’s shaken the very foundation of her beliefs. Jace, please, do as she asks.”

Emmara looked at her, surprised and extremely grateful.

“Jace, you have to put me back to where I was before. You have to take these memories from me. With them, I can never open up to my guild again. I can never be Selesnya.”
Jace ran a hand through his hair, fisting the loose ends at the back of his neck. He scowled deeply, taking deep deliberate breaths.

“Please,” Emmara begged. She was on the brink of tears.

“Jace, please,” Vraska added, “Give her back her guild and give the Selesnya back their heroine. It’s what the Living Guildpact would do.”

This seemed to clinch it. He inhaled deeply. His eyes momentarily glowed blue. There was a tension in the air, like the pressure before rainfall, and then it was gone. It had passed so quickly that Vraska was taken aback by the simplicity of it all.

Emmara blinked once, twice, and then smiled. She offered him another wooden leaf.

“In case you need me,” she said. Jace took it.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, staring at their feet.

“No, thank you,” Emmara smiled at them both before making her way towards the door.

“I look forward to working with you, at the new offices.”

Jace managed a weak smile and a small wave as she made her way from the flat.

As soon as she was gone, he sank to the floor, shaking. Vraska instantly hastened to his side. She hesitated for a moment before putting a hand on his shoulder, hoping that would be enough to comfort him.

“You did the right thing,” she assured him. He shook his head.

“But why did I have to do it at all?” he retorted, “Why do I have to be the one to mess with people’s minds? Why do I have to be the one with that responsibility? I almost doomed Ravnica by giving up my memories. I could have so easily stumbled when I was in Emmara’s mind, I could have ruined her entirely! It would have been so simple to twist her mind beyond repair. That isn’t the kind of power anyone should have. Who am I to make that choice for someone else? What gives me the right to change something so fundamental about a person?”

Vraska had no answers to that so she did her best to comfort him.

“But you saved Ravnica and you didn’t hurt Emmara. On the contrary, you made her happy. Our powers are as a much part of us as our limbs, removing or ignoring them would be futile. Maybe we should celebrate that you are the one with this power, not someone who would use it for terrible purposes? You’ve helped a woman reunite with her guild today. You saved an entire world yesterday. Your powers are as capable as achieving good as they are for ill. And because you’ve got them, well, they’re certainly more likely to be good.”

He glanced up at her through his fringe, his eyes a little watery. He sought the hand on his arm with his own and soon they were holding hands once more. They had done that a lot lately.

“I wish I believed in me as much as you do,” he said, “I’ve done some really awful things with my magic. I’ve killed-“

She cut him off.

“You’re talking to the assassin,” she said, “I’m never going to judge you for killing, especially
under pressure. Let me worry about the death, and you can worry about making the world a better place.”

He laughed a little.

“That’s a lot to w-“

He was cut off by a loud bang on the door. They both jumped to their feet. Racing to the door, Vraska used her superior height to lean over Jace and peek through the peephole.

There was a man on their balcony wearing the most unmistakably Izzet garb imaginable. Yet that wasn’t all she recognised about him this time.

She hissed loudly. Jace looked at her, also scowling, as she opened the door, keeping it on the latch.

“Fuck off,” she told the chimney thief through the crack in the door. He merely put a hand on his hip and rolled his eyes.

“Friendly,” he commented. Jace crouched a little to get a look through the door under Vraska’s arm.

“What do you want Zarek?” he demanded, trying to look authoritative despite his weird position. Vraska recognised the name at once. Ral Zarek was the chimney thief! The bastard had a lot of nerve turning up here.

“Oh, so you do live here,” said Ral, “Can I come in?”

“No.” They said in unison, before staring at each other in shock.

“Whatever did I do to deserve such animosity?” asked Ral with a sigh.

“You tormented one of my friends for no other reason than spite!” Jace retorted.

“And you broke into our house!” Vraska continued. It was Jace’s turn to be surprised.

“He did what?!“

“He,” Vraska continued, pointing one sharp finger at the guildmage, “Broke into the house, whilst I was asleep and hungover. He took the contents of our fireplace, then set fire to the couch and ruined my copy of Midnight Under Svogthos!”

“The couch and the book were an accident!” Ral protested.

“But you purposefully broke into our home,” Jace stated, crossing his arms and straightening up a little. Vraska reckoned Ral could only see a sliver of his face but she was too angry to care.

“Well, I needed to,” Ral reasoned, “If you’d just shared your research. Or done it in a guild-officiated manner. I wouldn’t have needed to. It’s your own-“

“Don’t you blame him!” Vraska exclaimed. Her eyes flashed gold and he instinctively threw an arm over his eyes.

“It was your choice to break and enter rather than just ask him nicely. Your choice to go rooting around in our fireplace and then set our possessions on fire!”
“I can replace your gods-damn book,” Ral growled, “Niv’s scaly left butt-cheek, is she always like this?”

He directed the question at Jace, who scowled.

“Only when dealing with bastards. And don’t speak like Vraska isn’t here. I’d replace that book if I were you.”

“He can try,” Vraska commented, stepping aside so Jace could get better view through the few inches of open door, “The book is banned in the Undercity. It got mass-burned because it spoke ill of the devkarin authority.”

“Good luck finding one then. I think I might read it after Vraska,” said Jace, “Is there any reason you decided to darken our door today?”

Ral grumbled something under his breath. Vraska caught the words ‘out-numbered’, ‘stupid’ and ‘ridiculous’ multiple times.

“I just thought I might drop by to see our new Guildpact,” he replied, “Wanted to see Pipsqueak now he’s saved the world. The world, might I add, that he’s not from.”

His tone darkened considerably and Vraska immediately saw what this was about. Ral was angry about the fact Jace was Guildpact, and part of that anger stemmed from the fact he wasn’t born on Ravnica. Somehow she wasn’t surprised that Ral Zarek was a planeswalker. She knew he was exceptionally powerful, especially as he’d controlled the weather at the maze ceremony. Jace didn’t seem surprised either. He merely bit his lip looking furious.

“He’s as Ravnican as you or I,” Vraska stated from behind the door, “And he managed what you and your entire League couldn’t. So suck it up or go home.”

Thunder rolled overhead. There was a crackle of lightning but suddenly a burst of blue escaped Jace’s clenched fist. The lightning never appeared, the sound of it vanishing as quickly as it came. Countered.

“She’s right Guildmage Zarek. You might as well go shout at the sky for all the good it can do. I told the Firemind he wasn’t allowed to go to war, and he listened. Are you more important than your guildmaster?”

Ral looked a little taken aback at the sudden fierceness in Jace’s tone.

“I am Guildpact now and I’m going to make a Ravnica where the Izzet can’t steamroll into wherever they choose. A Ravnica where the Azorius can’t arrest on a fleeting fancy. A Ravnica where every guild member, and guildless, has a right to live their lives – without being blown up by smug guildmages who regard other people’s lives as tools. Go back to the Izzet and tell them that the Guildpact is not intimidated by you. That’s what you came here to do, isn’t it? Intimidate me?”

He waited a moment, but did not allow Ral a response.

“You’ve failed. Go home Guildmage Zarek. Our business is done.”

White light sizzled forth, leaping from their doormat and impacting with Ral’s chest. He was shoved backwards, making him stagger towards the lift. Jace closed the door and let out a deep sigh. He then glanced up to see Vraska starting at him awe.
“Was that too much?”

Vraska was lost for words. She felt heat rise to her face, not entirely sure why she was blushing so much, but the fact remained – that had been amazing. She remembered Jace telling her about when he’d first met Ral again. About how Ral had threatened him in the backroom of Mizzium House. Considering that, and their initial meeting when Ral had almost killed them both? Jace had completely shut the man down. He’d had the confidence to stand up to someone who had hurt him and read him like a book! It was impressive, beyond impressive! He had the makings of an excellent leader!

“That-that was brilliant,” she managed, after a moment of awkward silence between him, “I’m so pleased you stood up to him like that. After all the times he’s bullied you about. That was, no, you’re extraordinary.”

Now it was Jace’s turn to blush deeply.

“I mean, I probably wouldn’t have been so bold if you weren’t right there next to me,” he replied, “You stood up to him too.”

“He wasn’t trying to intimidate me,” Vraska stated, “You stood up for yourself, against someone who has frightened you in the past and tried to do it again. And you told him, and his entire guild, that you are not someone to be bossed around. I’m proud, and very impressed.”

If he went anymore pink, he’d probably match the raspberry colour of the walls.

“I, err,” he ran a hand through his hair, “Hope I can live up to what I said. I didn’t want to be in charge but, I’ll try to do my best now I am.”

He looked at her for reassurance, as if she had been the one to solve an aeons-old maze and become the most important being in Ravnica.

“You’re going to be amazing,” Vraska told him, “And if it gets too much? Well, I’ll be here for you every step of the way.”

They exchanged bashful smiles and turned to look back out the window, over the roof-tops and over Ravnica. Life was going to be very different from now on, yet some things would stay the same. She had Jace, and Jace would certainly have her. In the end, what more did they need?
Politicians

Chapter Summary

Everything is changing and Jace is struggling to cope. Luckily, he has his best friend with him and something like a plan. Yet will that be enough to keep him from fleeing Ravnica entirely? Only time will tell.

Jace had got himself into a lot of messes over the years. An extraordinary number of messes over an extraordinary number of planes. He’d narrowly escaped natural disasters, chased after forbidden scrolls, fought other planeswalkers, even met with dragons more powerful than he could comprehend. He’d survived all those things, with enough memories to recount them if he so chose. However, out of all the phenomenal messes he’d made over the years, he’d never excepted to muddle his way into so much responsibility. He’d never anticipated becoming a politician. How did he end up in such a situation? That was perhaps the wrong question. He knew in explicit detail how he had ended up in this exact set of events. Perhaps the better question was why had he ended up in such a situation? He’d never shown any interest in politics before. So why was he suddenly the person who had to make decisions that affected the whole world?

It would be ever so easy to bolt. To run off to some far flung plane and never look back. There he could start a new life, get some new robes, cut his hair and make sure no one knew who he was. He’d never have to make a life-changing decision. He’d never have the whole world on his back. But he couldn’t. Ravnica had been his home for over eight years now. Even if he did leave, well, he couldn’t abandon everything he had here. He couldn’t leave Vraska, not after all she’d done for him over the years. Not after all she was still trying to do. It was clear that she knew as little about politics as he did. Yet, she was still trying to help him through it. She was still trying to motivate him, to be the crutch that he could fall back on if he felt hopeless. He had noticed and he appreciated all of it, all of her attempts to be there. All of her attempts to comfort him and give him strength.

He also wasn’t blind to how much she was frustrating herself. He would freely admit that he was an emotional mess right now, bound together by a new-found sense of obligation. Vraska saw that and she was doing everything she could to help him. However, everything she could do had limits. She couldn’t relieve his burden entirely, only make things a little easier. Whilst he was feeling fragile, all she could do was hold his hand and hope she was making things better. Jace saw the pain in her gaze, heard the unspoken apologies in her tone. She wanted to do more. She wanted to be able to do more. To express affection in ways other than holding hands, ways that her own trauma still denied her. In these moments, he wanted to comfort her. To show her that hugs were good, better even, than holding hands. Yet, that was more than she could handle, especially whilst so anxious and highly-strung. He settled for squeezing her hand, for smiles, for little gestures like making tea, wanting her to know that he didn’t mind. He would always go at her pace. Waiting until she was ready was no burden, he’d be here when she was. He understood what she meant when she offered him her hands to hold. Her intent was all over her features. I want to hold you but I can’t was plain in her eyes.

It still wasn’t fair that she did all the comforting. Once again, he’d been off having adventures whilst she’d waited at home. Had she spent all that time working whilst he was running around the district? He wanted, no, needed to be here for her as much as she was here for him. He owed her
She deserved so much more of his time than he’d been able to give her. How long had it been since they’d had an adventure together? When did they last explore some new corner of the district? Or spent a quiet evening, cooking together and then curling up with a book? Yet how were they going to do that now he was in charge of all the law on Ravnica? How much time was he going to have for leisure? If he was in charge, could he just make time? If the Living Guildpact wanted free time, did he just get free time?

That was the biggest problem with this whole politician matter. This position had never existed before. There had never been one person with authority over all the guilds. Therefore there was no research, no paperwork, no experience for him to learn from on how to do his job properly. This was new territory and yet everyone would judge him on how well he was doing. How was he supposed to know he was doing well with no benchmark to judge against? He was one man! One man with a very supportive best friend, but one man all the same!

And he was forcing her to move house!

Their flat was very much a one-person affair. It had been spacious for two fourteen year olds. Yet as they’d grown, everything got decidedly smaller. Their sofa was a bit of a squeeze for two adults. There was no room for them to eat properly, nowhere to put a dining table or even a desk for either of them to work at. Only one person could fit in the kitchen at a time without them constantly elbowing each other. He was thankful for the space, and still proud of how much they’d achieved to get the flat, but it was time to move somewhere bigger. Somewhere they got their own bedrooms, and their own wardrobes and bookshelves so they weren’t cramped for space. A home where Jace wouldn’t have to make excuses whenever he met someone extraordinary at a bar.

People had assumed he had controlling parents - which explained why they could never go home to his place. He’d never done anything to dissuade them of this idea. However it had got a bit awkward after a while. Would he even have time for that as Guildpact? Would anyone ever want to be in a relationship with him ever again? Would being the Guildpact be too intimidating? Ah, his whole life was being changed! He didn’t agree to this! He didn’t want any of this! He just didn’t want Ravnica to be blown up!

At least he’d have his own bedroom now. So would Vraska and she’d be able to decorate it however she liked. She was a lot more house proud than he was and now she’d have more house to be proud of. There was, however, one distinct problem with their move. The Azorius seemed to have assigned Captain Lavinia as his supervisor, or personal police escort. Captain Lavinia was very good at her job, and was clearly well respected, however she was as typically Azorius as it was possible to be. Vraska had a long and painful history concerning the Azorius, and he was worried how the two might interact. On one hand, Vraska was sensible enough to know that Lavinia herself wasn’t involved in her childhood torment, so may treat her nicely. On the other hand, Lavinia had probably never met a gorgon before and that could go really badly for all involved. Guess he just had to find out. He expected Lavinia to be there as soon as they set foot in the new Guildpact offices.

He wasn’t wrong. The next day, he, Vraska, and their large rolls of paper, took a trip via wagon to the Transguild Promenade. Rain was beating hard against the cracked pavement, still wrecked by the stampede following the maze running. The sky was dark, threatening a storm, at the sight of lightning sparking in the distance, Jace couldn’t help but wonder if he’d pissed off Ral Zarek enough that he was throwing a tantrum over in Nivix. Their papers were securely packed away in a large leather satchel which had once contained lab equipment. Jace missed his lab, but he guessed he wouldn’t have much time for that anymore. Maybe Dr Marian would let him have a go in the lab at the offices when he was less busy? He hadn’t actually asked Dr Marian whether she wanted to work there yet. Vraska would do that as soon as they knew the lab would exist. Regardless, the wind tried to rip the umbrellas from their hands as they strode down the Transguild Promenade.
People ran past them, paying the gorgon and the Guildpact no mind as they sprinted through the treacherous conditions, clutching coats and cloaks tight as they splashed their ways down the street. Jace and Vraska’s destination was made obvious by the large cluster of armoured Azorius guards, standing outside a huge domed building that could easily house an entire Orzhov cathedral. The soldiers stood, their cloaks whipping in the wind, striking each other whilst rain hammered off their armour. It looked like the most unpleasant post in the Tenth right now. Yet, if she was bothered by it, Captain Lavinia certainly didn’t show her displeasure.

“Guildpact Beleren!” she called, having to shout over the weather, “You are early!”

“Can we go inside?” Jace replied, also raising his voice, “Before we do all the formal stuff. It’s awful!”

She seemed perturbed by his lack of formality, but they couldn’t exactly conduct this conversation out on the pavement. She nodded, gesturing for her entourage to open the large double doors into the building. They filed in, leaving the guards outside. Jace wanted to ask whether they’d be alright stuck out in the storm, but felt that would be insensitive.

The building was as grandiose inside as it was outside, though a little neglected. They retreated to a grand entrance hall with what he could only assume was a reception desk, covered in canvas sheeting. The walls to their left and right were lined with doors and a sweeping staircase took entrants up and round the desks towards a landing that overlooked the entrance. All the furniture in the room looked like it had been stored away for some time. Covered in sheets and pushed to the corners of the room, this large space had clearly stood unoccupied for quite some time. Lavinia stood, prim and proper as ever, in the centre of the room, leaving them to stand slightly awkwardly before her.

“Guildpact Beleren,” she stated, “Who is this with you?

Oh yes, introductions.

“Captain Lavinia, this is Vraska. Vraska this is Captain Lavinia.”

Vraska nodded politely. Captain Lavinia did not.

“Who is she?” she continued, “Why have you brought a gorgon here?”

Behind him, Vraska visibly bristled. Her hair unfurled itself in an instinctive threat display, uncurling to its very impressive full length. He winced. How was he going to get through this without having Lavinia insult Vraska?

“She is my housemate,” he explained, “And my best friend. Without her support, I wouldn’t be Guildpact today and Ravnica would be in ruins.”

Lavinia glared at Vraska. Vraska stared back. Jace could sense the conflict rising and continued:

“We live together, we have done so for years and we’re not stopping now. So she’s here to see the new living quarters. Also, she helped me plan what we’re doing with this space.”

Lavinia fixed her gaze on him now. She pursed her lips, as if his words had been distasteful.

“You shared vital Guildpact information with an outsider?”

“She’s not an outsider,” Jace replied, “We’ve worked and lived together for most of our lives. If you want me living and working in this place, she will be too.”
He fixed Lavinia with his best determined look. He wished Vraska would say something but realised that this was very much his domain. Lavinia had no reason to listen to her. He was the figure of authority here.

“We can’t just-” Lavinia cut herself off with a sigh, “Fine. Show me what you have come up with and we’ll go from there. After that, I’ll show you your new living quarters.”

They unrolled the large pieces of paper over the top of the covered desk. Lavinia raised an eyebrow at their rather juvenile method of planning.

“This is what we had to use, so this is what we used,” Jace informed her, “I didn’t exactly have an office, or an architect on hand.”

She took a moment to read through their work, following the many lists and arrows, bullet points and strange diagrams of Jace’s own invention. They made perfect sense to him, but his handwriting had got a bit spidery near the end. It was very obvious what was his writing and what was Vraska’s. Her lettering was even and regular, whilst his looped and scrawled all over the place. Lavinia however judged it all with equal silence. When she returned her focus to the second point, law making, Jace piped up.

“Neither of us knew what a law-making process was. I trust the Azorius will help out with that?”

“Of course,” she replied tersely. She took a step back to take in the papers as a whole.

“Well it was more than I expected,” she commented, “Even if the execution is a little lacking.”

“You only gave me a day,” Jace retorted, “And I’d never seen the space before. If it wasn’t for Vraska I would’ve spent the entire time staring at blank paper.”

Lavinia turned to look at Vraska, who was leaning against the desk with her arms crossed.

“This was your doing?” she pointed at the much neater handwriting.

“Yes,” she replied, tension plain her tone.

“You will continue to aid the Guildpact in making coherent plans and processes?” Lavinia demanded. Jace didn’t appreciate the severe tone but they were definitely getting somewhere.

“I will do my best,” Vraska stated, “As long as your guards don’t try to murder me when I come in and out of the building.”

“I will inform them of your residence.”

Jace looked between them. That was the best he could hope for! It looked like Vraska was allowed to stay and help out! That was great news!

“I will have these written up officially, and hand them over to our building planner,” Lavinia informed them both as they rolled the papers back up.

“It will take a few weeks for the infrastructure to be in place, as this is a cross-guild effort. However, your living quarters have already been set up to move in at your earliest convenience.”

They were taken to see their new home. Jace immediately started to think of all the wards he should put on this place as they were led down through a side passage followed by a maze of corridors. By the time they arrived at the front door, Jace was fairly sure they were in the left hand
wing of the building. He sincerely hoped there was another way to get in or out without navigating the entire building. It wouldn’t be much of a living space if there wasn’t. As they got closer, he began to pick up signs of life. There were footprints on the dusty old carpets, the signs of people dragging wheelbarrows and trolleys across the ground. The front door was clearly brand new, a dark wooden piece with a brass plaque saying ‘Private – Do Not Disturb Unless Authorised.’ There was a brass knocker in the shape of a lion with a ring in its jaws and a solid handle, complete with equally solid lock.

Lavinia took out a set of keys, inserting three in succession, a click echoing after each one. A multi-key lock? Interesting. Jace was probably going to make the access magically-triggered but it would do for now.

“Here you go,” said the Captain. She opened the door with a creak that seemed to echo for miles.

_It was huge._

You had to go down a set of stairs to even get in! The front door opened up and down into an enormous meeting and library space. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with antique bookshelves, many still packed with hundreds of ancient-looking tomes. The only gaps in the shelves made room for immense stained-glass windows, better suited to a cathedral than a home. A table large enough to host a banquet occupied the centre of the room, lined with sheet-covered chairs, sitting twenty. Dozens of little tables bore old curiosities that Jace couldn’t wait to poke at. Three-dimensional maps of Ravnica, telescopes, models of buildings, this was paradise for the curious scholar! He glanced at Vraska, who was taking in the space with wide eyes. Their footsteps echoed as they went down the stairs.

“This is your audience space,” said Lavinia, “For the most private discussions. Try to keep it respectable.”

Jace could not guarantee that. There was so much space for more books!

“Through here, is your personal space.”

They were led through another door which had to be unlocked with two different keys. Jace was definitely going to put magical recognition wards on these doors. They couldn’t carry around dozens of keys wherever they went.

Their personal space began with yet another winding corridor. Lavinia opened doors as they went, revealing a more private study (with yet more bookshelves!) The study was bigger than their current bedroom, with yet more stained-glass and a desk that could easily multi-task as a dining table. However, that wasn’t necessary, for the next room they encountered contained exactly that – a dining table. The dining room was resplendent with freshly-stocked chandeliers and a wide oak table that could seat ten. Honestly, this was getting excessive, but at least they would have somewhere proper to eat next time Emmara came to visit. Were you even allowed to eat take-away at such a fancy table? Jace was going to find out. Not now however, they had more rooms to look at first.

There were, overall, too many bedrooms. Some of them even had their own bathrooms attached. What were they going to do with all these bedrooms? Could they turn them into other sorts of room? What could they turn them into? There was already a huge kitchen, multiple other bathrooms and living rooms, a second study, a library, two storage rooms and a something that looked like a bathroom but seemed to be one giant shower. This was too much! What was he supposed to do with this?!
As soon as she was done showing them around, Lavinia led them to another front door, this one leading to a low stone arched porch and the way outside. They exited into a extremely wet courtyard overlooking the Promenade.

“Guildpact business has already started!” Lavinia yelled over the rain, “So I suggest you move in as quickly as possible. We will send a covered wagon to your current place of residence at noon today. Please pack all necessary personal possessions and have them ready by the end of the day for immediate transport.”

There was no suggestion in those words. It was ‘you are moving in today, get used to it’ dressed up in formality. He sighed.

“We’ll go home and pack.” He said, glancing at Vraska who hadn’t said anything whilst they’d been in the building. She merely nodded.

“Where can we get a wagon from here?” he asked Lavinia, “Is there a station nearby?”

Lavinia sighed.

“You are the Living Guildpact. You do not have to take public transportation.”

She called a carriage for them and Jace couldn’t help but feel incredibly awkward as soon as he and Vraska were alone. Everything, from the house to this vehicle, was just too big. More than he’d ever expected. More than he really knew how to cope with. If he wasn’t trying to save face in front of her, and maybe Lavinia too, he would undoubtedly have planeswalked out of here by now.

“So, err,” he said, breaking the silence within the carriage, “What did you think?”

Vraska gave him a look. Her stoic façade melting away with a sigh. She looked as overwhelmed as he felt.

“Jace, I’ve assassinated people with less fancy houses than that. That—that is a mansion.”

He couldn’t disagree.

“And I guess we live there now,” he replied, “I’m sorry, I didn’t expect any of this to go so fast. I thought maybe, I’d have time to adjust? Clearly not.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, “You can’t have expected any of this. But, that place, we could house a small community in there. There’s just so much.”

“Do you think we could?” Jace asked brightly. She raised an elegant eyebrow at him.

“House a community?” she repeated. Jace nodded.

“We could provide rooms for people who need shelter,” he suggested, “Help get people off the streets, that kind of thing.”

Vraska smiled at him and he couldn’t help but squirm a little in his seat.

“I would love to, but I’m not sure your Captain would be too pleased about that,” she responded, “However, as Guildpact, I’m sure you can build as many shelters as you want. Maybe some orphanages too.”

“I could,” Jace stared at his own feet, realising the impact of what she had just said.
“I could get the guilds to provide for the homeless of Ravnica! If it was in the name of cross-guild cooperation, they’d have to do it!”

Vraska looked so impressed with him, he immediately felt rather shy.

“See, you can do a lot of good as Guildpact,” she commented, “It’ll be worth all the politics.”

In his excitement, he was tempted to believe her. They got out the carriage at Tin Street and picked up some fruit crates to pack their things into. Carrying the crates over their heads, they got home before the wagon turned up, and started packing immediately. Jace wasn’t sure exactly how to feel about packing all their possessions into bags and boxes. Firstly, he discovered that he had a lot of bulkier things than Vraska did. His robes took up an entire crate to themselves, and his book collection had spread itself further around the flat, whilst Vraska kept hers on the shelf or under her bed. Vraska fetched his collection of coloured pens and started labelling up boxes so they could find everything again. He remembered buying their kitchen supplies when they first moved in. Outfitting the entire flat had seemed quite daunting back then. They had barely enough stuff to put in cupboards or on shelves, but their possessions seemed to have multiplied significantly over the years. He found a book he’d thought he’d lost, as well as three different socks, under his bed. There were beds waiting for them at their new home. It didn’t seem practical to bring these ones with them. Jace frowned as he rolled up his blankets into a manageable bundle. The beds at the Guildpact office were much bigger, which meant they couldn’t bring the mattresses either. How different were those beds going to be? Were they going to be easy to sleep on?

All their bathroom essentials went into one bag. Towels were used to cushion plates and glasses so they didn’t smash in the back of the wagon. Jace found a pair of shoes he’d forgotten about as he filled a box with what was left of his old lab. He gave the sofa a goodbye pat. They’d been through so much on that sofa, it had been the location of so many good chats, and awkward ones too. They ate dinner sat on it, and Emmara always sat there when she visited. The throw had changed over the years. They’d lost the first one to emergency bandages, Vraska had torn it apart. The second had too many food stains on it to be respectable so they’d had to throw that one out. They were on throw three, maybe four, he’d kind of lost track. Either way, there were chairs and sofas already at the house. He guessed that would stay here as well.

“We should probably sell this place,” he commented as the wagon finally rattled its way outside. Vraska nodded.

“It’s at the wrong end of the district to use anymore.” She looked round at all the empty space they’d created, sadness plain in her eyes.

“It’s a very good flat,” she said, “It was a lot grander when we were teenagers, but it’s a very good home.”

“It is,” Jace replied, “I’ll miss it.”

“Me too.”

They returned to packing in silence. Jace couldn’t help but wonder if Vraska felt like he did – that this was all very fast. Faster than he could really get used to. At least he’d caused this, he was kind of dragging her along for the ride.

“You don’t have to move, if you don’t want to,” he called out, as she returned to the kitchen. Vraska stuck her head back round the door.

“Don’t be silly. It wouldn’t be home if you weren’t here.”
Jace wasn’t emotionally capable of dealing with all the praise he was getting today.

They locked up and left with the wagon, deciding to visit the estate agents as soon as they had a free moment. By the time they got back to the far end of the Promenade, night had set in. There was still a cluster of Azorius guards outside, their armour too uniform for Jace to tell if they were different guards from the ones this morning. They were helpful enough to assist in carrying their boxes inside. Jace piled them up in the central meeting room, covering the large table in an assortment of random bags and crates. It was getting too late to start unpacking now. They stood about a bit, wondering what to do, before Vraska suggested they found pyjamas and something to make breakfast with the following morning. They put anything that might be spoil in the excessively large kitchen, before calling it a night.

They each chose a bedroom with a bathroom attached. He was slightly perturbed by the fact that Vraska chose a bedroom so far from his own, but then again, they hadn’t really had that much personal space before. Besides, if he ever did get to bring someone home, it was probably better to put some distance between them. He didn’t want to interrupt Vraska’s sleep with, well, that. She also wouldn’t wake him if she was working overnight. Yes, distant rooms were sensible. He should probably enjoy the privacy now he had it. He’d have time to come up with all sorts of ways he could use it, he was sure. That night however, he simply made the bed and laid his familiar blankets out over the top. His new bed was at least three times larger than the previous. He didn’t even know what you called a bed that was bigger than a double. A triple? This was more like a quadruple. The four poster could probably sleep a whole family. His blankets and pillow looked very small in comparison. Considering Vraska’s bed was the same, they might need to get new bed linen.

After changing into his pyjamas, he drew the curtains around the four poster and got into bed. He rolled onto his side and drew the blankets up to his chin. Wrapped up with his pillow, he tried to get comfy on the unusually wide mattress. It was soft. There was plenty of room for him to spread his legs out. It should be comfortable. Jace rolled onto his other side, trying to get settled in. He closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into the mattress. Why couldn’t he doze off? He was tired! He hugged the pillow to his chest, nuzzling the familiar fabric which still smelt like the candles that Vraska used to burn in their room. Even the familiar scent didn’t let him drift off. He opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by darkness. Sitting up, he felt for the nearest curtain and drew it open. Maybe he was claustrophobic? He didn’t usually sleep surrounded by curtains. He settled back down and tried again.

No luck. There was something wrong. He stared out, up at the stained-glass window which was filling the room with silvery moonlight. The window was so far away. He was used to having his bed right up against the wall. Besides, there wasn’t really anywhere in their flat that wasn’t a few paces away from a window. There was so much space in this room! It was so big, so empty, and kind of, well, kind of lonely.

Jace frowned into his pillow. He was used to lying on his side and seeing Vraska sleeping nearby. Less than two feet apart, they had only been separated by their bedside tables. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine she was there. No, he was too busy imagining, he couldn’t fall asleep. There was something missing, and now he realised that it wasn’t a something, it was someone. He was alone. Alone in a giant empty room, devoid of everything that looked like home. No familiar furniture, no familiar books, no familiar friend snoozing gracefully in the bed next to his. Everything was dark stone, barren and lifeless, as unfamiliar as the future as he was heading into. At least he wasn’t going into it alone, but he was alone right now, alone and surrounded by empty space. He couldn’t sleep like this. It was too dark and lonely in here.
He got up, yelping as bare feet met cold stone. Drawing his blankets and pillow back off the bed, he left the room and padded down the long dark corridor. He knew there wasn’t anyone else here but he couldn’t help but eye every shadow, skirt away from every door. The house was too big. Too big and too empty. He couldn’t even hear the street outside. They were too far removed from the promenade below. Usually he could hear the chatter and rumble from Tin Street. Yet here, nothing. Not even a bird or a passing beast of burden. Some people might regard that as luxurious. Finding silence was certainly a rarity in the heart of Ravnica. However, Jace couldn’t help but hate it. Too eerie, he almost expected an assassin to come slinking out of the shadows. Wait, he was important now! Were people going to send assassins after him? He was going to be assassinated! Or attempted-assassinated! He was going to be in so much danger!

He hurried down the corridor a little faster, his bare feet pat-patting against the old carpet. Finally, he reached Vraska’s room and knocked softly against the door.

“Vraska?” he called. He heard movement from behind the door.

“Vraska, please can I come in?”

He heard her unlock the door, opening it a crack, blinking blearily at him as he hugged his blankets close.

“I-I couldn’t sleep,” he explained, suddenly realising how silly he must sound, “Can-can I sleep on your floor?”

She frowned and ushered him in.

“Lonely?” she murmured. Jace nodded before burying his chin in his pillow. He began to look about for a comfortable patch of floor as she closed the door and retreated to her bed.

“Come here.” Vraska beckoned him over, “There’s plenty of room up here.”

He immediately hurried over. Her bed was the same as his own, easily fitting four people. Two people could definitely lie like starfishes and never touch each other. Vraska rolled over to the far side of the bed, bringing her blankets with her.

“Is-Is this ok?” he asked.

She nodded sleepily. Clearly she’d managed to doze off even if he couldn’t.

“ Weird not having you here,” she commented as he lay back down and rearranged the covers about him.

“’m fine, sharing like this,” she continued, half-mumbling with her pillow, “It’s nice. But if we do it too much, Captain might get strange ideas about us.”

Jace took a moment to consider what she meant. It took a minute for him to realise she was talking about Lavinia. There was no need for her to inquire after their sleeping arrangements. However, if there were people around, and they saw them both surfacing from the same room every morning. Well, they might get ideas. Ideas that they were, you know… Jace flushed into his pillow, drawing his blankets over his nose.

“W-Would that be a bad thing?” he dared to ask, shocked at his own daring.

Her only response was a soft snore.
It starts with a brown paper folder and a cup of coffee. It ends with a dead man in an alley full of rotting garbage. Vraska has one hell of a day.

**Content Warnings for: Police Brutality, Harm of Children, Torture, Gore, Murder and Body Horror.**

“You look like shit.”

Vraska frowned as she sat down.

“Not you Lady Death, the officer over there.” Ruby gestured towards Javy who was approaching bearing a tray with five drinks. They were in the back of Bolt from the Blue. Levi was at the counter as the night club next door did not open during the day. Vraska was thankful to finally have an excuse to leave the Guildpact Offices. As much as she needed to help Jace unpack, (she’d already sorted herself out), the whole place was incredibly eerie. Huge empty rooms and not a sign of life except for herself, Jace and the Captain. This café meeting was a welcome breath of fresh air, even if she did have to leave Jace at the Captain’s mercy for a few hours.

“You always look great,” Ruby assured her, as Javy set the tray down.

“You however look like you haven’t seen a bed in, what, forty-eight hours?”

Javy grimaced.

“Good morning to you too,” she retorted, “I had a busy night. Had some research to do after my shift.”

She took a swig of her coffee before pulling a brown envelope out of her bag.

“Here you go,” she passed it over to Vraska, who took it, faintly surprised.

“I realised something whilst on patrol,” explained Javy, “Those names you got? That’s the administration, the legislators, the politicians. None of those assholes ever set foot in a prison. You want the guards and their direct superiors, there you go. Even comes with pictures and reports on the incidents.”

“Thank you, that’s amazing.” Vraska couldn’t help but open up the envelope and have a flick through the contents. There was a group picture of the guards outside the prison, the figures numbered and labelled at the bottom. She would peer at these faces later, in case they set off any especially terrible memories. She didn’t want to go through that in front of all these people.

“As soon as you pin down one of your targets, you have to let me know!” exclaimed Tasia. They were sat, arms linked, with a merfolk that Vraska had never met before. He wore intricately embroidered robes bearing the swirling patterns so typically found in Simic fashion and
architecture. Like Tasia, he seemed to have gone for wings as an adaptation, but Vraska couldn’t
tell what kind. They might be fins for underwater travel, they were so tightly furled against his
back she couldn’t make an educated guess. Vraska did however have a good guess as to who he
was. The fact that he and Tasia sat so close together, constantly touching each other, gave it away.

“If you ever want me to help out, come find me at the hospital!” Tasia continued, “I’m on day
shifts at the moment so I end at six! Just hang out at the staff exit and say hi!”

“I will keep that in mind, thank you,” Vraska replied, reaching for the drink she assumed was hers.

“Same here,” said Javy, “As I said, I know four of those guys but I’m still looking into where they
are these days.”

“You don’t have to,” Vraska assured her, “You’ve done so much already.”

Javy smiled, her lip twitching as she agitated one of her scars.

“I want to,” she replied, “I heard what you did for Marian, asking for nothing in return. I’m happy
to pick up the slack.”

“Me too!” Tasia piped up, “Dr Marian even told me not to owe her a favour, and to help you out if
you needed it instead.”

“W-We’re very grateful for you speaking out,” stammered the merfolk, “You’ve clearly inspired a
lot of people.”

He blushed blue as he drew the attention of the whole table.

“I’m Edvin,” he elaborated, “Tasia’s other half. I’m so glad to be back on the surface. I know I
have you to thank.”

He nodded at Vraska.

“If you didn’t encourage Tasia and the doctor to act out of guild regulations, well, I’d still be a
prisoner in my childhood bedroom. Thank you.”

He made a strange little gesture with his facial fins, halfway between a bow and a wave. Vraska
returned it with a polite nod as that felt right.

“You’re welcome. I only want people to have the happiness they deserve,” she replied, “Sometimes
the guilds make that a little harder to find.”

Edvin nodded fervently in agreement.

“Talking of harder to find,” Javy commented, “Have you moved house?” She pointed at Vraska
with the spoon she was using to demolish a fruit slice.

“I went to your flat and it was up for sale.”

Whoops. She hadn’t had any time to tell the Malcontents she was moving. Admittedly, only Javy
knew her address. However, it was Javy who made sure they could all get in contact. She was the
middle of this great mysterious network. Vraska wasn’t even sure how far her reach went.

“Yes, sorry,” she apologised, “It was very sudden. My housemate-”

She paused for a moment. How best to put this?
“My housemate suddenly got a new job and we had to move across the district. We’re actually on the Transguild Promenade now, it’s a bit of a trek.”

“Nice,” Ruby proclaimed into her teacup, “That job better pay well. It’s pricy up that end. It’s where everything happens. Tried to set my school up there, you wouldn’t believe the rent.”

“The house came with the job thankfully,” Vraska said, “It’s a bit much in all honesty.”

Javy’s spoon hit the table with a sudden clink. They looked at her. She was staring at her empty plate as if struck by sudden inspiration.

“We can meet at the Copper Ladle!” she exclaimed, “I never have an excuse to go around that part. Apparently their food is fantastic, and the drinks even better.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Tasia, “Is it in Boros territory?”

Ruby shook her head and cut across Javy before she could even get her mouth open.

“Close, but it’s in a back alley off the Promenade. I went to a wedding there once, inter-guild wedding, and it was properly nice. I mean nice as in the food is great but you don’t have to empty your wallet to try it. They do a mean Bloodrush and Orange.”

“Do I want to know what that is?” asked Edvin. Looking between Tasia and Vraska, who he seemed to have judged the authority here. Vraska assumed it was a cocktail, but she was none the wiser either. To be honest, at the arrival of the folder, her enthusiasm for conversation had immediately died. What she really wanted to be doing was sitting somewhere private and going through all the information that Javy had just handed her. She was so close to achieving her own justice but to get there she was going to have to sit through a lot of meaningless conversations like these. That was fine, that was how social interaction worked, but she was just not in the mood right now. She was on the cusp of, well, something. She didn’t know what that was, but she felt that a breakthrough would come from this folder.

Halfway through their animated chat about cocktails and other beverages, Ruby leaned over to Vraska, close, but just shy of touching her.

“If you want to slip off Lady Death, I’ll cover the slack. You’ve clearly got something nagging at you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She did precisely that. One advantage of an assassin’s stealth perhaps, being able to vanish from social situations you truly didn’t wish to be part of.

The ride back to the Transguild Promenade was uncomfortable, largely because of all the stares she received in the wagon. She was travelling hood up but she was becoming so frustrated at the slowness of public transport, that her hair was moving – shifting the fabric of her hood as it went. As soon as they got to her stop, she jumped down, ignoring the proffered ladder, and made an immediate beeline for the courtyard entrance to their home. Jace had done his magic on the doors, so there was no need for excessive numbers of keys. She slipped inside and headed straight for her room, clutching the folder tight to her chest, unable to wait any longer.

Kicking a pair of Jace’s pyjama shorts under the bed, she sat on the rug, spreading the papers out before her. There was so much! Javy was truly exceptional. She had no doubt where the wojek had been last night. She must have gone back into the Azorius archives to find these. It was likely she’d had to sneak into an entirely different column for these. This wasn’t legislative work, but more like historical records of cases. This wouldn’t be held in the Lyev column.
Was this what it was like to be Jace when he started a new project? Excitement bubbled up inside her as she organised the papers by profile, record or report. She had staff details – everyone who had been working in the prison during the Golgari Purges. The Azorius had given the operation a codename – “The Sanitisation” but all the reports just called them the Golgari Purges. They evidently thought no one outside their guild would read these. The factual nature in which the writers had described the massacre of hundreds brought bile to Vraska’s throat. She scanned the reports, written by guards in the prison. They were more like diary entries, describing in jubilant detail how many prisoners they had used to ‘make space’ for more and how’d they’d done the deed. One even went as far as describing, in excruciating detail, how he had murdered a new mother, just after her cell-mates had done their best to ease the pain of her labour. He’d then proceeded to feed the baby to his mastiff and- and-

Vraska threw up into her waste-paper bin and tossed that report to one side. All these men needed to die. If they hadn’t already, these men would perish. Be it by her hand or another Malcontent’s she didn’t care. They all had to die. All of them! None of them deserved to remain on this world.

The waste-paper bin was now her designated sick bucket as she was forced to pour through entry after entry, trying to find something familiar, something to identify the men who had tortured her. Yet, the sheer lack of concern for people’s lives revolted her to the core. These guards, these abominations, could do such things to innocent people and still think themselves righteous! She was shaking so hard she could barely hold the papers. Yet somehow, nothing quite prepared her for what she found on a piece of letter paper, gilded and embossed with the Azorius crest. It was a letter from New Prahv to the prison warden, announcing a new ‘wave’ of prisoners.

“The Golgari administration,” the letter stated, “Has been most helpful in recommending areas from which to fill our quotas. Upon meeting with Guildmaster Jarad and his court, we have identified the areas with the most Golgari undesirables, and purges in these areas will be met with no official defence from the guild.”

Vraska’s eyes burnt golden. Her hair whipped itself into a tangle above her head as she stared at the paper in an intoxicating mixture of rage, disbelief and nausea.

*Jarad* had…

*The Golgari court* had…

Her stomach seemed to have run out of contents as she dry heaved into the metal bin, which now smelt absolutely awful. She shook so hard her teeth rattled. As she curled in on herself, she dropped the letter. It fluttered to the floor to join its fellows as the room span slightly around her.

Jarad had led the Azorius to Dredgefold Docks.

Jarad and his court - they had decided the slums were so undesirable to the devkarin agenda that they had authorised the Azorius to-to…

She scrabbled at papers, trying to find the name, trying to find any name or location she could start her revenge. She would start with the Azorius! Start from the lowest of guards and work her way up to the highest of senators! Gods, she would have the Guildmaster if she could! And then, then… she would have Jarad. She would have Jarad and all his court. She would tear down the Golgari from the inside out! She would avenge all the victims of their horrific agenda! She would tear down the leadership and rebuild it anew!

Shaking, she picked up a piece of paper, dated after the fancy looking letter. The massacre of Dredgefold Docks must have happened after Jarad had given his permission.
She wasn’t wrong.

“These bastards won’t go down quietly,” complained another guard in his report. “Branko says don’t whip them, it just makes them mad. It makes them die quicker though, which can only be a blessing. Latest lot came in with a gorgon – tiny thing clapped up in metal. She screams real loud under that gag though. Branko got her sent to solitary for a bit, thank Azor. Those snakes give me the creeps and she won’t stop moving them, no matter how hard I whack.”

One of Vraska’s nails pierced through the paper and the report remained, even whilst she attempted to drop it. Speared there, she willed herself to look away, but she was frozen. Shaking like a leaf, she felt tears well in her glowing eyes, but she could not bring herself to wipe them away. The room was much darker than she remembered. It was dark and empty, bare stone walls boxing her in. She could remember. Remember all of it. The shouts to stop moving. The shouts to just die already. The whippings, the beatings, being dragged off to solitary by the ankles. The feeling of fetid water up to her knees. The swimming rats. The mold on the walls. She could see it now. She felt like she was drowning. Drowning in solid stone, the walls trapping her in. She clasped at her throat as she struggled to breathe. She found no shackles there, just a thin metal chain. She felt for the end of it, finding the tear shaped pendant. She didn’t know what it was, just that it was important, that if she held it, something good might happen. Something, anything, she didn’t want to die here. Alone…in the dark.

“Vraska!”

The door banged open and she visibly flinched at the loud noise. She heard footsteps through the darkness, and then her vision filled with blue.

“Vraska! I’m here, what’s going on?”

She knew that voice. It was a good voice. One that wasn’t going to hurt her. So why was it here?

“Vraska, I’m here,” said the voice, “It’s me, Jace. You’re in your bedroom in the Guildpact Offices. You’re home with me. Please, tell me what’s happening.”

She blinked at him as he reached forward to take the piece of paper off her fingernail. He gasped as he scanned the contents.

“Vraska, this is-“ He knelt down beside her, glancing over the wide array of papers before her. His eyes immediately lit on the fanciest letter, the one with the gilt letter head. He quickly read that one too.

“Oh Vraska…” He shuffled a little closer but was careful not to touch her.

“Vraska, you’re safe. You’re twenty-two years old. You’re in your home, with me, you’re safe. I’m here, Jace is here. You’re going to be fine.”

Jace. Jace was here. It was like someone had turned the lights back up on the pathetic stage show of her life. She blinked at him, tears trickling down her cheeks. He met her gaze and gave her a small smile. Feeling pathetic, she offered him her hands in a plea for comfort. He took them at once.

“Hey,” he said softly, “Do you know where you are?”

She nodded, suddenly feeling ridiculous.
“I’m-I’m fine,” she said, attempting to wipe her cheeks on her shoulder, “Sorry, I got…a little too involved with what I was reading.”

Jace sat on the floor beside her, still keeping a comforting grip on her hands.

“I can see,” he replied, “This is paperwork, paperwork about the Golgari Purges. Didn’t you think these would hurt you when you started reading them?”

“Not this badly,” she mumbled, “I thought I was stronger than this. I thought I had grown up.”

“Growing up doesn’t erase the pain you go through,” said Jace, “But feeling pain doesn’t mean you’re weak. You survived all that! You’re so strong to still be here. To still be fighting.”

Vraska had the distinct impression she’d said something exactly like this to Jace in the past, but let him continue.

“Aren’t you always telling me not to pick at my scars?” he told her, “Well, now it’s my go. Don’t pick. You’ll just make them worse.”

“I need to,” Vraska replied, “I need to bring them to justice. I need them to be punished.”

Jace grimaced. He knew it was hard to dissuade her when she was truly determined. He also knew what her brand of justice entailed.

“What happens if you face them and you break down again?” he asked, “You’d be putting yourself in so much danger. Isn’t it better not to chase after them?”

“I won’t break,” she swore, “It was these reports that broke me down. I wouldn’t do it front of a person.”

Jace looked at the papers with a sigh.

“What ones are the reports?”

Vraska gestured to the far right of the mess she’d made. Jace crawled to that side and began scooping up papers.

“I’m going to put these away,” he said, “Somewhere safe. Somewhere where Lavinia won’t find out you’ve got stolen Azorius documents.”

“I didn’t steal them,” Vraska replied, feeling slightly petulant.

“But you can keep these,” Jace continued, pointing at the rest, “If you promise you aren’t going to go murder all those men.”

Vraska stared at him as he stood back up.

“They deserve to die,” she retorted, “How could you possibly-“

“Because I’m the law of Ravnica now!” Jace’s tone rose, making him sound slightly hysterical, “Because you’re my best friend and I can’t let you break the law. That isn’t assassination, that is murder. I agree, I agree they deserve every horrible thing they can get. But please, don’t murder them because then I’ll have to hide from everyone that I let you break the law in my own house!”

Vraska scowled. This wasn’t about him. It wasn’t about peace on Ravnica. It was about revenge for hundreds of dead Golgari!
“Promise me,” Jace pushed, “Promise me, you won’t kill these men.”

Fine. But he needed to work on his laws a bit better.

“I won’t kill them,” she muttered, “I promise.”

Jace instantly looked relieved.

“If you need me, I’m in the audience room,” he said, “Any time, ok?”

She nodded, her mind whirring with possibilities. As he left, she watched him go until he was out of sight, before returning to her greatly diminished spread.

Sure, she wouldn’t kill them.

However, she had a large group of Malcontents who would do the killing for her.

The Waters’ Crest Hospital was a twenty-minute walk from the Guildpact Offices. It was an impressive looking building, with a set of leaping fountains outside, water issuing from the mouths of various sea creatures. Above the large glass double doors, the Simic symbol had been added to the stonework in glistening green marble. A steady stream of wagons and carts passed by the emergency entrance, as uniformed response teams carried patients inside. She didn’t know where the staff exit was, but she was willing to guess that it was the opposite side of the hospital from A&E. Vraska had never been inside a hospital – it wasn’t exactly where you’d conduct an assassination and she was fortunate enough not to get that injured or sick. Regardless, she curiously inspected the building as she took the path round the side. In a few places, there were metal pipes protruding from the stonework. All the windows were covered in thick blue blinds, for patient privacy no doubt. What intrigued Vraska most however, were the gardens. Round the left hand side of the hospital was a wide section of greenery, separated from the rest of the grounds only by a low log fence. It was full of flower beds, some natural, others bearing weird plant life that Vraska had to assume were the result of Simic hybridisation. She recognised the pear-peaches that still flourished in the Orzhov park.

As she considered whether it was right to intrude into the garden, a nearby clocktower chimed six o’clock. Her heart leapt as she realised she still hadn’t found the staff exit, distracted entirely by the plant-life. Casting her reservations about hospital property aside, she stepped over the tiny fence and strode through the gardens around to the back of the hospital. There she saw an assortment of people wearing blue uniforms, obviously on their smoke break. They stared at her as she approached. She’d come hooded, but she was clearly not hospital staff.

“Good evening,” she said as she approached, “I’m looking for Doctor Tasia, they asked to meet at the staff exit.”

A hybrid, who looked like the lobster equivalent of a centaur, pointed their human hand over their shoulder.

“Just over there. They got out of surgery half an hour ago. Shouldn’t be long.”

“Thank you.”

Vraska passed the foggy group, ignoring their stares and made a beeline for the now very obvious set of double doors. They bore a large sign saying ‘STAFF ENTRANCE – AUTHORISED
PERSONS ONLY’ along with an advertisement for a hospital cake sale. Vraska chose a low stone wall, as far from the smoking area as possible without losing sight of the door. There, she took a scrunched up piece of paper out of her bag and read through her notes again.

The two guards in her section of the prison were Branko and Gebris. Gebris had written that report where he’d complained about his superior. Thankfully, fate had already run its course for Gebris. He was killed in a prison riot a few months after she’d escaped. Branko on the other hand, she gave a little shiver as she remembered the face – not only from the picture she’d been given but also how it had looked, snarled with fury as he beat her against the concrete ground. Branko was the one. Branko was the one who had tried to dash her brains out on the cell floor. Branko had tortured her in solitary. Branko was going to die first out of all her targets. He was still alive. He’d retired from active duty shortly after the incident. She had his home address from his profile. The Azorius had given him an unbelievable sum of money to buy his silence. The amount, poorly concealed under a ‘redacted’ sticker, had made Vraska hiss in anger. This vile man was a murderer and torturer, but his guild rewarded him with enough money to last a lifetime! He’d seen everything. He could have reported it, exposed it, told all the press in Ravnica what atrocities he’d witnessed! But no, he’d taken payment rather than expose all the awful things his guild was responsible for. Some law-enforcers the Azorius were, handing out bribes like an Orzhov bookie! He would pay for his greed.

“Oh, Vraska!” Tasia looked delighted to see her as she made her way out of the building, throwing a cardigan over her hospital uniform.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon! Do you want me to go back and get my tools?”

Tools? Vraska was slightly thrown for a moment before realising they must mean their surgical equipment.

“Yes please,” she replied, “I found someone, in Javy’s notes.”

Tasia made an excited ‘ooh’ before hurrying back inside with an cry of:

“Won’t be a moment!”

They returned with a slightly heavier bag than before, but no other obvious changes. Vraska told Tasia about their target and his location, prompting the hybrid to become incredibly excited.

“So what are we doing with him?” they asked as they passed through back-alleys towards Rakdos territory, “You know, I really liked it when I saw Edvin’s family being locked away in little prison cells. Considering they’d locked him away in a little room for ages, it seemed very fitting. The punishment should fit the crime!”

“I agree,” Vraska replied, “Branko swapped common sense, empathy, sympathy, everything for greed. His crime was greed and violence.”

Suddenly she had an idea.

“Can we stop by the Paradise Arcade?” she asked. Tasia looked at her quizzically.

“Don’t worry, I have an idea.”

She purchased two bags of toy currency from a stall in the Paradise Arcade. They were circles of useless metal, stamped up to look like zibs and zinos, but clearly made as toys for children. Vraska had seen forged money before and these weren’t even close. Regardless, they looked how she wanted them to look – shiny coins much like the ones Branko had taken instead of doing the right
thing. As she explained this to Tasia, they gasped.

“Ooh, I know where we could put them,” they replied excitedly. “You said he swapped reasonable thought for money?”

Vraska nodded.

“Have you ever seen craniotomy?” Tasia continued.

“No,” she replied, “What is it?”

Tasia walked with a little bounce in their step.

“It’s where you remove a small piece of the skull to treat the brain. However, I’m not thinking of removing just a bit of skull. I say, we take the entire top of the skull off, remove the brain and the rest of the skull is sort of like a bowl! In the bowl goes the coins!”

Vraska stared at them as if seeing them in a new light. She knew Tasia had a slightly unprofessional interest in seeing how injuries got made, but this was an entirely new level! This was turning the skills they knew to save lives into skills for murder! Still, their imagination was truly something. She couldn’t see a better way for the punishment to fit the crime. Death by having your head cut in half and your brains replaced with money? That wasn’t something you’d ever see on your average mission!

“Sure, that sounds like a great idea,” she replied, “How fast is it? We don’t want to get caught.”

“Oh, I can make sure he doesn’t make any noise,” Tasia said with a smile, “I can put him under just enough that he won’t make a sound, but aware enough that it will hurt a lot. Is that good enough for you?”

“That’s perfect.”

They found Branko’s flat deserted but recently so. The trail of rubbish down the stairs, fresh on top of decades of decay and rot, led them to the back alley behind the terrace, where the man was clearly putting out his bins. The alley stank like refuse, deserted except for the three of them. This whole neighbourhood was in danger of falling into the Rubblebelt next door if no one cleaned the place up. Vraska somewhat doubted anyone would.

“Is that him?” Tasia whispered, pointing at the lone man, heaving sacks into an already over-flowing dumpster. As Tasia donned what looked like a canvas poncho, Vraska stared at the face, illuminated by a sliver of sunlight through a gap in the buildings. He was missing an ear. She could remember the moment where she dug her talons into the side of his head, clawing for freedom.

“That’s him,” she confirmed, “Shall we?”

She took down her hood as they trod lightly down the waste-covered street. Vraska disappeared into the shadows as Tasia bravely made their way forwards, directly towards the groaning man.

“Mr Branko!” Tasia called out as Vraska slipped round the back of him and into the shadow of the dumpster.

“Excuse me, are you Mr Branko?!” they called again.

The man looked up directly at them.
“I am, what’s it to you?” he retorted.

“Oh nothing really,” said Tasia, “It’s just, my friend really wanted to meet you.”

Branko had a split second to react before he was grabbed from behind, knife to his throat, tendrils scraping over his receding hairline.

“I don’t suppose you remember me, do you?” Vraska hissed, straight into his remaining ear, “It’s been a few years Branko. I supposed my voice must have been a lot higher when I was eight years old and screaming for my life.”

His lips moved, but fear had taken his voice away. He mouthed the word ‘gorgon’ whilst staring down, terrified of her blade.

“Indeed,” Vraska continued, “Age really hasn’t suited you well, Enforcer Branko. Thankfully, it has suited me quite nicely. Doctor, if you please.”

Tasia skipped over a pile of filthy cloth on the ground and approached.

“Mr Branko, we’re about to do a procedure which I am calling a grand craniotomy. Except it isn’t a craniotomy because I don’t intend to put any of the skull back. Let’s just call it a partial beheading, shall we? That sounds a lot more exciting.”

They pulled a small vial and needle out of their bag.

“You’re going to feel a short prick, a lot of numbness, and then an incredible amount of pain. Understand Mr Branko?”

They didn’t give him time to respond before jabbing the needle straight into his arm.

“Your veins are very easy to find Mr Branko,” they commented as they eased the injection in, “I suspect substance abuse. At least you won’t be doing that anymore!”

Branko blinked once, twice, before slumping in Vraska’s grip. She lowered him to the ground, propping him against the brick wall. Tasia checked his pulse and his eyes quickly before declaring:

“Conscious, but he won’t be getting up for a while.”

They pulled out a coloured marker and a leather roll of scalpels. Vraska couldn’t help but marvel at the different coloured blades, small and precise, yet so mesmerising in their own way.

“Would you like to do the honours?” Tasia asked, offering her the pen. Vraska took it, smiling at the unconscious Branko as she drew a line across his forehead and round through his hair.

“Perfect!” Tasia took the pen back, “Mr Branko, anything you would like to declare before we start the procedure? Are you on any medication? Any allergies we should be aware of?”

Branko said nothing. Vraska couldn’t help but laugh at a little at the mockery of a professional air.

Tasia pulled out a large scalpel. They took a deep breath and suddenly a razor thin line of bright green energy emitted from the edge of the blade.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Tasia commented to Vraska, “I love these new magically-edged scalpels. Well worth the investment!”
Vraska couldn’t help but think of the mana blade that had been used to torture Jace. It was at least better that the technology was being used to help rather than torture – this exact instance aside.

“Ok, here we go!”

Vraska couldn’t take her eyes off the sight. The magical scalpel made a clean cut through skin, flesh and bone, cauterising the wounds as it went. Occasionally, Tasia would cut into the brain, causing random parts of Branko to shudder or convulse horribly. Vraska could not pin-point the exact moment where Branko died, but she certainly delighted in the sole mean of expression they’d allowed him. Namely, the absolute agony in his eyes.

“You’re doing really well Mr Branko,” said Tasia as blood poured over their gloved hands and down onto the man they were cutting open. They rearranged him a little, so he was sat cross-legged on the ground.

“There, now you’re comfortable, I’m going to need you to hold this for me.”

Vraska watched in amazement as they lifted Branko’s brain straight out of his skull and deposited it into his lap. Blood soaked into his trousers and spread across the ground below.

Tasia took the top section of skull, still bearing skin and hair, and carefully placed it in the dumpster. It made a disgusting noise as it slid down the metal side.

“All done,” Tasia proclaimed, rubbing their hands together and then on their bloody poncho.

“Do you want to add the coins?”

Vraska nodded. She ripped open the little canvas bags and poured the fake currency into the cavity where the brain once was. The clinking and squelching made for an unpleasant chorus, but a satisfying one nevertheless. The relief that was passing through her, it was something like drunkenness, but more like euphoria. She felt like she’d suddenly become lighter in the last few minutes that had passed. Her torturer was dead. He had been punished like he rightfully deserved.

Death by the manner in which he lived!

“That was fun!” exclaimed Tasia. They were stuffing their poncho into a blue bag marked ‘medical waste’

“I’m going to need to burn this. I’ll swing by the hospital on the way back. Javy and Ruby were going to go to the Copper Ladle tonight. Want to get dinner?”

Vraska took a deep breath, taking in the smell of rot and blood that permeated the air. She continued to breath, deep and steady, as she got her emotions in order. Finally, she turned to Tasia, smiling.

“Sure, I'll meet you there.”
Planners

Chapter Summary

After a chat with Jace over pancakes, Vraska takes a trip to Dragons Perch University to see an old mentor and a new friend.

Content Warnings for Death and Gore. These are only mentioned and not explicit like last chapter!

"Are you still working?"

Jace let out a sleepy groan before looking up from the piles of paper he was pouring over. He blinked at Vraska before running a hand over his face. There was ink in his hair and a liberal amount smeared across his nose. His little section of table was illuminated by a solitary stained glass lamp, which cast a kaleidoscope of colours across the paperwork. That couldn’t be an optimal way to read.

“What’s the time?” he grumbled as Vraska approached. She checked the grandfather clock on the left hand wall.

“Quarter to ten,” she replied, “Bed time.”

Jace let out another groan and leant his head against the table. This was only going to result in more ink on his face, so Vraska quickly slipped the freshest document out from under him.

“I was going to make pancakes for lunch,” Jace murmured into the table, “They were going to be so good. I bought fruit and everything.”

Did that mean he hadn’t eaten since breakfast? He’d got up about six. Did that mean he’d gone the whole day on a slice of toast? He’d worked non-stop since he’d come and found her in her room! This better not become a habit.

“We can make pancakes for breakfast tomorrow,” she insisted, “We’ll make them together. Enough that you can have them for lunch as well if you want.”

Pancakes probably weren’t the most nutritious meal, but if it got him to eat lunch then it was worth it. She moved his paperwork out the way and tried to usher him out of his chair. He got up with an audible click from his knees, causing him to wince as he took a wobbly few steps. From his awkward gait, she assumed he had pins and needles from sitting in the same position for too long.

“I- We need to talk,” Jace yawned, “About-about stuff.”

“In the morning, over pancakes,” Vraska insisted, “When you haven’t had a sixteen hour work day. It’s time for bed.”

He looked wearily at the table before nodding and wobbling towards the door to their private quarters. Vraska wondered if he knew about the ink but couldn’t bring herself to boss him around that much. She wasn’t his mother. If he got ink all over his pillow, well, he’d learn to be more careful next time.
Jace was clearly worn out enough to fall asleep in his own bed that night. Vraska gathered the papers up that were still all over her rug. Putting them on her new desk, she noted that a new mission had arrived in her communications tube. She cast a quick eye over the details before putting it pride of place on the desk. As she changed for bed, she noted that her windows were the perfect position to catch the season’s full moon. Her whole room was illuminated in moonlight, enough so that she was glad for the curtains about her bed. A four poster was excessive but, in this case, it had its practical uses. After such an emotional day, she was almost glad for its semblance of privacy. After shutting out the world, if just for a little while, sleep came easily that night.

She woke to a faint knocking on the door.

“Good morning!” came Jace’s groggy voice, “I wanted to sleep in but then Lavinia turned up and she brought an owl.”

Vraska wasn’t entirely sure what the owl had to do with anything, but yawned loudly in reply.

“Meet you in the kitchen?” Jace suggested through the door.

“Yes, morning, meet you in the kitchen,” she replied, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Throwing back the covers, she went into her bathroom, (personal bathrooms were also excessive in her books but nice to have,) and got ready for the day. She was going to have to do that mission this afternoon, but otherwise she didn’t have anything planned. After choosing a slightly simpler dress, she swept her hair up and over, directing it vaguely in the same direction. Good enough, she made a beeline for the kitchen.

Jace was already there with the ingredients for pancakes, as well as three punnets of fruit, out on the worktop. He hadn’t bothered to don his cloak, leaving him in his odd assortment of blue overalls that he called robes. The sound of her bare feet on the tiles echoed oddly through the overly-large room. They had put their utensils in the cupboards closest to the door and were ignoring most of the space. There was nothing two people could do with this much kitchen. You could cater for a party in here but Vraska wasn’t intending to throw any of those any time soon. Pancakes however, were something they had made together more times than she could count. They instinctively fell into a routine as Jace began to pull bowls out of the cupboard.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked, inspecting the ingredients on the worktop in front of her.

“Oh,” Jace put the bowl down, his expression immediately troubled.

“Err, it’s not important.”

Vraska raised an eyebrow at him as he tried to distract from the conversation by pouring out milk into a measuring jug.

“Well, it’s a bit important,” he conceded, “I just wanted to apologise. For what I said yesterday.”

That caught her by surprise. Yes she’d been mildly irritable at the fact he was trying to deny her revenge, but he had a point. It was hard to let others break the law when you were its guardian.

“I want you to get your revenge,” he elaborated, “And everyone involved deserves what’s coming to them. I know you’re perfectly able to get away without arrest, but, I just worried. Maybe it’s because I’m overly stressed, I tried to make it about me again. For that, I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you, and I understand your concern,” Vraska replied softly, “You’re an agent of the law
now and I’m, well, quite the opposite.”

She turned on the heat, picking a pan from the hook on the wall.

“Still, I don’t break my promises. I can’t say that those men won’t end up dead, but it won’t be me who killed them.”

Jace pulled an expression somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

“Well, that’s an assassination then,” he stated, “Perfectly legal, somehow.”

Vraska smiled. The law truly made no sense. Law was decided by its makers and they were incredibly biased.

“How was work yesterday?” she asked.

He groaned loudly.

“I think Lavinia is trying to get revenge by working me to death,” he complained, “I’ve never been less interested in taxes, or infrastructure, or population metrics. Do you know I have to go and visit every single Guildmaster this week? I went and saw Niv Mizzet and Isperia yesterday and that was ok, but…ugh, I don’t want to go to Rix Maadi or Svogthos. No offence.”

“None taken,” Vraska replied, “Svogthos is a decadent pig sty. Korozda isn’t terrible, if you like mazes, but the court is awful.”

“You’ve been there?” Jace immediately stood a little straighter as she measured out spoons of mixture.

“Of course, it’s where the liches are,” she replied, “Occasionally, the court turns on each other and they need someone to petrify a few over-confident nobles.”

“That sounds awful. Can you come with me?” he asked, sneakily eating two blueberries whilst she was focused on the stove. Vraska saw him but couldn’t bring herself to chastise.

“Bringing the lich killer with you doesn’t sound like the best idea,” she stated, “It doesn’t give the right impression. Otherwise, I would.”

She loaded up the first plate with pancakes and passed them to him to cover with fruit and syrup.

“Give those to Lavinia, would you?” she directed. Jace, who had clearly been contemplating eating said pancakes himself, looked slightly betrayed.

“What, why?” he questioned.

“Because she works as long as you do and I’ve never once seen her eat,” Vraska said, “You’ll be next don’t worry.”

Jace took a little more care in decorating the pancakes before hurrying out the kitchen, plate in one hand, cutlery and napkin in the other. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what the Captain would think of this peace offering. She didn’t have anything against Captain Lavinia specifically. The entire concept of her guild was the problem, but Vraska wasn’t about to let someone go hungry in her own home. She’d never seen the Captain eat, drink or take a break. That surely wasn’t healthy. She may not particularly like the woman, but everyone needed to eat breakfast.

Jace returned with a newspaper under one arm.
“Vraska, I think you might want to see this.”

He showed her the front page of the Tenth District Times – the district’s most prestigious and definitely Dimir-owned broadsheet. Vraska leaned in to get a better look.

“BELOVED SENATOR HUNG FROM FORUM MONUMENT

Crowds awaiting the reveal of the restored Scribes’ Column were treated to a horrific surprise this morning - writes Audra Filipek of The Tenth District Times. Upon the removal of the regulation blue tarp, the crowds found not only their historic monument, beautifully restored, but a sight best suited to the eve of Devil’s Folly. A robed figure, hanged about the throat with a golden rope, swung from the tip of the white marble column. Upon the screams of the citizenry, Azorius Skyguards were on the scene at once.

It has been confirmed that the deceased is Senator Antonius Valenta – much beloved among his peers for his rousing speeches and ability to sway the hearts of the public. He is best known for his widely popular series of lectures in academic institutions throughout Ravnica, advocating the need for Greater Order and Tighter Regulations on Public Spaces. This series of talks was met with a cacophony of praise, resulting in the closure of several large parks and recreational spaces throughout the district to non-Azorius families. Whatever the reader’s opinion on this controversial policy, this senator was certainly known for his love of the public eye. His death will certainly be investigated by all parties involved. Story continues on page 4.”

“Do you know who this is?” Jace asked.

“No idea,” Vraska stated immediately. She was going to have to check whether this was one of her targets. She had hidden her other list from Jace. All he knew about were the guards from the prison. The senators were on her original list from the Azorius archives that she’d copied out herself. If this was something to do with her, well, no one told her they were going after one of her targets. Besides, who out of the Malcontents would have access to the forum, let alone the ability to hoist a body up to the top of pillar? No, that was a silly question. Javy would, especially if there was scaffolding from the restoration to help her get it up. She was going to have to ask.

“Really?” Jace pushed.

“I don’t know who he is, I promise,” she replied, “I think he’s just another senator who managed to piss someone off.”

Jace breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lavinia says thank you for the pancakes by the way,” he added, “I convinced her they weren’t poisoned.”

She wasn’t wholly surprised when they ended up in the audience room rather than the dining room. The table worked very well for both. Captain Lavinia was already in there, eating her way through the pancakes she’d been provided without complaint. Opposite her, perched on top of a chair, was a large grey owl in a blue messenger uniform. It stared at her as she sat down, as if sensing her curiosity. She’d seen birds of prey in the sky, and once at a falconry display in the Undercity, but the Azorius’ trained birds were quite something else. She wasn’t sure how she felt
about giving them clothes, but this one certainly looked cute and didn’t appear to mind.

As they sat down, Lavinia swallowed heavily and immediately started talking.

“We’ve got construction workers in today,” she announced, “To start outfitting the offices.”

“Oh good,” Jace commented, through a mouthful of pancake. She scowled at him.

“We’ve also got approval from the Izzet and they want an order for what we’ll need in our lab. I assume your chosen Laboratory Head will be able to do that if you bring her in?”

Jace nodded.

“I can go and get her today,” he replied.

Lavinia’s scowl deepened.

“You don’t have the time to traipse round Dragon’s Perch. You have a meeting with Guildmaster Trostani at eleven o’clock and Teysa Karlov of the Orzhov at twenty to three.”

Oof. Vraska knew what needed to be done.

“I’ll go find her,” she offered, “I know where in the university she works. I’ll bring her back to the office. Do you have the lab requisition paperwork?”

“Of course,” Lavinia replied, presenting them with a sheaf of papers several inches thick, “Also enclosed are the details of the budget allocated towards the laboratory. These papers cannot leave the offices.”

“Understood,” Vraska stated, “I will leave them in the audience chamber until we are back.”

“You will also need these.” Lavinia picked up a pouch that was resting on the table beside her plate. She slid across the table two squares of leather. They glided across the smooth surface, enabling Vraska to catch them before they hit her plate. They reminded her distinctly of the New Prahv keycards that Lavinia was never going to know about. Smooth black leather wallets, inside there was a metal sigil with a faint magical aura. The symbol was not Azorius, it took the form of eleven interlocking circles, ten outer circles surround one large one. In each circle was a guild symbol, so in combination, this must be the symbol of the Guildpact.

“One for you, one for Dr Marian,” said Lavinia, “Once she agrees, I will go through the necessary paperwork with the doctor to settle her employment.”

“Thank you.” Vraska pocketed the badges. How very official.

“Can I have one?” asked Jace, who looked slightly miffed.

Lavinia slid him one too.

“You are the Guildpact, you don’t strictly need one,” she told him, “But if you wish.”

The rest of breakfast was finished in silence except for the occasional movement of the owl. Vraska kept glancing at it and each time it stared straight back. She began to wonder if she ought to have provided breakfast to the owl too. She didn’t have any dead mice about. Would it accept chicken?

“Come, Florence,” Lavinia announced as she pushed her plate aside. Florence the owl fluttered
over to sit on her armoured shoulder.

“Guildpact, we really should be making our way to Vitu Ghazi.”

Jace wiped his syrupy face on a napkin and nodded.

“Of course.” He turned to Vraska.

“See you later.”

“See you soon,” she replied, “Say hello to Emmara for me.”

His expression immediately brightened. Had he forgotten that Emmara worked at Vitu Ghazi now?

“Will do!”

He followed Lavinia and Florence out the room, leaving Vraska to gather up plates and leave them to soak in the sink. Well, now she had a plan for today too. First she’d look up whether Senator Antonius was anything to do with her revenge, then she’d go straight to Dragon’s Perch. A morning with Dr Marian sounded a lot more pleasant than a day of whatever Jace was going to end up doing – even if he did get to see Emmara. She yawned a little as she fingered the emblem she’d been given. It was a very high quality casting, how had Lavinia got these done so quickly? It felt sort of odd to be bearing the symbol of an organisation. She didn’t wear her little Golgari broach anymore – no one ever contacted her on it. She hadn’t heard from her sisters in the Ochran in years, not since she was a teenager. As long as the jobs kept coming, she couldn’t really complain.

Returning to her room, she made the bed before pulling her list of Azorius officials out of her underwear drawer. (The one place she was certain Jace would never look.) There he was Senator Antonius, one of the four Senators that signed the Golgari Purges into motion before the order was put before Isperia. How lovely. She recalled that Javy knew four officials on that list. Was it a coincidence that there were also four senators at this rung in the hierarchy? These men were second only to the Guildmaster when it came to new legislation, so she was very happy to let Javy sort these men out for her.

A quick look out the window showed her that the sky was threatening rain again. She picked a waterproof cloak and an umbrella, for all the good that it would do, before finding the leaflet full of wagon time-tables. She had a desk drawer entirely devoted to useful leaflets, everything from public transport schedules to that bright red flyer that Ruby had given her. She’d yet to go to the Scarlet Rose Academy, but she felt like she might one day. Content that she knew how to get to Dragon’s Perch, she left the house and into the blustering courtyard outside.

Dragon’s Perch University was an enormous edifice to Izzet madness. Even the architecture seemed ‘experimental’. Vraska frowned up at towers with no foundations and down at fountains filled with electric current rather than water. There were more lightning rods than plants, the few patches of grass about were incredibly charred and barely recognisable as greenery. Vraska couldn’t help but keep her hands and hair close to her body as she worried any stray surface might give her a shock. She passed dragon statue after dragon statue as she followed sign posts to the Pyrology department. The students were nothing but inventive when it came to new ways of displaying their Guildmaster. There were traditional pieces of metal and marbles, solid statues that wouldn’t look out of place in any guild. However, as Vraska turned a corner past a building the colour of rust, she was accosted by a mass of springs and coils that swayed and jangled in the wind, like the dragon was wiggling on his plinth trying to get comfortable. There were stained glass Niv Mizzets on the windows, immense murals on the side of buildings. Even what looked like a small shrine in a wooden wagon stop. This Firemind was constructed of what looked like recycled cans
and cutlery, wore goggles and a conical party hat whilst looking over his hoard of glass bottles. Someone had scrawled on his plinth ‘Party Niv’. Vraska stared at it for a moment, before shaking her head and moving on.

She would have liked to go to university. Not this university. Vraska didn’t think she would want to be Izzet. Only devkarin and absolutely exceptional humans were allowed to go to university in the Undercity. Having a degree was seen as far too much of an honour to be bestowed on ‘lesser races’. Maybe she could have wheedled her way into another guild’s university and then used her knowledge for the Golgari. She could have studied literature, or history, perhaps politics. Ah well, there was no point dreaming about that now.

Finally, the Pyrology Department came into view through a large brassy archway decorated with fliers for student events. Vraska cast a quick glance over the advertisements for second hand bicycles and spare rooms for rent, before heading into the main reception. The building was immense, four storeys high with what looked like some sort of glass house on top. The reception was equally grand – a large receptionists’ desk, made of dark wood, took up most of the room. There were a few leather sofas by the glass front wall, and a large noticeboard full of departmental messages. Vraska ignored these in favour of approaching the desk, where two people sat watching her.

She pulled down her hood, prompting one of them to gasp. She rolled her eyes and pulled out her badge of the Guildpact.

“Good morning,” she stated, “I’m here on the behalf of the Chamber of the Guildpact. Please could you let-“

She was cut off by the receptionist on the left – a woman in a red and blue striped blouse with a bow that looked like it was made of copper wire.

“Never heard of it.”

Vraska turned to look at her.

“The Chamber of the Guildpact are the new offices under the authority of the new Living Guildpact,” she explained.

“Still haven’t heard of it,” the receptionist objected, “What do you want?”

“I’m here on the behalf of the Chambers of the Guildpact to speak to Dr Marian,” she stated, “Please could you let her know I’m here, or otherwise direct me to her?”

“No.”

Vraska blinked at the receptionist. The woman was scowling heavily at her, as if she had come here to make trouble.

“Why not?” Vraska asked, keeping her tone level and pleasant. However, this woman was starting to get on her nerves.

“I’m not going to the trouble of fetching someone for some made up authority.”

“The Living Guildpact is not made up. Do you not know he is?” she asked, wondering if she was dealing with an idiot. Or at least someone who’d never read a newspaper or spoken to anyone else who did.
“I know who he is,” said the receptionist, “But I don’t believe in this Chamber of the Guildpact nonsense.”

“Young Guildmaster and the whole of Nivix have acknowledged the Chamber’s authority. That’s why I’m here. To speak to Dr Marian about that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Vraska glanced at the other receptionist. The young vedalken man had his head down and was trying to look very busy with a notepad and pen. Helpful.

“Why?” she asked, frustration edging in her voice. She just wanted to talk to one woman! Why was this so difficult!

“I am here on the Living Guildpact’s authority, he sent me personally. This is the Chamber’s badge. Please may I speak to Dr Marian?”

“No,” barked the receptionist, folding her arms. Vraska let out a deep sigh, her hair writhing a little in anger that she was doing her best to control.

“May I speak to your superior?” she asked, “We’ll see if they respect the authority of the Guildpact.”

The receptionist huffed.

“I’m not calling down Professor Masek for the likes of you.”

How could one person, on a customer service desk, be so profoundly unhelpful?!

“The likes of me?” Vraska retorted, temper rising, “What exactly does that mean?”

The vedalken chose that moment to hurry around the back of the desk and behind a large white screen that separated the reception from whatever lay beyond. Now she was alone with the stupid woman, great.

“Nothing,” she replied, “Just not going to let some filthy Golgari spawn trample up and down our good building on some made-up authority.”

Vraska stared at her, rage mixing with the disbelief. What was this woman’s problem?!

“The Chamber of the Guildpact is real! Check the papers. Ask your Professor Masek if you want! I am here on the behalf of the living embodiment of law on Ravnica. He is not going to be pleased if I come back without having spoken to Dr Marian!”

“You’re lying,” stated the receptionist, as if her every word was fact. Vraska audibly hissed.

“I am not lying, I am here on business.”

“You’re here to spread poison and disease throughout our good school in the name of the Golgari. You’re a monster and a liar.”

Vraska balled her hands into fists and did her best not to petrify the woman. Her eyes flashed gold but the woman didn’t even blink.

“Call your Professor Masek,” she demanded, “Call her before I report this entire establishment back to the Guildpact. Call her before I charge you with guild discrimination.”
The receptionist spat at the desk in front of her.

“I don’t have to do anything for a snake-bitch like you.”

Oh Vraska was ready to petrify this woman. It was taking all her self-control not to calcify her and then blast her into rubble. She opened her mouth to make some sort of retort before she heard loud footsteps echoing off the stone floor.

She and the receptionist turned, just in time to see three figures enter the room. The first was the young vedalken receptionist. The second, to Vraska’s immense relief, was Dr Marian. The third was a very tall vedalken woman in a leather tailcoat and glasses that were so wide she resembled Florence the owl.

“Language, Neta! How dare you present such hostility to a guest!”

Vraska could only assume this woman was Professor Masek. At her arrival, Neta the receptionist had immediately got to her feet and straightened up her uniform.

“She’s not a guest Professor! She’s a dirty Golgari creature trying to kill us all in the name of some made up authority!”

Professor Masek turned to Vraska, who said nothing but showed her the badge of the Guildpact. Masek’s eyes widened and she covered her mouth as she gasped.

“Neta! That is the symbol of the Chamber of the Guildpact!” she exclaimed, rounding back on the receptionist.

“Yeah, but that’s a made-up place. There is no Chamber of the Guildpact Professor,” said Neta.

Somehow Vraska couldn’t believe that Masek’s eyes could get any wider, yet they did. Perhaps it was just the glasses.

“Yes there is! We’re building their new laboratory for their cross-guild crime investigation bureau! They are Ravnica’s new government!”

Neta stared up at her, her mouth slightly ajar, comprehension slowly dawning in her eyes. The horror of her situation was starting to take hold and personally, Vraska couldn’t wait to see the penny drop.

“But-but,” Neta stammered, “She’s a monster. A dirty lying monster from the sewers! You can’t trust Golgari! They always-“

“NETA!”

Even Vraska jumped at the sudden shout.

“Neta! My office! Now! Bring your things, we won’t be needing them in reception anymore.”

Neta gaped like a fish out of water as Professor Masek turned back to Vraska.

“I’m so dreadfully sorry Miss-“ She paused, as if looking for a name badge.

“Vraska. I’m here on behalf of the Living Guildpact to talk to Dr Marian.”

“Of course,” Professor Masek simpered, “I’m so dreadfully sorry for all of this. I had no idea Neta held such prejudices. She won’t be leaving with her job I can assure you, and we will do whatever
we can to make amends.”

“Thank you. I’d like to start by talking to Dr Marian, somewhere private, if that is agreeable.”

Vraska glanced at Dr Marian who had somehow managed to stay out of the whole affair.

“Of course.” The Professor turned to Marian.

“Please take Miss Vraska up to the empty lounge on the second floor.”

Dr Marian nodded and beckoned Vraska to follow her. Neither of them spoke until they were behind the screen and safely inside an elevator, rising away from the chaos below. Vraska took deep breaths to calm herself down, settling her hair about her features in a way that she hoped was as elegant as she imagined. She would be the mature one here. She had been the mature one here. She was right, the receptionist was wrong. Even if she was a monster, there was no basis for such treatment!

“What happened out there?” asked Dr Marian as they got out onto the second floor.

“As far as I can tell, the receptionist took one look at me and decided not to believe anything I said,” Vraska replied, “Mainly because I’m a gorgon, or Golgari, or both.”

“Sparks on a Biscuit,” Dr Marian muttered. It was an unusual curse but an amusing one.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” she continued, “No one should have to go through that. Neta was always short-tempered but, gods, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Don’t worry, I’ve survived worse.” Vraska followed her down a series of corridors full of metal trolleys filled with indiscernible instruments and rubber piping. As they turned a corner, Marian pulled a lanyard out of her labcoat and swiped it against a door. There was a loud beep and the door swung upon automatically as the lights came on. Inside was a small living room, complete with hearth, multiple sofas and what looked like a games table set up for a round of Krasis Hop - or at least something similar.

“Doesn’t mean you should have to go through it at all hon,” commented Dr Marian, “Take a seat. The Prof will probably send up tea and snacks for us once she’s done with Neta. She’ll probably break out the good stuff too, so she doesn’t get filed for guild discrimination.”

They took a seat in a pair of comfy looking leather armchairs. Vraska found a playing card down the side of hers, yanked it out and placed it on a side table.

“So how have you been hon?” asked Dr Marian, crossing her legs and placing her hands in her lap.

“Do you work for the Chamber of the Guildpact now?”

“Not exactly,” Vraska shrugged, “Still in the same line of work. I just help out at offices because, well, I live there now and Jace needs all the help he can get.”

Dr Marian frowned a little, before suddenly, she gasped.

“Jace Beleren?” she exclaimed, “I mean, I read all the papers, but… Y-You’re telling me that the new Living Guildpact is little Jace? Your little Jace?”

Vraska smiled.

“I wouldn’t call him mine, but yes, same Jace who came to work at your lab.”
“Well I’ll be damned,” Dr Marian said, as if she couldn’t quite believe her own ears.

“Judging by the success of all your pupils, you must be the best teacher in all of Ravnica,” Vraska commented with a slight chuckle, “The Guildpact and Niv Mizzet’s right hand, that’s some prestige.”

Dr Marian still looked rather overwhelmed.

“I’ll be damned,” she said again, “I knew the Firemind gave the task of fitting out a new lab to the university, funded and everything, but I didn’t know it was little Jace in charge.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here,” Vraska explained, “He’s setting up a investigative bureau for cross-guild crime. A neutral force to punish criminal activity between opposing guilds. He’s going to have a lab there, to identify and look into evidence that his detectives bring in. However, with all the politics he now has to do, he needs someone else to help set up and run his lab for him.”

She gave a moment to let this information sink in.

“I may have mentioned that we had reconnected. As you have plenty of experience in running a lab, the Chamber, well Jace, would now like to offer you that job. Head of the Chamber’s Laboratory.”

Dr Marian stared at her as if she’d grown an extra head.

“Are-are you joking?”

“Of course not,” Vraska replied gently, “It’s a full-time job. All the paperwork is back at the offices and all the details are there. You’ll get to design the lab, commission the equipment you’ll need, and then recruit a team to help you out in the bureau.”

“I’m not dreaming?”

“No, this is real,” Vraska chuckled, “Would you like to come back to the Chamber of the Guildpact and read more about it? Jace should be back from the Selesnya soon.”

Dr Marian took a moment to look around the room, as if she expected someone to leap out of a cupboard and laugh at her for falling for their prank. When no such thing happened, she turned back to Vraska.

“You’re not kidding?”

“I am not joking Doctor. Jace would like you to come and run the lab at the Chamber of the Guildpact.”

Dr Marian shifted in her seat, putting her hands on her knees and taking a deep breath.

“All right,” she concluded, “I-I’m going to need to see this paperwork before it all sinks in. Do you want to go now?”

“If you have the time,” Vraska replied.

Dr Marian nodded just as the door to the lounge opened. The vedalken receptionist appeared, bearing a large wicker basket. Its contents were wrapped in parchment cloth and it was tied with a large red bow.

“Oh good, you’re still here,” he panted, clearly having sprinted from the lift, “Professor Masek
once again extends her greatest apologies for the insults you have received today. She wishes you to know that the Pyrology Department here at Dragon’s Perch bears no ill-will to yourself or any of your guild. She hopes you might accept this selection of gifts, to enjoy at your leisure, to make up for the bad time you have had here today.”

Vraska walked over to him and took the basket out of his trembling hands. It was surprisingly heavy, she needed to carry it with both hands.

“Thank you. Please tell Professor Masek that her apology has been accepted.”

The vedalken nodded gratefully and was about to depart when Dr Marian called out:

“Jon, can you tell the Professor I’m going to the Chamber of the Guildpact. I haven’t got anything lined up in my diary so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Yes Dr Marian!” Jon replied, before nervously sprinting back down the corridor.

By the time they got on a wagon back to the Guildpact Offices, Vraska’s arms and begun to ache and Dr Marian offered to hold the basket. Apparently expensive gift baskets were something of a tradition at Dragon’s Perch, when a department head felt they had really messed up. Vraska was secretly rather eager to find out what was inside, however there were more important matters at hand. After the last wagon, she handed Dr Marian the badge that would get her into the offices. She could just take her through their home via the courtyard, but she thought she ought to do this properly. The usual contingent of stationary Azorius guards were standing watch over a stream of workmen, who were carrying paint, plaster and a lot of wooden boards into the building. The sound of construction was loud as they approached the front entrance.

“Maybe it’s better we go around the side,” Vraska commented as she watched two men holding a large horizontal saw pass into the building.

“This is the main entrance that we’re supposed to use. But there’s another into where Jace and I live.”

Dr Marian was nice enough not to comment on the eerie darkness that filled most of their living quarters. Vraska felt rather relieved to get back into the audience room, which, aside from their bedrooms, was the area that had been most lived in. The paperwork was exactly where she left it. Jace and the Captain didn’t seem to be back from their trip to Vitu Ghazi yet.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked as Dr Marian took in the cavernous room. Once again, she was looking very overwhelmed. Vraska hoped she wasn’t scaring her out of a job.

“Yes please hon,” Dr Marian replied, “Wow, this place is ancient.”

“It certainly hasn’t been lived in for a while,” Vraska commented, “I won’t be a moment.”

She returned with two cups of tea, some biscuits and the remainder of that morning’s fruit. Settling into the comfiest of the meeting chairs, she flicked through the paperwork, trying to find the most concise job description she could. Finally, she found the actual job application form - five pages of pink paper with the Guildpact symbol emblazoned across the top.

“Here you go.” She slid the paper over.

There was a moment of silence as Dr Marian read her way down the first page. When she reached the bottom, she swore.
“What’s wrong?” Vraska asked, jumping a little at the sudden curse.

“Nothing, nothing,” Dr Marian assured her, “Have you seen this? This is better than Nivix money!”

She was gesturing to the salary at the bottom of the page. Vraska had a look and almost swore herself.

“Technically your lab will outrank Nivix,” she reasoned, scanning the page herself, “Guildpact’s word is final on inter-guild matters. They’ll have to respect you now.”

“They will.”

Vraska was pleased to hear a note of smugness in her voice.

“And I really get to design the lab?” Dr Marian asked, “And Dragon’s Perch is just going to build it for me?”

She was clearly getting excited now, it was a welcome change from how weary she’d sounded at the Malcontents’ meeting.

“Yes,” Vraska replied, ”There’s a budget to consider, but we’ve already got it in writing that they’ll build it.”

Vraska went through the rest of the paperwork with her. Apparently, the budget was as generous as the pay, with a promise of five more staff members to boot. The lab workers would have their own common room, with kitchen, and Dr Marian would get her own office to work from. The allotted space was already four times bigger than her workshop near Tin Street. It was a new role with a lot of responsibility, but personally, Vraska couldn’t think of a better person for the job. Dr Marian started having ideas as soon as she looked at the floorplan, and her diagram drawing was far superior to any plan Vraska and Jace had made in coloured marker. Vraska couldn't help but watch, somewhat mesmerised as Dr Marian copied out the diagram from the plans, started adding dimensions and talked through the average sizes of machinery used in analysis work. By the time the biscuits were gone and their tea was drank, she had a floor plan all drawn out ready to go. Lavinia was going to be impressed. This was why you employed people who were truly passionate about their discipline. Perhaps the Captain would realise this and stop bossing Jace around so much.

Vraska’s heart leapt when she heard the door from the main building open. Jace emerged alone, shaking rain out of his cloak and hair. He looked down at the table, smiled and took the stairs two at a time to join them.

“Dr Marian!” he called. The minotaur looked up from her incredibly detailed plan and leapt to her feet.

“Jace! Or-or should I say Sir, or my Lord, or Mr Guildpact? I don’t know what to call you hon. Look how much you’ve grown! I remember when you were shoulder high!”

“Jace is fine,” he murmured as she gave him a hug, “How have you been doing? It feels like an age since I saw you.”

“Well I’m doing a lot better now,” she replied, “I couldn’t believe it when Vraska told me. You really want me running your lab over here?”

“Of course,” Jace beamed at her, “I couldn’t think of anyone I want more. You had the best identification lab on Tin Street and I thought Ravnica needed it back. Just a bit bigger.”
Dr Marian choked up and hugged him again. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what it was like. Dr Marian looked like she gave very warm hugs.

“How much of the papers have you had a chance to look through?” Jace asked, gently slipping out of her grip.

“Oh, we’ve got through a lot of it,” Dr Marian replied, “I’ve even started drawing you out a plan. Would you like to see?”

“Of course!”

Vraska switched seats so Jace could get a better look. He clearly understood all her terminology and tech-talk more than she did. They were soon engrossed in a conversation that she could only understand every other word of. She settled for going to get more tea as they started talking about conduits and coils and goodness knows what else. Idly wondering where Lavinia was, she came back to them drawing out the plan on an even larger sheet of paper.

“Is Captain Lavinia about?” she asked, as the conversation lulled for tea.

“Oh, she had to dash back to New Prahv,” said Jace, “Teysa Karlov couldn’t make it to our meeting, so she’s sending her secretary to me this afternoon.”

“Why did she have to go back to Prahv?” Vraska asked. That didn’t seem to be anything to do with the Orzhov’s poor organisational skills.

“Another murder,” said Jace, “Apparently someone cut out a judge’s heart? Not only that, they then posted it to a family who’d lost their children to a serial killer the judge had ruled innocent. Bribes were involved most likely. Everyone thought the killer was guilty.”

“I see.”

“How do you even send a heart in the post?” Jace mused, “Probably in a box, or a jar.”

As he went back to floor plans, Vraska couldn’t help but think over what she’d just learnt. Bribery was involved? She was going to need to pick up a paper and find out the judge’s name. This was a particularly bloody death, especially compared to the hanging that had happened earlier. Was this another of Javy’s four? Was she on a roll? Bribery was understandably a sore spot for her, it would make sense if she made this punishment a little more gruesome. She really needed to get in contact with Javy. Dr Marian would probably know how to do that, but she was far too distracted by her new job to have a sneaky conversation with. For now, she just had to wait.

After a light lunch, she had to excuse herself from the excitable lab planning process. She wasn’t helping that much and she had her own job to do.

“Back later,” she told Jace and Dr Marian, “Got to visit the Undercity for a bit.”

They gave her a series of distracted goodbyes as she left. As she walked towards Deadbridge, Vraska couldn’t help but reflect that Jace had looked happier than he’d been since he got the title of Guildpact. Labs, experiments, research, that was his thing. Just like murder and interior décor was for her. How long was he going to last as a politician before he cracked? Vraska sighed as she arrived at the only overcity beetleback station. Jace could planeswalk out of there at any time. Lavinia certainly couldn’t stop him and she’d have no idea where he went. For now, it was working. Maybe when the offices were full of eager employees, his workload wouldn’t be quite so crippling. She sure hoped so. When it came round to assassination season again, she wasn’t going to have much time to run errands for him. You never knew when a guild was going to get
particularly stabby, her work came in peaks, seasonal usually, but sometimes there was a rush. Murder was what she was good at. She had a skill no one else had and that was what she wanted to use. She was no politician either, she was a killer, and a bringer of death even when she didn’t do it herself. Neither of them were particularly suited to the changes of late. At the end of the day, they just had to make do. Always, whatever their situation, they would make do.

Perhaps some things never truly changed.
Puppets

Chapter Summary

Jace struggles with his new life as the Living Guildpact. Once he dreamed of changing the world, now he just dreams of sleep.

Was Zendikar nice this time of year? How about Lorwyn? Could he go hide in the woods? Maybe he could become a hermit in the forest and make things out of twigs and live off fruit. No, then he wouldn’t be able to have a hot shower whenever he wanted it. Damn it. Jace groaned into his coffee as he looked through the small mountain of post he had received. Even if he did skip plane and go live in the woods, they’d just come and get him back. By ‘they’ he meant Ral Zarek, and by ‘get him back’, he meant track him using technology that never should have existed in the first place. Why in all that was divine, demonic or otherwise, did the guildmage think planeswalker-tracking was a good idea?! Not only was it a huge invasion of privacy, but Ral had almost exposed the existence of planeswalkers to his Guildmaster! Like he wasn’t busy enough being Guildpact, he then had to go help the Izzet planeswalker fix his mess. He hadn’t needed that. He didn’t need any more trouble now or ever. Jace had enough on his plate. He hadn’t asked to become Guildpact. He didn’t want to be Guildpact. Yet here he was, doing his best and not running for the hills! All he wanted was his home not to be blown up and this is what he got as a reward? Pressure, responsibility and more pressure!

Admittedly, it was easier now he had an entire government behind him. His offices (that was a weird phrase, he’d never get used to it,) were now handling all the little things he’d had to do over the last few weeks. No longer did he have to settle property disputes and land requisition – he had lawyers and solicitors for that. All inter-guild criminal cases were handled by the Investigation Bureau, before handing off all evidence to the in-house court. There were twelve expert lawmakers, from the Orzhov, Azorius, Boros and Simic, working with their clerks to process requests for new laws and bylaws. An entire floor was dedicated to conducting meetings and negotiations between guilds, the team of scribes, negotiators and organisers worked tirelessly to stop fights breaking out between warring factions. They had a team who managed all the eternal affairs like recruitment, payroll and complaints.

Yet even with all that help, he still had so much to do. Nothing could be completed without his say on the matter. No verdict could be given. No law could be instated. No case could be closed. Not unless he had gone through all the findings, planning, or notes and approved every step of the process. These things weren’t light reading either. He was stuck in his office, or in the audience room, with piles upon piles of paper, describing every little intricacy and possible ramification of what was about to put into motion. Seriously, why did one small amendment to a law need a novel’s worth of explanation? However, if he didn’t read it all, then someone might have snuck a loophole in like the ‘assassination technically isn’t murder’ law that he was still annoyed about. He didn’t want people to die because he’d fallen asleep mid-paragraph. His work days were just hours upon hours of legalese, wading through sentences as long as paragraphs, before finally putting his signature on each copy and watching the little flash of white light bring the rule into being. That bit was at least interesting. He liked the magic and wished he could play with it more. However, it only happened after every stack of papers was complete.

That didn’t even touch upon the meetings. There were just some people who weren’t content with
the very professional meeting-people and negotiators he’d provided. They just had to meet with the Living Guildpact himself. Some people were pleasant, he didn’t mind those meetings so much, but many were simply rude. Jace had lost count of how many meetings could have been conducted by someone that wasn’t him, just because the problem was at such a low stage of being addressed, the decision didn’t need to come before him yet. Of course there was always diplomacy to do. Lavinia was forever nagging him about maintaining relationships with important people. But didn’t she realise, didn’t anyone realise, that the more time he spent having tea and being shown paintings, the less time he had to actually improve Ravnica?

What had he actually achieved over the last month? Some transport based bylaws, a trade agreement concerning fish. Vraska had convinced him that he was able to do so much good for the people of Ravnica, but his proposed orphanages were still stuck in the planning process and no one had said anything about the shelters. When it came to the courts, he tended to trust his array of judges. One of them kindly added short summaries to the end of their reports which enabled him to speed through verdicts in a morning and have them delivered back. If only the law making was that simple. If only interacting with people was that simple.

*He’d had to give a speech.*

“It was a very good speech,” Dr Marian told him, passing him a cup of tea as he hid out in her lab. They were getting funny looks from her assistants, but every time Dr Marian looked their way, they hastily went back to work.

“I think all the papers liked it,” she continued, “Very exciting and full of promise. Just the kind of thing people love to hear.”

“I didn’t write it,” Jace mumbled into his mug, “Vraska wrote it. And then I wandered round my room practicing it to the mirror. Felt a bit silly.”

Dr Marian gave an affectionate laugh and passed him a biscuit.

“Reminds me of when Ral was practicing for his Dragon’s Perch interview. He walked round and round my kitchen practicing all the answers for questions he might get. If it works, it works.”

Jace couldn’t help but be a little jealous of the close bond between Dr Marian and Ral Zarek. During his time in her old workshop, he could see how close they were. Dr Marian doted on Ral, and in return, Ral protected her with all the fieriness and affection that one would feel about their mother. Judging by all he’d heard from Vraska and Dr Marian herself, she was the reason that Ral had managed to get off the streets and into his guild. Their relationship was certainly familial, though Ral’s own success had driven them apart. Jace liked Dr Marian a lot. She was immensely skilled, but she never let that fact go to her head. (Unlike Ral.) The feedback from her lab assistants and the offices in general was overwhelmingly positive. She was also very good at hiding him from Lavinia when she came searching. Jace had helped her get a permanent job. However, the credit for that mostly went to Vraska. Jace would never have met her again, if the two hadn’t found each other prior. No, he wanted to do something nice for Dr Marian by himself. He couldn’t get complacent and let Vraska be the only one making people happy. He had the authority of being Guildpact. If he could use it to cause even a slight bit of happiness, he would.

So he sent an official letter to Nivix, requesting the attendance of Guildmage Zarek. Using freshly-printed Guildpact letter paper, he asked Ral to attend but made sure to keep the reason unknown. This was partially for the surprise, but partially so Ral couldn’t foist the job off on someone else. If Jace looked like he was keeping secrets, then Ral was much more likely to come. He gave a week’s notice, so Ral had plenty of time to work the meeting into his schedule. Once the letter was gone, he was forced to sit back and wait to see if the guildmage would even show up. He got no
letter in response, but honestly, he hadn’t expected one.

The afternoon came and Jace caused quite a stir by innocently sitting in reception, waiting for Ral to show. Clearly the employees of the Chamber of the Guildpact weren’t expecting to find the Guildpact himself waiting in the lobby when they came back from lunch. He got many awkward nods, a few bows, and a some very nervous ‘good afternoons’ from flustered people as they raced towards the lifts and away from any potential conversation. Jace did his best to nod and greet back but was rather glad that no one stopped to talk. Jace kept glancing at the clock on the wall as it ticked its way to two o’clock. He’d had to book a meeting with Dr Marian at quarter past two to make sure she and Ral would have the time to talk. If Ral didn’t turn up, he’d have wasted her time and would have to explain his failed surprise. Then she’d be disappointed and, well, if Ral showed up he didn’t have to worry.

There was an agonising ten minutes in which Jace started pacing the lobby. Two past two and he was too agitated to sit. Five past two came and he was already composing his apology in his head. At eight past, he was regretting ever arranging this in the first place and hated how he was going to bring sadness rather than joy. At ten past two, Ral showed up. He breezed in through the double doors, fashionably late and clearly unapologetic.

Jace opened his mouth to accuse him of being tardy, when suddenly he was struck by what Ral was wearing. He had abandoned his usual deep blue attire, and all the brassy instruments that usually hung about his person. He had swapped his lab-tattered garments for a brand new-looking red silk shirt, complete with a long brown leather waistcoat that was fastened round his waist with a thick belt. The belt buckle was in the shape of a curled dragon, its tail snaking round to form the belt loop. He was wearing formal trousers and shoes so polished that they rivalled the marble floor. Jace couldn’t imagine Ral Zarek wearing cufflinks and a tie, but there they were. He smelled like a barber’s shop, hair wax and aftershave mingling in a not unpleasant combination. He looked good, really good. However, Jace couldn’t help but wonder why he had gone to all the effort.

“This isn’t for you,” Ral spat as he noticed Jace’s gaze, “I’ve got a date this afternoon. You better not make me run late, because I am skipping out of whatever this is to get there.”

Well that explained that.

“What time is your date?” Jace asked.

“Half four,” Ral stated, “And it’ll take me half an hour to get there. You’re not getting any more details. We’ve been going strong for a month now and I’m not having you turn up and ruin it.”

Jace gave a sigh.

“You assume I care?”

Ral gestured at himself

“Have you seen me? I’m gorgeous. He’s as cute as fuck. Why wouldn’t you be jealous? It’s not like you haven’t ruined every other important thing in my life.”

“I haven’t got the time for this,” Jace groaned, “Follow me, we’ll talk as we go.”

He set off out of the reception, Ral hurrying to keep up in his incredibly shiny shoes. They made as straight a path as they could to the Criminal Investigations Bureau, taking a lift up to the third floor of the building.

“So why am I here?” Ral demanded as they rode the elevator up.
“You need to meet someone,” Jace replied simply. Ral raised an eyebrow at him.

“Going to give me an actual answer, oh great and mighty Guildpact?”

Jace rolled his eyes.

“It’s a surprise,” he stated, “Don’t get tetchy with me. I’m being nice.”

“Nice, right,” Ral snorted, “Like it was nice of you to ruin all my hard work on solving that maze business. And very nice that you ran away from our fight like a coward!”

Jace let out a long slow breath. He was making it so hard to be kind. He just had to remember, he was doing this for Dr Marian. Not for Ral.

The lift gave a celebratory ‘ding’ as it reached the right floor. Jace kept up his quick pace from the lobby, heading towards their allotted meeting room. Just before he entered, he turned back to Ral.

“Just try not to be a dick for five minutes?”

He entered.

The meeting room was fairly mundane. A table that could seat about eight, the appropriate number of chairs, a blackboard and a water-cooler. There were tea and biscuits on the table and the lights were on when he entered. Dr Marian was already there. She leapt up from her seat as she arrived. Opening her mouth to greet him, she promptly froze as she saw who was entering with him.

“I don’t think I need to make introductions,” Jace announced.

Ral stared at Dr Marian. Dr Marian stared back at Ral. There was a moment of silence in which Jace stood smiling awkwardly, hoping one of them would do something. Then he swiftly had to get out the way as Ral barrelled across the room exclaiming:

“Marian?!”

“Ral! Oh my gods!”

Jace leant against the wall, watching as the two embraced.

“Look at you,” Dr Marian proclaimed, “Look at you, Nivix guildmage, all smart and proper! You’re just so grown up hon. I can’t believe it. When I saw you starting that maze running, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Look at you now! Look at little Ral all grown!”

Ral went rather pink in the face. He hadn’t exactly been the model of best behaviour at the start of the maze. Especially when he’d murdered the proper Izzet runner and tried to stun the entire crowd – not the best way to present yourself in front of your mother-figure.

“I’m the same as I’ve ever been,” he assured her, “Even better now I guess. I looked for you everywhere. I wanted you to be there. At my graduation, but you’d gone off the charts. Where were you? I mean, not that that matters now, because you’re here! What are you doing now?”

Dr Marian finally let go. Ral’s smart date outfit was now a bit ruffled.

“Well Mr Guildpact here put me in charge of his lab,” Dr Marian explained, “Proper investigation lab, Nivix-spec, you’ll just love it. It’s an absolute dream!”

Ral glanced over at Jace in surprise. Jace took this as an opportunity to speak.
“This room is yours for the next hour and a half,” he commented, “Feel free to give him a tour of the labs though. I need to get back to work.”

Dr Marian looked a little disappointed, but she still couldn’t help but smile.

“Thank you hon, I mean it. I never thought I’d see Ral again. You’re too good to me, really.”

Jace smiled at her.

“It’s nothing. What’s the point of having a little authority if you can’t reunite people with it?”

He turned to leave when suddenly he heard his name.

“Jace!”

He turned. That wasn’t Dr Marian’s voice, it was Ral’s. That might be the first time he hadn’t called him “Pipsqueak” or some sort of profanity.

“Yes?” he inquired.

Ral swallowed, huffed and then stuffed his hands in the pockets of his dress trousers.

“Thank you,” he managed, as if the words were getting stuck in his throat on the way out, “Thanks for-for this. For letting me see Marian again. For helping her get her dream job.”

“No problem,” Jace replied, he couldn’t help but chuckle at the fact the guildmage was suddenly acting humble.

“Though some of the thanks should go to Vraska. She was the one who reintroduced us.”

Ral glanced at Dr Marian who nodded.

“Well, I’m thankful to her too then,” Ral replied, “I’ll send her a letter or something.”

Jace nodded and returned to the doorway.

“Well, see you around,” he said, “Have fun on your date later.”

There was an intake of breath from Dr Marian. Ral shot him a glare. Jace couldn’t help but laugh as he slipped out the door. Dr Marian was definitely going to quiz Ral all about his date. Wasn’t that what parental figures were for? Being nosy about your love life? That was what books had led him to believe anyway. Oh, he was sure Ral was going have a lovely catch-up. But he wasn’t getting out this building without a thorough interrogation. Serves him right for being so obtuse downstairs!

Jace returned to his sanctum, jogging a little as he raced the clock to his next meeting. Lavinia was already there waiting for him amidst the tall stacks of paper. He was about to comment about the fresh piles when he noticed there was a stranger with her. A tall woman in the gleaming armour of a Boros officer. She had the military bowl cut that seemed somewhat of a standard in her guild, but what was most striking about her were the large scars that stretched over the entirety of her face. She’d evidently seen action, and a lot of it. So what was she doing here? He thought he was just going through plans with Lavinia now. As he approached, she gave him a salute and Lavinia stepped forward to introduce them.

“Guildpact, this is Officer Pel Javya of the Boros Legion.”
“A honour to meet you Officer Javya,” he said to her, “How may I be of assistance to the Legion today?”

These meetings all started in the same way. His introductions were becoming somewhat rehearsed.

“The pleasure is mine Guildpact,” Officer Javya replied, “And it’s just Javy, if that’s alright. Everyone calls me that.”

“Of course Officer Javy.”

Lavinia gestured them to sit down.

“Guildpact,” Lavinia began, “I’m sure you are aware of the gruesome string of murders that have taken place of late to a series of notable Azorius officials.”

“I am,” Jace replied, “The hanging and the posted heart incident. That’s hardly a string, have there been more?”

Both Lavinia and Officer Javy nodded. Officer Javy pulled out a large red envelope and pushed it across the table at him.

“Those two are the most widely reported,” Lavinia explained, “However, we believe there has been eight murders in total, all connected to the Azorius, all relating to Tenth District officials, and all similarly horrific.”

Jace opened the envelope and revealed a set of papers that had been stapled together into a rough booklet. The front of the page was a contents full of interesting titles. At least the Boros liked to get to the point.

- Hanging at Scribes’ Writ Monument.
- Gouged Heart Postal Incident.
- Murder and Eye Theft.
- Gold Thread Puppet Killing
- Brain Removal Murder
- Poisoning
- Frontal Burning Death
- Mock-Sleep Asphyxiation.

Jace couldn’t help but wonder what was so gruesome about the poisoning, but he’d probably find out once he’d read the file. He’d read a few horror stories when he was younger so this shouldn’t be too bad. Though admittedly, Vraska had taken away a few horror stories from him when he was younger, because he’d given himself nightmares and accidentally projected them all over their bedroom.

“The Azorius and the Boros are now working together on the case,” Lavinia explained, “Officer Javya has been assigned the lead, in case the culprit ends up being internal to the Azorius. However, as this is a cross-guild effort, and it may bring other guilds under scrutiny, Officer Javya sought it best to seek out cooperation from our Investigative Bureau.”

“You wish to work with them in tandem?” Jace asked of the officer. She nodded.

“I understand that this could be an internal incident,” Officer Javy replied, “However, this is more likely an attack against the Azorius from another guild. At the moment, the Boros are at a loss as to what connects the victims except for their guild membership. We are not allowed access to the
Azorius personnel archives, however…”

“Our investigators are,” Jace finished, “Understood. Bring me the proper paperwork, and I’ll assign you a Chamber Investigator to liase with.”

“Thank you sir.” Officer Javy gave another salute. She exchanged a look with Lavinia.

“The paperwork will be sent to your barracks by the end of the day,” Lavinia promised, “Then you may start connecting the victims.”

Officer Javy nodded, and without another word, headed for the exit. Jace watched her go, mildly impressed at how short and succinct that meeting had been. Perhaps they could learn how the Boros did politics and adopt that from now on. Lavinia probably wouldn’t agree though. That was a problem with having an Azorius steward, everything had to be done the long and complicated way. It didn’t look like their meeting was quite over yet either.

“Guildpact,” Lavinia stated, “We need to talk.”

Oh dear. That was never a good opening. He’d been feeling so good at this meeting too.

“About what?” Jace asked, idly fiddling with the booklet of grisly murders. He kind of wanted to read it now. He definitely wanted to read it more than talk about whatever she had lined up.

“Vraska.”

Jace’s heart dropped somewhere about his midriff.

“Why?” he asked cautiously. This was very convenient timing, considering Vraska left for the Undercity in the early hours of this morning. He didn’t know when she would be back, but Lavinia had definitely chosen her moment to talk about his best friend when she was out.

“The speech you gave last week,” Lavinia stated, “Has been very well received. The newspapers found it very quotable, somewhat inspiring, and it impressed them into believing you are a capable Guildpact.”

“Good?” Jace replied, wondering why this was suddenly a bad thing.

“Your postal system, with the templated letters,” Lavinia continued, “The classification systems, the ease of printing from the templates. All work wonderfully for providing rapid responses to inquiring guild members.”

He liked those too. The templates, which could have a few names and numbers switched round were excellent for providing rapid responses. Also they looked really good on the new Guildpact letter paper.

“And the entire set up of the Chamber of the Guildpact. The departments, the catering to people’s lifestyles, the healthcare, the insurance, the fostered atmosphere. This has lead to a happy and productive working environment.”

“What’s the problem?” Jace asked, though he had a nagging suspicion now as to what she was leading up to.

“You didn’t design any of that,” Lavinia stated, “You didn’t write that speech. You didn’t plan that response system. You certainly didn’t plan any of the staff infrastructure in this place. That was all Vraska’s doing.”
“I had ideas too,” Jace objected, “Besides, those have all worked wonderfully. So what’s wrong with them?”

“That’s beside the point,” Lavinia argued, “She is having a greater impact on the Chambers of the Guildpact than you are as the Living Guildpact. Without her, there wouldn’t even be any offices or systems in place. When the press inevitably finds out about this, what do you think they are going to say?”

He didn’t like her tone. She was making Vraska sound like a problem and she was anything but.

“I have a really good supervisor?” Jace suggested, “I employ people with good ideas? I don’t.”

“You’re a puppet,” Lavinia interrupted, “They are going to look at you and see a plaything of a cleverer and more powerful figure. What’s worse, is that they’re going to look at you, see her, and decide that the most powerful person in Ravinica is being controlled by a monster.”

Jace sat up straighter in his seat.

“She is not a monster!” he retorted, “Anyone who can see all the good she’s done for Ravnica should be able to see that, including you.”

“There are multiple monstrous races with human intelligence,” Lavinia replied, “And none of them should be influencing Ravnica’s legal system. Vampires, Shapeshifters—”

“Sphinxes?” Jace interrupted. Lavinia visibly bristled.

“Do not speak ill of my Guildmaster! Sphinxes are—“

“Less human than gorgons, that’s for sure,” Jace interrupted her again, “Their thought patterns are entirely different to humanoid races. Yet we let them influence Ravnica. We let a shapeshifter run a guild! We let a dragon influence the very power structure of Ravnica! We do so because they are exceptionally intelligent. Vraska is incredibly intelligent, and far better at politics than I am, so why doesn’t she get the same respect?”

Lavinia pursed her lips, a sure sign that she was struggling to think of a response.

“Dragons and sphinxes are well-respected in our society,” she tried, “In the official personhood laws, both species are listed as Intelligent Persons, and thus fall under the rights given to all Free Persons of Ravnica. Gorgons on the other hand, are classed as Monstrous Beings and—“

“Who made that list?” Jace demanded, “Was it a sphinx? Had they ever even met a gorgon? Were they some lofty Azorius senator who’d never met anyone except his own staff? You have met Vraska. You have seen the impact of her decisions. The eloquence of her words. Can you look me in the eye and say she isn’t a person?”

Lavinia looked him directly in the eye.

“By the Personhood Laws—“

“Screw the laws, give me an honest opinion from your own brain and not a millenia-old piece of paper. Is Vraska a person?”

Lavinia said nothing. There was a furious tension between them now, neither willing to back down from their stance. Jace was sure he heard footsteps nearby and hoped it was just Officer Javya in the echoing corridor.
“You are being undermined,” Lavinia said, after a moment of shifting in her seat, “You are the Living Guildpact. You are the ultimate power in Ravnica. Yet you let someone else direct your decisions.”

“I don’t feel undermined,” Jace retorted, “I feel like I’m being assisted.”

“You should not need the assistance,” she sounded like she was explaining simple mathematics to an idiot.

“You are the one blessed by Azor. You do not need the assistance of a Monstrous Being to tell you how to run your office.”

Jace couldn’t bite back the rage in his voice. Where did she think she’d been for the last month? Didn’t she know who the competent one was in this house? It certainly wasn’t him!

“It’s a shame Azor didn’t bless me with some damn instructions on how to do this job then!” he exclaimed, “It’s shame he didn’t give me one jot of political experience, or speech writing skill or people management classes! No, he threatened to blow up the entirety of Ravnica and gave me a ton of responsibility that I never asked for!”

He got to his feet, trembling in rage.

“I was a private investigator! I found missing jewellery, I caught adulterers, I cracked codes! I am not a politician and I never wanted to be! The only reason you have a stable Chamber, the only reason why I am still here and haven’t run away from all of this, is because of Vraska! She is the reason I’m here. She is the reason why I try to do the best I can for Ravnica! She is the talented one that keeps this whole farce afloat! She is my inspiration and if you don’t want her then you don’t get me!”

He glared at her. There was a flash of blue as he willed her to understand, going as far as trying to insert his views directly into her mind. However, his telepathy just bounced off the wards he knew she kept in her armour. She also rose, brow furrowed, gaze furious.

“Do you hear how selfish you sound?” she demanded, “You are the most important man in Ravnica! If you abandon your post then this city will spiral towards its own destruction! You will run your own office. You will make your own decisions. You will lead Ravnica as its very paruns intended! Law is not about choice. Law is not about what you want! And it certainly isn’t about presenting a weak leader who is being puppeted by a-a gorgon!”

The footsteps stopped outside. Jace had a terrible feeling about this but he couldn’t help but argue back in the hopes that, if it was Vraska outside, that she would know he was defending her.

“Then make her the Guildpact!” he responded, “Make someone with experience do it! Give the job to someone who actually wants it!”

Lavinia spluttered.

“We cannot give such power to a gorgon! They are natural-born killers, a mockery of human life, the horrors we use to scare children into obedience! They are not fit to govern any-“

“ENOUGH.”

Jace didn’t know he was capable of such a loud shout, but he was.

“If I’m so fucking important, then what I say goes,” he told her, “You either get me and Vraska, or
you get nothing. If you try and expel her. If you try and hurt her in any way, we will move so far that you will never see us again. No one you send will be able to find us and there will be no more Guildpact. If you can’t do the intelligent thing and look past your stupid biased laws, then let Ravnica spiral to its destruction!”

He shoved back the chair and strode over to the door that he sincerely hoped Vraska wasn’t behind.

“Guildpact!” Lavinia barked.

“We’re done here!” he retorted, “You’re not needed for today! Go do whatever you want to do whilst I do the job I don’t want!”

He wrenched open the door, stepped through, and slammed the door behind him.

He looked left.

He looked right.

And there was Vraska, leaning against the wall. Her arms were folded and her expression was neutral. However, as it so often was, her hair gave her mood away. It had fallen about her face and shoulders in an expression of resignation. He had expected fury, but somehow this was even worse. He offered her a hand. She looked at it for a moment, before taking it. Jace wanted to apologise but knew there was nothing he could say that would make up for how Lavinia felt. He wasn’t the problem here so his apologies would do nothing. Wordlessly, he led her back to the nearest place they could talk – his room, which was only a few doors off from the audience chamber.

They sat on his bed amidst the nest of pillows and cushions he had amassed there. Once they were comfortable, he offered Vraska his other hand. She took that too.

It was hard to know where to start. He could reassure her that he didn’t think she was a monster, like he had done so many times over the years. He could praise her and tell her how amazing she was. Yet he wasn’t the problem. Unfortunately he wasn’t the solution either. He doubted even being Guildpact could wipe all prejudice from people’s minds. He could try and get the law changed, make sure gorgons were viewed as people, but that wasn’t exactly a motion people would treat with the utmost importance. He hadn’t even known that gorgons weren’t even legally people. That meant they had no rights under Azorius law. If Vraska got hurt and he wasn’t there… no one would be legally obliged to take her to hospital. She could be arrested without any reason. No one would listen to her in a court of law.

“Would you really?”

Her voice was as soft as the covers surrounding them. It wavered a little as she stared at their entwined fingers.

He looked at her, slightly confused.

“Would you just leave?” she elaborated.

He nodded.

“Of course,” he replied, “You and I, we’d skip plane, go find somewhere nice to live. Warm, blue skies, good beaches. We could live in the woods, build a little house just for us, keep chickens, cover the place in flowers.”

She chuckled a little, but her smile did not reach her eyes. There was no glow there, the gold of her
eyes was dim.  

“You sound like you’ve given it a lot of thought,” she said.

“I have,” he sighed, “We’d go fishing in the afternoon sun. Bring back our catches and eat them with fresh fruit straight from the trees. As the night falls, we’d watch the fireflies dance about our camp and sing lullabies to the stars. We’d upset the local wildlife because my singing voice is really bad, but before that, we’d be at peace. We’d be happy, just the two of us”

“That sounds…really romantic.”

She gave him a shaky smile and he felt heat rise to his face. For a moment, he thought about Ral and his date. About how they were meant to be perfect because Ral was good-looking and so was his partner. Vraska was beautiful. It was a shame he was so boring to look at.

There was a quiet moment in which a pair of pigeons hobbled across the ledge outside his window. They watched the shadows of the birds wobble along, gentle coos echoing through the room as if the world outside was trying to lull them to sleep. Jace realised he was exhausted. He barely stopped to rest these days. He ate whilst he worked, usually whatever he could grab straight out of the cupboards, if no one else was around to cook for him. He’d work from six in the morning to late into the night, pouring over papers until his vision swam and his head ached. He would probably make himself sick.

“I-I hate this,” Vraska breathed. If they weren’t sitting so close, he’d never have heard her.

“I hate the fact you’re unhappy, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

He stared at her.

“You already do so much,” he murmured, “You make my life, well, you make my life so much better. You make it endurable. You make it worth getting up every morning, make it worth finding myself breakfast, because that’s when I get to see you.”

Her smile was so fragile, she looked like she was about to cry.

“You hate it, don’t you?” she asked, “Being Guildpact.”

He nodded, there was no point denying it.

“I’m sorry I pushed you,” she said, “Into believing you could do more. I never realised how much there was, how convoluted it would be to get anything done.”

“Me neither,” he replied, “Some times I just want to throw all that paper in the bin and start over. Yet I can’t. People’s lives depend on those words.”

She curled up on the bed, drawing her knees closer to her. He shifted a little too so they were thoroughly surrounded by his pillow hoard.

“I still believe in you,” she said, “But I know how your mind works. The more people pressure you into doing something, the more you don’t want to do it. Your minds fights being forced to do what, otherwise, you might be quite good at. I’m exactly the same.”

He couldn’t deny that either.

“My mind hurts,” he murmured, “All the time. I’m so tired, hungry, stressed. I hate this.”
Her hands twitched, as if she was compelled to move them but couldn’t bring herself to.

“Then sleep,” she said, “Let’s sleep and dream of beaches and fireflies.”

He smiled at how keen she was on his stupid idea. She also sounded bone tired. He wondered what she’d been doing on her absences lately. Probably working, the commute to and from the Undercity was rough.

“It’s four in the afternoon,” he replied, though that wasn’t really an objection.

“It’s night on some plane. Besides, isn’t that what naps are?”

She made a lot of sense. He could so easily fall asleep right here, fully clothed. However, he’d done that before and bruised himself from lying on all the buckles on his clothes.

“I’m,” he managed, before letting out a small yawn, “I’m-I’m going to pyjamas. I mean, change. Do you want to?”

“Pyjamas?” she replied.

“Yeah.”

She gracefully sat up, her hair still loose around her shoulders.

“I won’t be long.”

She was true to her word. Jace had barely rearranged his pillows into a more comfortable nest when she was back, wearing a long green nightdress and carrying her own, regular amount, of pillows. They added them to the nest before settling in, drawing the many blankets over the top. Thank goodness these beds were so outlandishly big. How else would you fit two grown adults into a pillow nest?

As Jace settled in, he thought he heard more footsteps outside in the corridor. He was fairly sure Lavinia could get into their personal quarters if she wanted to. As he focussed on the sound, he felt Vraska shift a little in the blankets, one hand reaching for his own. Jace sat up a little, concentrating on the lock on his door, telekinetically clicking it closed and activating the wards.

“Stay,” Vraska mumbled, as if she worried he was going back to work. He nestled back down, deep into the comfortable mess they had created. He reached forward and gripped her hand gently. Enough to be comforting, but not enough to scare her in the night. As they both drifted off, he couldn’t help but whisper to her a promise that he had full intentions of keeping.

Stay? With her?

“Always.”
Partners

Chapter Summary

Vraska has an intriguing meeting with a potential ally, before suddenly, things go from bad to worse.

Content warning - Sex (Mentioned, Not Explicit), Abusive Relations, and Discussion of Sexual Topics.

Vraska had a meeting.

This was especially odd, because in her line of work, you didn’t have meetings. All her communications were done through a glass cylinder that sat in her bedroom. Therefore, the whole idea of having to sit round a table and talk about work was entirely bizarre. She was almost certain that this meeting wasn’t about her skills as an assassin. The fact that this had all been booked through the Chambers of the Guildpact, through Jace no less, definitely made it about Guildpact business rather than her own.

It had been a month and a half since Lavinia insisted she shouldn’t be involved with Guildpact law. That had done absolutely nothing to dissuade her. The Captain didn’t get it. She wasn’t trying to meddle in politics. She certainly wasn’t trying to interfere with Ravnica’s power structure and she definitely wasn’t trying to puppet Jace. Vraska was just trying to help him. Anything she could do to make his life easier was a task worth taking on. If that involved structuring an entire government, or reorganising how the government received post, then so be it. Jace was drowning in responsibility right now. If she hadn’t been there, he no doubt would have fled to another plane by now. If Jace’s life was political, and she was committed to making that life better, well, she was going to be political too. Whether Captain Lavinia liked it or not.

Over the last month or so, she had so rarely seen Jace smile. In all honesty, she missed it. One smile from him could brighten her entire day. She was doing her best. Trying to make him happy whenever they were together. But the weary and resigned look on his face was almost too much to bear. She was starting to think she was barking up the wrong tree. She shouldn’t be trying to encourage his political career. She should be searching for a way out.

Jace had not been invited to this meeting. He’d certainly told her about it. However, he was currently engrossed in a rather heated discussion with a pair of representatives from the Rakdos. She had set out to the appointed room alone, none the wiser as to why she was actually going. Didn’t she get some sort of briefing? Some notes to take with? The names of the people she was meeting with? Apparently not. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what the secrecy was about as she went upstairs and into the Inter-Guild Negotiation Department. There she was met by Ada, the nervous clerk on the front desk, who pointed her towards the smallest meeting room on the south side. Heading over, she entered five minutes early. The lights came on revealing someone had set out drinks and biscuits for them. She poured out a glass of water and sat, waiting for whoever had planned this mystery event.

Five minutes later, the door swung open, revealing Ada and a young man wearing long white
robes. He had a gold-trimmed messenger bag swinging off one shoulder and a large package tucked under one arm. He was unmistakably Orzhov. From the sun symbol on his belt to the ostentatious nature of his robes. Everything he wore screamed money from the quality of his boots to the gold rimmed spectacles on his face. He couldn’t be much older than her, which only raised more questions. When she thought of Orzhov officials she thought of aged men and women with more jewellery than hair. This man however was quite different to the usual bureaucrats she saw walking the halls.

“Erm,” announced Ada. “Mistress Vraska, this is Mr Tomik Vrona of the Orzhov Syndicate, right hand to Lady Teysa Karlov. Mr Vrona, this is Mistress Vraska of the Golgari Swarm, right hand to the Living Guildpact, Mr Jace Beleren.”

So she was Jace’s right hand now? Interesting.

She got to her feet and offered Mr Tomik Vrona her hand. He took it without the slightest reluctance. Unusual, most people avoided even touching a gorgon. Satisfied that her work was done, Ada vanished from sight, leaving Vraska alone with her unexpected guest.

Vraska decided to get to the point.

“How can I help you Mr Vrona?”

They wordlessly sat, taking opposite sides of the meeting table. Tomik was smiling pleasantly, as if he wished nothing more than to be here. He was definitely a politician, or at least used to the the public eye. The ease at which he carried himself round strangers, especially such a monstrous stranger like her, revealed a professional at work.

“Actually, you’ve already helped me quite significantly,” he replied, “And I am merely here to thank you.”

Vraska raised an eyebrow at him.

“Go on.”

He put his package on the table, the one he’d been juggling as he entered. He peeled off the outermost layer of brown paper, revealing a fine silk cloth underneath. This he then passed across the table to her. She took it, confused, but nevertheless withdrew the contents of the gold silk bag.

It was a book. Leather-bound with beautiful gold filigree along the spine. It was undoubtedly ancient, the cover had weathered with time and the pages had turned to the beautiful yellow she associated with old tomes. Running one careful finger down the cover, she traced embossed letters, her hair curling about her chin in surprise. It was a copy of “Midnight Under Svogthos”, not only that, it was a first edition of “Midnight Under Svogthos”.

It was beautiful.

She stared up at Tomik Vrona, who now bore a seemingly genuine smile.

“Think of it as a token of thanks from Ral Zarek,” he explained, “He told me how he accidentally ruined your last copy. Unfortunately, Ral has no idea how to acquire out of print tomes, so he came to me for assistance. I was more than happy to go through my contacts. It’s rare to find someone else with a passion for old heretical literature, it was a challenge I couldn’t resist.”

He had piqued her curiosity. He wasn’t wrong. It was rare to find someone who was interested, or even knew that this particular book was deemed heresy by the Devkarin Administration. He
couldn’t just be a dealer in rare tomes. There was something else here, a piece missing in his story.

“Why go to such lengths for a stranger?” she asked, “A debt to Ral Zarek? Or was this just that interesting?”

Tomik laughed.

“I can assure you, I talked to many interesting people to come by this, and certainly made a few purchases for my own collection along the way. You could say this was mostly out of personal interest. In locating and bringing Dr Marian here, you enabled Ral to reunite with his long-lost maternal figure. That made him extremely happy and I am happy when my boyfriend is happy. As he was exceptionally so, there was no end I wouldn’t go to in expressing our mutual thanks.”

That explained a lot. Admittedly, she was having a hard time believing anyone would want to date Ral Zarek. However, maybe there was a side of him that only Tomik saw. A side that wasn’t a complete asshole.

“Well, you’re very welcome,” she replied, “Please express my gratitude to Ral when you next see him. I look forward very much to finally getting to read this.”

“Of course.” Tomik reached forward to pour himself a glass of water. Vraska had the distinct impression their meeting wasn’t done yet.

“I have a few questions, if I may,” Tomik stated, “Nothing too invasive, I assure you. Nothing that isn’t common knowledge within this room.”

Well, she was intrigued.

“Ask away,” she directed.

Tomik took a sip of his water before neatly setting the glass down on a Guildpact-insignia coaster.


“Indeed,” she replied. She couldn’t help but smirk a little. He hadn’t technically asked a question so she technically didn’t have to give an answer. Tomik seemed to realise what she was doing and returned a smirk of his own.

“I believe your Guildmaster had all three editions of this volume collected up and burned,” he continued, “Finding one involved scouring beyond even the Tenth. So, what interest does a member of the Swarm have in such heretical reading?”

“Perhaps I’m just a very heretical member of the Swarm who enjoys old books,” she responded, “Perhaps I don’t like the versions of history that my Guildmaster wants to prescribe to us.”

“Perhaps,” he repeated, “Perhaps, with your heretical leanings and your excellent grasp on how to run a freshly formed government, you might be a bit more heretical than even your Guildmaster might anticipate.”

Oh, so he knew? He knew what she’d been doing here at the Chamber despite how they’d been attributed to Jace. That was interesting. That meant the Orzhov had someone on the inside, someone working in the Guildpact office who could feed them important information.

“This is all purely theoretical of course,” he added, “A very intelligent and capable gorgon would be deemed a heretic just by existing, am I right?”
She nodded. He really did know too much about how other authorities functioned. Was he Dimir? Or did he simply broker information?

“In this very theoretical scenario we’re talking about,” she said, “What would it mean to you if I did have designs on the running of my guild?”

His smirk widened.

“Why, a connection between Svothos and the powers that be in Vizkopa,” he replied, “We’re very interested in your work Mistress Vraska. Not just your political leanings, Ms Teysa is very impressed by your day to day work. We’ve rid ourselves of so many troublesome members thanks to your exceptional talents. What do the Ochran call it? The Severance?”

“Indeed,” Vraska replied, “And I am glad my particular talents are of use to Ms Teysa. But what do you get out of such an alliance? If I am perhaps in charge, then I won’t have the time to mop up stray ministrants.”

Tomik shrugged, taking another casual sip of water. From his posture, you would have thought they were talking about the weather.

“We haven’t decided yet. Ms Teysa finds that Guildmaster Jarad’s court is very bad for business. You can’t put the fear of death into a room full of liches. However, with a little shake up, a change in leadership, people are going to be more uncertain about their position in life. People are going to want assurance. That’s when people turn to the church. You get to transform the Golgari into a guild of your liking, we get to profit off the fools who run scared. Theoretically, it’s win-win.”

“And what do I get from you?” Vraska asked.

“A favour, from Vizkopa,” Tomik said, “Of course this all being pure speculation, we can’t say what the favour is. However, if the day comes when you need a little assistance in toppling the Golgari throne. Ms Teysa and I will be waiting on your letter.”

“Thank you.” Vraska’s mind was filled with ideas on what a favour from Vizkopa might be and how she could use it against Jarad. She admittedly wasn’t planning on a coup right this second, but the thought was always there at the back of her mind. She had the power to end Jarad permanently. She should be the one to do it.

“Is there anything else you would like to talk about?” she asked of him as he swiftly finished his glass of water.

“Oh, I think we’re done for now,” he said, getting to his feet in a swish of robes.

“It was an absolute pleasure meeting you Mistress Vraska. You’re no where near as unpleasant as Ral made you out to be. I enjoyed this meeting. I hope there will be more.”

“As do I.”

They shook hands again and departed together.

Vraska felt the need to get some fresh air after such a ‘theoretical’ discussion. The fact that Teysa Karlov liked the idea of her taking over the Golgari would certainly occupy her thoughts for some time. As far as she understood, Teysa Karlov was not in charge of her guild, but she certainly had designs to be. It was hard to overthrow a leadership consisting entirely of ghosts, so she took power where she could. Vraska recalled her being the Orzhov’s guild runner. Jace had also gone to meet her, rather than the Obzedat, on his little tour of Guildhalls. She was certainly an ally worth having,
but Vraska couldn’t help but feel she was going a little too fast. She didn’t have any plans to overthrow Jarad quite yet. Would the powers in Vizkopa be willing to wait that long? She guessed she’d find out.

She wandered to a nearby farmers market as she sought to clear her head. There she picked up fresh vegetables for dinner that night before her eye caught on a variety of potted plants. The sanctum was so dull and lifeless. Just solid stone and dusty old books. It needed some colour to it, some life. Having some greenery around was a good start. Flowers would certainly cheer the place up, and Jace would have something to look at other than his mountains of paper. He had mentioned that he’d liked to plant flowers in his dream woodland home. Well, this was a start. Perhaps the gesture would make him smile.

When Vraska returned to the sanctum, she bore a bag of vegetables under one arm and a pot plant in the other. She put the vegetables in the kitchen, before depositing the plant in her room for now. She’d ask Jace about it later, but the plant was probably better suited to being near the large windows in the audience room. It was certainly the least gloomy part of this wing. Perhaps she’d ask about it now? She had gossip to share after all. Jace would no doubt be interested to learn that Ral Zarek was in a relationship with Teysa Karlov’s right hand man. He’d probably share her incredulity, but she wanted to see his reaction for herself.

Expecting Jace to be at work, she made a beeline for his study. Halfway there however, she heard loud voices echoing down the corridor ahead. The sanctum was extremely echoey, but she began to expect that the discussion was coming from exactly where she intended to go. As she drew closer to the study, the voices decreased their volume a little, but they were still very much arguing.

“Look, I’m a busy man,” Jace was protesting, “You can’t just come in here and assume I’ll do whatever you want.”

“I’m not assuming anything,” replied a female voice. She was a stranger. Her accent wasn’t one Vraska had heard before. Whilst that shouldn’t concern her, it did. She’d met all sorts of Ravnicans and that accent wasn’t Ravnican. There was a planeswalker in their house. Other planeswalkers were always bad news.

“You will help me,” she continued, “Because then you get more of what you want.”

Jace made a spluttering noise.

“Look, we’re not even a-a thing. What happened last night… it just happened. Things happen sometimes! Usually they only happen once and then we go our-”

She cut him off.

“But what if it was a thing,” she continued, “What if I said I wanted a handsome little thing like you.”

Her tone was sultry and Vraska felt immensely uncomfortable.

“You-you do?”

Jace had switched tones entirely. At first, he’d sounded irritable, but now he was… hopeful? Vraska didn’t like this at all. The woman was freaking her out. Yet it sounded like Jace already knew her, and judging by their conversation, had already slept with her too. Vraska was entirely out of her depth in this situation. That woman, she had twisted Jace’s words into calling him a ‘thing’. As someone who had repeatedly been called a thing, both internally and externally, that didn’t sit
right with Vraska at all. Yet, she’d also complimented Jace. And he was clearly interested. Vraska was no longer the responsible teenager who needed to look out for him. He’d had countless relationships, or one night stands, over the years. He had infinitely more experience than she did in this area.

“How eager,” simpered the woman, “Hm, I think I’d consider it…though you might have to persuade me.”

Gods, this felt wrong! Jace and this woman had clearly had sex and they were probably going to do so again. Was this normal? Was this how people behaved before they got to the face eating part? Was Jace in danger? Did she need to go in there? Or would that be stupid? Could she ruin something for Jace and make him terribly unhappy? She didn’t know and it was eating her alive!

“I-I thought I said….”

Why did Jace suddenly sound so breathless?

“Oh I think you’ve said enough,” replied the woman, “Why don’t you show me how eager you are to please me? You were quite enjoyable last night.”

Vraska wanted to melt into the stone and never hear another thing. The noises Jace was making! The sounds of her both encouraging and patronising him! She was paralysed by indecision but she didn’t want to walk in on whatever they were doing in there.

If there was one other thing her assassin’s stealth it was good for, it was getting away from the sounds of her best friend having sex with an ominous stranger. But why? The question stuck with her as she sat at her desk, attempting to distract herself with everything and anything. This didn’t make sense. They’d been arguing! Jace had told the woman that he didn’t have time for her, that he expected it to be another one-time thing. Yet, she’d turned all his words against him and made him so obedient. Jace didn’t sound like he even liked at her at the start of that conversation! And everything she said! Vraska thought back on it and found all her speech so intensely creepy that it made her shiver in her seat.

Jace could do whatever he wanted, but, still, Vraska just couldn’t understand why. She thought she had finally puzzled it all out! From what she’d gathered, wanting sex went as follows. Firstly, you found a person you liked the appearance of. Secondly, you spent some time with them and they were very nice to you. Then, the first two factors combined, and flicked a sort of switch on in your brain that turned you into a lust-addled idiot. (Or at least that’s what happened to Jace anyway.) Yet this didn’t make sense with this stranger. She was creepy and patronising. That completely ruled out her assumption that someone had to be nice to you before you wanted to have sex with them. She remembered seeing those two guards in the alley when she was sixteen. Now an adult, she hated the fact she was just as clueless as in her teenage years. If this was something everyone was meant to experience, why didn’t it make sense to her?! She truly was broken.

Pulling open one of her desk drawers, she began to rummage, hoping what she sought was still in there. Under a layer of notebooks, scraps of paper and various trinkets, was a certain leaflet and business card. It had been many months since she’d received it, but she couldn’t help but wonder if the offer was still there. Whatever the case, she had failed to find answers in the library during her teenage years. Perhaps she might casually ask what was going on between Jace and this stranger, but she didn’t expect any answers there. No, she really needed the opinion of an expert. There was no way she could figure this out by herself.

The pot plant sat on her windowsill for the time being. She grabbed a cloak, slipping the leaflet and card into a discrete pocket. The leaflet gave her directions to the Scarlet Rose Academy, even
citing the nearest wagon stop. She jumped on the first wagon going in that direction and prayed that answers lay at her destination. How was she going to explain this all to Ruby? She was going to have to be honest. She didn’t have a choice.

The Scarlet Rose Academy was a narrow four-storey building in a swanky looking shopping district. Its ground floor was an exceptionally fancy bar, which doubled up as a events space during the day. As Vraska approached, hooded as usual, she saw that there was some sort of party happening amidst the dark wooden furniture and velvet covered seats. Most of the party-goers were in formal attire, robes, dresses and suits. A few hung out in the heated patio area at the front of the bar and stared at her as she approached. Vraska had little doubt that the bar and the school were both owned by Ruby. The décor was so typically her than she would be shocked to learn otherwise. Ornate black iron railings lined the outside, complete with black roses, covered in sharp iron thorns. The lighting was dim, reflecting off a stylish water feature made of red glass and black thread. It was the most sophisticated looking Rakdos venue she had ever seen. Perhaps she should take Jace here some time. Lavinia would never guess where they had run off to.

For now however, there were more important matters at hand. She followed a sign round to a side entrance, which proclaimed to be the way up to the academy. Taking the steps two at a time, she bounded up the ornately patterned carpet, and entered through a black beaded curtain. At the top of the stairs lay an reception with dark wood-panelling on every wall. A human with extravagant eye make-up sat behind the desk. His eyes sparkled crimson, the dark lines about his lids spiralling upwards towards his forehead where it burst into tiny black butterflies. It was truly artistic and must have taken forever to draw out.

“Can I help you?” he asked. Remembering what she was here for, Vraska produced the leaflet and card and showed it to him.

“I’m here to see Ruby?” she tried.

The man ignored the leaflet but took the card between his index fingers, appraising it as if was some priceless jewel. There was a moment of silence before he turned and bellowed.

“RUBY, A VIP IS HERE TO SEE YOU!”

There was a clatter from behind the black curtain that made up the back wall of the desk. Heavy footsteps followed and soon enough, a familiar face appeared from behind the velvet.

“Lady Death!” Ruby cried, “Didn’t expect to see you round these parts!”

She had swapped her usual corset and breeches for something approximating office dress. The mostly unbuttoned blouse showed off a generous amount of her lacy red bra and the skirt was a little too short to be called ‘appropriate’.

“I need your help,” Vraska replied, as the receptionist stared between them, “And I think you’re the only person I can ask.”

Ruby looked a little surprised before she slipped out from behind the desk and gestured for Vraska to join her.

“Of course, follow me. Do you want Matty to run down to the bar? A drink sometimes helps a difficult chat.”

Vraska considered this for a moment. After all that she’d just heard? A drink would be great.

“Yes please,” she replied, “Something sweet. Apple Smiter if you have it.”
Ruby nodded and waved at the receptionist. He nodded and disappeared behind the curtain. Either he was Matty or he was going to get Matty.

“Apple Smiters in the middle of the day, you must be going through some rough shit,” Ruby commented, “Come, he’ll bring it to the room.”

Vraska followed her down a corridor with similar décor to the bar downstairs. The glossy black floor glimmered beneath ornate red light fittings, each casting mesmerising shapes upon the ceiling. Ruby led her to the room at the very end of the corridor. There was a sparkling red rose painted on the door, along with swirling black capitals spelling V.I.P.

Inside were an array of comfortable looking armchairs and chaise longue. Half the room was curtained off and hidden from view but the rest simply looked like a very opulent living room. There was a large mirror on one wall in an ornate gold frame, and a few dressers full of drawers. Ruby gestured her towards an armchair before taking the one beside it. A moment or so later, Matty the receptionist was back with a tray containing two Apple Smiters and a bowl of mixed nuts. Ruby thanked him and waited until he was thoroughly out of earshot to ask:

“So what’s happened?”

Vraska told her about Jace and the mysterious woman, without once mentioning Jace’s name. She made a point to tell Ruby about the woman’s patronising tone, Jace’s sudden change of heart, the fact that the pair appeared to have slept together before. It was impossible to hide her worry, her confusion, her fear that she both letting him get hurt, but also that she might be ruining something good for him if she did interfere. Ruby had her speak out the conversation from memory, before asking her what else she knew about “her housemate’s” sex life. Vraska did her best to recall everything she’d seen. From the bars she knew he used to go to, to his crushes over the years (names excluded), all the way to the very large boxer shorts she’d once found in their laundry. Once she had finished speaking and began to nervously sip at her Smiter, Ruby gave a deep sigh. Vraska waited anxiously for her advice.

“I’m not over-reacting am I?” she asked her fellow Malcontent.

Ruby shook her head.

“No, no you’re not. You came to the right place darling, I’ve had this sort of question before and it’s a tricky one.”

The teacher lay back in her armchair.

“We’ve got two options before us,” she stated, “And I don’t think we can know for sure without asking your housemate.”

“What are the options?” Vraska asked.

Ruby cleared her throat a little.

“We’ve got two possible situations here,” she explained, “One, you’re right. This unknown woman is bullying your housemate into sexual favours that he doesn’t want to give. From what you told me, it sounded like consent went pretty much out the window when she started emotionally manipulating him. She was, definitely, manipulative.”

Vraska was ready to go and petrify her right now. Sensing this, Ruby hastily threw up a hand to keep her in a seat.
“Two,” she said a little firmly, “This could be what your housemate likes in bed.”

“What?” Vraska asked, suddenly deeply confused.

“Some people like to be given orders during intimacy,” Ruby explained, “Your housemate clearly likes older, more powerful, and possibly much larger partners than himself. What you heard could just be foreplay.”

“Foreplay?” Vraska repeated, still none the wiser as to what she was talking about. People wanted to be bossed around and manipulated during sex? Why?

Ruby stared at her. There was something rather judgemental about her gaze.

“Is the question ‘why is that foreplay’ or ‘what is foreplay’?” she asked.

Vraska wondered if she had said something wrong.

“Both?” she replied, her anxiety ramping up another notch as Ruby took a deep breath and smiled at her.

“Ok, don’t worry,” she assured her, “I’m going to go out on a limb here and say you don’t have much sexual experience?”

Vraska could only nod.

“You don’t have any sexual experience?”

Vraska nodded again. Was that a problem? Should she leave?

“That’s fine,” Ruby said, “You came to the right place. We can talk through this and you won’t be so confused.”

It wasn’t what Vraska had come here for, but she didn’t think she was going to get another chance. All the questions she’d had since her teenage years came spilling out, eased by the sips of alcohol and the presence of a friendly face. She’d trusted Ruby with details of her horrible past, and with the knowledge of all the bloody crimes in her future. Why shouldn’t she trust her with all the questions she had about sex and relationships? Ruby knew about these things, it was her job after all. She was an exceptionally patient teacher. Vraska couldn’t help but feel slightly stupid as she was given the run down on safe sexual practice, the importance of consent, and even what often went on between two sexual partners. Out of one of the dresser drawers came a whole pile of leaflets on everything from self-pleasure to other places she could go to learn more about certain sexual acts. Her handbag ended up full of colourful bits of paper, but none of them seemed to answer the most burning question in her mind.

“So-so I’m not broken if I don’t feel attraction to people?”

Ruby smiled.

“No, of course not. It’s quite normal, there’s plenty of people out there who’ve never felt attraction, and plenty more who still enjoy sex regardless. Desire and attraction aren’t the same thing. You can want to share in the sensation, without having a particular type of person in mind. I hope I’m not breaking my boundaries here, but I’m sure plenty of people would want to be with someone as gorgeous as yourself Lady Death, even on an aesthetic level, no attraction needed.”

She wasn’t quite sure what to say about that. She didn’t feel gorgeous. She just felt quite juvenile
and awkward. It was both a relief and a pain to hear that she’d been worrying needlessly all those years. That was so many years she could have spent trying out new things. Going to the bars that Jace liked. Finding out what it was truly like to make out in an alley!

No, wait, that wasn’t what she was here to talk about!

“But what about Jace?” she asked. They had spent hours on this tangent when she hadn’t come to talk about herself at all. She was worried what Jace might be doing with that woman even now!

“Jace?” Ruby asked.

Vraska instantly realised her error. In her haste to get back on topic, she’d forgotten to leave out his name.

“That’s my housemate,” she mumbled, “I was trying to keep him anonymous.”

“Jace,” Ruby repeated with a slight frown, “Jace, odd name, but I’m sure I’ve seen it somewhere before. Maybe in a newspaper?”

Oh no. This was why she was avoiding his name!

“Holy shit,” Ruby gasped, “You’re… Jace Beleren! You’re rooming with the Living Guildpact? Wait, the-the Living Guildpact likes to be subm-“

“No,” Vraska interrupted, “Don’t tell anyone. I don’t want his sex life all over the papers. Also I don’t want him to know I’ve ruined his privacy.”

“It’s ok,” Ruby assured her, “We practice pure client confidentiality here. My lips are sealed. This won’t be leaving these walls.”

Vraska took another sip of liquid apple pie as she felt her heart race just a bit too fast for comfort.

“Well, I didn’t think I’d be hearing about the Guildpact’s sex life today,” Ruby stated, “But, I admit, I’ve had weirder.”

She took a deep breath.

“Jace trusts you right?”

“Yes,” Vraska replied at once.

“Enough that he’d share his worries with you?” Ruby continued.

“Of course.” Vraska didn’t doubt that for a second.

“I would go home, seek him out and ask him about the whole thing,” Ruby suggested, “That’s how we’ll truly know if he’s being coerced. If he is, then you have my full approval to turn that woman into stone. If not, maybe ask him to keep his roleplay a bit quieter?”

Vraska nodded. That certainly seemed like the most sensible plan of action. She and Jace trusted each other with everything. Yes, she may have hidden her involvement in the recent Azorius murders, but that was different! That was murder and this was Jace’s wellbeing! He knew she cared. He knew she would go any lengths to make sure he was happy. So, of course he’d explain the situation to her. She’d get answers!

Ruby wished her luck as she headed back down the stairs. They agreed to meet, with Javy and the
others, at the Copper Ladle in a few days time. Right here and now however, Vraska was on a mission. A mission to make sure that Jace wasn’t being bullied by a strange woman with a sultry voice. She got home, heart pounding as she psyched herself up for the conversation ahead. She was Jace’s protector, she had been protecting him for so long that he should expect her to be looking out for him! She ignored Lavinia entirely as she strode through the audience chamber and into their private quarters. Down the corridor and towards Jace’s study.

The door was open.

She peeked inside.

There were papers everywhere, a lot of books on the floor, but no Jace. She headed to his bedroom instead, hoping she wasn’t about to walk into some sort of post-sex nap-time. Once there, she had the sense to knock. The sound echoed horribly off the stone walls and the door merely gave a little creak open. She looked through the gap and all she could see was his pillow nest, empty in the centre of his bed.

She tore round their home, checking bathrooms and storage cupboards, living rooms and studies. He wasn’t anywhere! There was no sign, no nothing! His usual cloak was still on its hook by the door! Where was he? Where had he gone? Had the woman got him? Had he been kidnapped? Vraska went into her room and promptly screamed into her bedcovers.

Jace was gone and it was all her fault!
When Jace fails to return home the next day, Vraska is grateful for any distraction from her panic. Hoping Lavinia can find him in her absence, Vraska ventures forth to tick off the last name on her list.

Content warning - Murder and mentions of Medical Malpractice.

Dear Lady Death,

It was nice catching up with you the other day. Don’t worry, nothing we said will ever go beyond the pair of us. I hope you’ve sorted out the situation with your housemate and things are getting better at home.

I completely understand if you’re not feeling up for it right now, but Tasia finally made good on her promise to track down a certain healer that I’ve had a vendetta with for some time. Before I go making big asks, I should probably explain myself. Once again, I’d prefer to keep this between us. Javy knows, but that’s about it.

When I was about your age, I worked as the strongwoman in a touring troop. Traditional Rakdos stuff, nothing out of the ordinary. One night, there was a mistake on the high ropes, one of the wires snapped and our youngest recruit took a terrible fall. I rushed in to try and catch him. Managed it, but got horribly mangled in doing so. The stage collapsed under our combined weight, leaving me bleeding out in the wreckage. The circus rushed me to the nearest clinic, a little Selesnya place on the outskirts of the precinct. When I finally came back round, I had all the blood back where it belonged, but something was different. Too different.

I couldn’t feel. I’m not being over-dramatic here. It literally feels like all my skin has been muffled in a layer of wool. Pain, pleasure, hot, cold, I can’t feel any of it. Not the wind through my hair or the rain on my face. I’m a void in a world of sensation. I went back to the clinic and demanded to learn what had happened to me. They put me in the office with the guy who treated me. The fucker had the nerve to say he’d improved me for the better. He said he’d freed me from the sins of my guild, taken away my ability to feel ‘carnal pleasure’ so I could walk a more virtuous path. Needless to say I was pissed. He’d taken everything away due to his stupid beliefs! He’d ripped my life apart because he hated my guild! And somehow, he had the gall to feel righteous about it!

In my anger I attacked him. It took four Selesnyans to drag me out of there and I went straight to the police, demanding justice. They merely laughed in my face. Well, all except one, a certain Officer Javy who we all know and love. Needless to say, I’m banned from any Selesnya guild premises, but I want that bastard dead. I want him to become the void he turned me into. I never want him to feel again. I want to turn his stone hands into a candle-
holder, never able to feel the hot wax as it pours over his granite skin.

His name is Evangel Bron Jile, he lives at 26 Point-Park Avenue. Do with that information what you will.

Best wishes,

Ruby.

It was a welcome distraction from the emptiness of her home. Vraska found the letter propped on the audience room table, addressed thankfully to her real name rather than ‘Lady Death’. She hadn’t given Ruby her address, but considering that the teacher knew who her housemate was now, it wasn’t much of a stretch. Vraska spent most of the morning absolutely livid on Ruby’s behalf. Somehow, everything Ruby had told her, everything about consent, everything about knowing what you wanted for your own body… It all took on a deeper meaning now. Ruby had lost her ability to feel, she’d been hurt, operated on, with complete lack of consent. Yet now she’d dedicated her life to educating others. To making sure they would never be violated, never go through the pain she’d experienced. She was remarkable! Vraska paced the house as she waited for Jace to return. Reading and re-reading the letter, she spent the morning planning exactly what she was going to do to Evangel Bron Jile. As she paced, she occasionally passed Lavinia, who had the sense to stay out of her way on the first few passes, but after the fifth or sixth, she had the nerve to ask:

“What do you know where the Guildpact is?”

Vraska turned on her heel so abruptly that even the stoic Captain jumped.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing since yesterday afternoon,” she hissed, “There was a stranger in here. A woman. Do you know who she was?”

Lavinia frowned.

“I wasn’t aware that the Guildpact had any visitors yesterday afternoon. I was attending a meeting at New Prahv.”

Vraska gave a frustrated sigh and slumped into an audience-room chair.

“Is something the matter?” asked Captain Lavinia, “Do you suspect that this woman has harmed the Guildpact?”

“Yes.”

There was no point denying it. She hadn’t been able to sleep last night, she was so sick with worry.

“I overheard them talking yesterday,” she informed the Captain, “She was attempting to bully him into assisting her with something. He was reluctant but…”

“But?”

Vraska let out a deep sigh. Jace was not going to like the fact she had shared this. However, Lavinia had an entire guild’s forces at her disposal. If she couldn’t find Jace, then perhaps Lavinia could.

“She attempted to seduce him,” Vraska continued, “And succeeded. Her language was extremely sinister and now he’s gone and I have no idea where.”
Lavinia’s frown turned into a deep scowl. Her tone was grave.

“I will put the word out and send search parties up and down the Promenade. If he’s still in the Tenth, we’ll find him.”

“Thank you.” Vraska leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands in her hair. She watched as Lavinia went back up the stairs and into the main building of the Guildpact Offices. Had it happened? Had Jace finally caved under the pressure and fled? Had this woman been the spark that finally lit the fuse? He was gone and he hadn’t even told her where he was going! Was this the end? Was this what finally brought the world crashing down around her? He could be anywhere. Anywhere! Any plane! Beyond the reach of Lavinia’s search parties where no one would ever find him again. Why hadn’t he invited her along? Wasn’t she part of his dream escape? They were supposed to build that log cabin together, go fishing together, sing songs together under the fireflies and stars. Had the presence of that woman changed his dream? Was she now his ideal escape partner?

Vraska sat bolt upright.

Was she being replaced? Was this Emmara all over again? He’d found another powerful woman who told him what to do. Maybe Ruby was right. He was hopelessly enamoured with older women who bossed him about. Unlike Emmara, he’d actually managed to have sex with this woman, multiple times! Gods, no, this was it. He’d promised not to do it again, but hell, he was in such a bad state at the moment his will power would be practically non-existent! He was an accident waiting to happen! And it had happened, he was gone, forgetting about her entirely…

Vraska got up before her thoughts ran too far in that direction. No. No. He was going to be fine. He’d be back soon. Lavinia would find him. He cared about her. He had said so. They both cared about each other so much. He wouldn’t just replace her. He couldn’t. She bit her lip, willing back a fresh wave of panic. She couldn’t think about this right now. She needed a distraction and one had freshly presented itself to her. Ruby’s letter. That was right, even if she had been abandoned by Jace, there was no reason for her to abandon her other friends. Ruby deserved justice and she was the only one who could grant it. So that’s what she’d do.

The following day, she made her way to the Copper Ladle with a very odd package in her bag. She had re-used the gold silk bag that Tomik Vrona had wrapped her book in to add a little class to the gift. She’d even gone and picked out a scented candle for Ruby to use in her new, rather macabre, table decoration. Fortunately, the Copper Ladle was already packed by the time she arrived. It was filled with a whole rainbow of robes and uniforms. The pub was just off the Transguild Promenade, making it the perfect place for local employees to grab a bite for lunch. Vraska was fairly sure she recognised a group from the Guildpact Investigative Bureau. The wide variety of businesses on the promenade meant that you met all sorts in venues like these. From Selesnyan landscapers to Orzhov lawyers, guildless labourers to off-duty Boros guards. Waiters squeezed their way between crowds and tables, bearing trays of food and drink. Vraska passed a gated off staircase. In the centre of the Copper Ladle was a set of trellises, laden with large orange flowers. Beneath this arch was the top of a spiral staircase descending into the basement. Right now, the area was locked off amidst the trellises with a sturdy chain. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what was down there. It was both decorated and hidden, an intriguing combination.

Ruby and Javy were already present. Vraska wordlessly handed the golden bag over. Gently slipping the drawstring wider, Ruby took a peek inside before quickly drawing it shut.

“You spoil us, truly,” she told Vraska, “Thank you.”

Javy merely raised an eyebrow at them over her beer.
“I was all ready to give you a location in thanks,” said Ruby, “But I messed up. Tasia dropped by the academy yesterday with invitations. I was so excited I’d actually found someone for you, I told them about. So yeah, Tasia took care of it for you. Sorry.”

“Would that be the man we found with lettering all over his corpse?” Javy asked, keeping her voice appropriately low, “The one who liked to frequent Rakdos pleasure houses?”

Ruby nodded but Vraska was still none the wiser.

“Who was it? What happened?” she asked.

Javy pulled out a very crumpled copy of Vraska’s list from her pocket. She then fished a newspaper out from under her seat.

**CORPSE OF ARBITER FOUND DISFIGURED IN PRIVATE RESIDENCE**

Vraska scanned the article in a matter of seconds, her appetite somewhat lessened as she read exactly how the man had died. He’d had dozens of words carved into his skin, phrases relating to his profession – law, proof, evidence, judge, jury, bias, ruling. The lettering had carved through muscle and bone, leaving him to bleed out in his own bed, blood streaming through the words he’d made his life’s work. Tasia was nothing but poetic with their justice.

“His name was Arbiter Zivan,” Javy explained, “A legendary legislator, one of Isperia’s favourites. He once talked for sixteen hours non-stop, just to stonewall a request for refugee assistance. He retired after being discovered cheating on his wife in half a dozen Rakdos pleasure houses. However, more importantly, he was the one who championed the Golgari Purges to Isperia. He was the man who wrote up the final law, the paperwork that condemned all those innocents to death. He delivered it in person to Isperia to magic it into law. He murdered thousands with his words.”

“So Tasia killed him with words,” Vraska concluded, “How very fitting.”

Another one gone. She kind of wished she had seen this one. Or at least got a picture of what he looked like with his condemnation etched into his skin.

“I wanted you to be able to do it,” Ruby apologised, “I promise. I didn’t think Tasia would just go and act on it. They’re really into this whole revenge killing thing. It’s not what I expected of them, that’s for sure. I know you can’t trust all medical professionals, but, well, they’re an official surgeon, in an official hospital. I wouldn’t really want the person who operates on me to be so enthusiastic about killing.”

She had a point. Vraska was an assassin. It was her job to kill people. Tasia was a surgeon, they were supposed to be saving lives not taking them away. There was being inspired, and then there was this. She didn’t want to lead an innocent person down a life of crime when they didn’t need to commit crime at all.

“Do you think I’ve had too much of an effect on them?” she asked the other two. Javy made an uneasy expression and shrugged a little. Ruby grimaced.

“Maybe, though you haven’t got many targets left, do you Lady Death?”

Vraska looked at Javy’s list, where she’d been scrawling notes as she went along. Ruby was right, there was only name left. She pulled a notebook out of her bag and checked it against her own list of guards and politicians. Yes, only one left – Arbiter Relov, one of the four senators who had signed the order through to Isperia alongside Zivan.
“Do you think Tasia will stop killing once they run out targets?” Vraska asked, “I mean, out of us five, six including Edvin, we’ve mostly got our justice. I’ve only got one name left.”

“I don’t think they’re going to go out seeking new victims,” Javy stated, “They’re very inspired by your talks on justice though. If you’re worried, maybe talk to Edvin first, and then Tasia themself? They should be here in a bit.”

Vraska resolved to do exactly that. She couldn’t condemn Tasia to the life of a killer. She couldn’t risk having her friend sent to prison. They weren’t a criminal. They weren’t supposed to be a killer in the first place. Vraska’s mood slipped as she realised that she’d spoken too well, too passionately. It was her words that had done this. Words had such power, the power to lead so many to their deaths. Zivan’s words had wiped out whole neighbourhoods. Then they had bled him dry. Her words had sent Tasia spiralling down a path she wasn’t sure she could pull them back from. She’d created another murderer. No one had the right to do that.

“I want to talk to you about these lists,” Javy commented, “Two things about them actually. It’s why I scheduled this meeting a bit earlier before the happy couple arrives.”

“Why am I here then?” asked Ruby.

“Because I invited you before I decided to delay the other two,” said Javy, “Also because I thought you still had someone you needed help with.”

“I’m good now thanks,” Ruby passed Javy the golden silk bag. The investigator peered inside, frowned a little, before handing it back.

“Fair enough,” she stated, “But I can trust you to keep a secret, so you can stay.”

“Thanks.” Ruby settled back in her chair, clearly getting comfy for whatever Javy had to say next.

“Here’s the situation,” Javy reported, putting her beer back on the table, “Most of list’s members have been found by now. They haven’t pieced all of them together, but the Azorius don’t want to handle the hassle of an internal investigation. They’ve turned the case over to the Boros and the Chamber of the Guildpact.”

That was interesting. Vraska hadn’t heard any talk of it around the building. It must be one of the more secretive investigations.

“Now, this happened by complete coincidence,” Javy continued, “But I got put in charge of this whole case. I’m Head of the Investigation, on both sides, Boros and Guildpact.”

“Nice,” Ruby replied. Vraska couldn’t help but smile a little. Well, this case was never getting solved unless Javy wanted to implicate herself.

“Even nicer,” Javy elaborated, “Is that I’ve been given the run of the Guildpact Investigation Bureau and all their facilities and contacts. They’ve got a pretty sweet setup down there. Honestly it’s impressive.”

She leant back in her seat, arms crossed in an authoritative smugness.

“And you’ll never guess what.”

She clearly wanted to be asked, so Vraska did.

“What?”
Javy grinned.

“I got to meet the Guildpact. The actual Living Guildpact in his actual audience chamber. He’s shorter and skinnier than I thought, but boy is that place grand.”

Ruby and Vraska glanced at each other. Ruby snickered and Vraska couldn’t help but share in her amusement. Admittedly, if you were a Boros officer with no connection to the Chamber, meeting the Living Guildpact would be quite something. But the fact that Javy was trying to boast about this to her of all people...

“Ok, what’s so funny?” Javy retorted, as Vraska and Ruby shared another furtive look.

“I thought you two would be more impressed.”

“Oh no, we’re very impressed,” Ruby replied, “Congrats on going up in the world. It’s just, well,”

“Ruby,” Vraska interjected, in the same tone Javy used when the Ruby was about to be inappropriate. This only seemed to confirm Javy’s suspicions.

“What aren’t you two telling me?”

Vraska shot Ruby another warning look before deciding it was better than she explained it herself. She didn’t trust Ruby not to let slip something about Jace’s sex life even she was under client confidentiality

“It’s nothing much. Just, well, do you remember when I said my housemate got a new job and moved to the Transguild Promenade? And I had to move with him?”

“Yes,” Javy replied, her eyes narrowing in suspicion, “Are-are you trying to tell me, that your housemate is-?”

“Yes,” Vraska replied quickly, “The Guildpact thing was sort of an accident. Though, let’s keep that to ourselves?”

Javy let out a low whistle.

“You live one hell of a life,” she commented, “What do I have to do to be a gorgeous assassin who grew up with the actual Living Guildpact?”

“I mostly keep those facts to myself,” Vraska insisted, “Though admittedly, it was mostly a long chain of coincidences. We just sort of fell into these things.”

She cleared her throat, hoping that would end that particular topic of conversation.

“What was the other thing you wanted to talk about?”

That had done the trick.

“Right,” Javy reminded herself, “Much more importantly, there’s something you should know.”

She dropped her voice back down to a conspiratorial murmur.

“That last name on your list? I know who he is, where he lives and exactly when to find him.”

“That’s great,” Vraska replied, though she suspected that wasn’t all Javy wanted to tell her.
“There is, however, something you need to be aware of,” Javy continued, “Relov and I go way back. We grew up in the same part of town. We went to school together. He joined the Azorius at the same time as I joined the Boros, fresh out of classes.”

Ah. Was that going to be a problem?

“Back then we were both idealistic idiots,” Javy continued, “We loved and believed in the system as if it were our own moral codes. We worked together on cross-guild projects, incarcerating goodness knows how many innocent children in the name of giving them a ‘proper’ upbringings. We were wrong and I am still atoning for that to this day. However, he hasn’t realised the errors of his ways.”

She took a deep breath, pausing a moment to meet Vraska’s gaze.

“I spoke with him this morning, after we went to look at what was left of Zivan. He definitely signed that order, the order that wiped out so many Golgari, but he doesn’t even remember it. He pretty much admitted he doesn’t even bother reading the things he signs. He just adds his scribble, collects his paycheck and then goes back to his stately home. No care for the lives he condemns every day.”

So typically Azorius of him.

“Because I knew him,” Javy said, “I have a request. You’re at liberty to say no, this is your justice of course. He’s the last one on the list. I know you’re not crazy enough to go after Isperia herself, so this is it. The last one before you get your well-deserved release. I imagine you’ll want to be there, to know it happened, to know it’s over. However, please, when you go, take me with you. I want to see him in his final moments. I want to see the end of his wicked reign, just like I saw him when it all started.”

She wasn’t objecting to Arbiter Relov’s death. She just wanted to be there when it happened. Vraska understood and certainly had no objections to that. In fact, having Javy around was a sure way into the Arbiter’s personal surroundings. She was a way in, and Vraska would be the way out, for Relov at least.

“I understand,” she replied, “We’ll do it together. Just like how we started this campaign for justice. You and I dealt with Banik together, now we can deal with Relov.”

Javy nodded.

“I’ve booked a meeting in with him this evening if you want this done once and for all,” she suggested, “Then maybe some celebratory drinks? Not as many as last time.”

“Sounds good,” Vraska replied, “Meet you outside the Chamber?”

“Of course. Six o clock sharp.”

Vraska needed time to process everything that had just been agreed upon. The last name on her list. Tomorrow there would be no more senators to kill, no more officials to bring death upon. She’d reach the end of the line. Her revenge would never be complete. Not until Isperia and Jarad were as stony as the walls of their guildhalls, but this was progress. Progress unlike any she’d ever dreamed of. So many Azorius had died gruesome undignified deaths. So many men and women, who would never have received punishment otherwise, had finally met their end. For the first time in years, she wondered what her mother would have thought of her life choices. Was she happy to be avenged? Would she be proud of all her daughter had achieved? Her mother had been an assassin
too. Would she approve of the influence Vraska had over others? Would she be pleased that she’d helped people find their own justices? There was no way of knowing. She was so young. Apart from the occasional dark mutter about Jarad, her mother hadn’t tried to talk about politics around a six year old.

“I wonder where the happy couple are?” asked Ruby, interrupting her train of thought.

“Maybe they both got called into surgery,” said Javy, “It’s happened before.”

Whatever the case, Tasia and Edvin didn’t show up for lunch. Vraska had the rest of the afternoon to come up with some sort of distraction that would stop her pacing the house again. She opted for looking through the vast amount of dusty old tomes that lined the audience chamber. Some of them just crumpled as soon as she opened them, however, she gleaned enough from the covers to discover that the books were not arranged by topic, or author, but by guild. The shelf she started on was entirely full of books about the Izzet – everything from lists of personnel to records of civic works from hundreds of years ago. The audience room was packed with shelves full of volumes, the same went for the library in their personal quarters. If any of the books remained intact, who knew what she might find out about the past?

She spent the afternoon looking for records about the Golgari. By the time she found them, tucked at the back of the library, it was almost time to meet up with Javy. She showered off the dust and grime before changing into a fresh dress, one that she often wore on missions due to its lack of rustling and excellent places to conceal knives. She didn’t often wear outfits that were entirely black, but this felt like an occasion for it. When she met Javy outside the front of the building, she somehow wasn’t surprised to find that she was in black too. She’d abandoned all traces of her Boros uniform, carrying a short sword in a plain looking sheath, but no signs of her usual gleaming regalia. They moved like two shadows against the darkening horizon.

“Ready?” she asked, as soon as Vraska approached.

“Ready,” she confirmed. The last name. The last senator. It was time.

Javy was let in by Arbiter Relov’s doorman, quoting their shared history at him as she was escorted upstairs. Vraska used the distraction to slip inside via a workman’s entrance. The Arbiter had clearly had his garden recently remodelled. The side of the mansion was entirely covered in rich flora in spiralling neatly-grown patterns. Selesnyan work by the look of things, no one else could make plants grow in such a stylistic fashion. She followed Javy’s voice up a flight of stairs. The officer was talking especially loudly, no doubt so Vraska could follow her progress through the house. The Arbiter didn’t seem to have a family. The place was far too austere, too pristine, to be lived in by anyone but a single rich man who liked to look rather than touch. There were very few servants about. The doorman was still with Javy, listening to her relentless stream of chatter. However, no maids, no butler, no cook, emerged from the various closed doors she sneaked by. This house could easily house a large family, two, if people were willing to share the enormous rooms. Yet this Arbiter deigned to have it all for himself? How wasteful. How many bribes had gone into the ornately patterned wallpaper? The oil landscapes in gilt frames? The oak dressers and carved handrails? Everything here was at its finest. Not tacky and golden like the décor of many Orzhov establishments, just far more expensive than it needed to be. A simple door with a good lock worked just as well as a fancy one with the same lock. The only difference was how much money went into preparing it. Everything in this house must have cost a small fortune.

Finally, she reached a set of double doors, carved with a woodland scene containing deer and birds. Javy’s voice came strongly from the other side, loud enough for her to slip behind a statue of some Azorius senator, and stay out of the way of any passers by.
“But what does it have to do with me?” came a male voice. He overly-enunciated his every syllable, as if addressing an audience with poor verbal comprehension.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Javy replied, her volume lowering a little, “Everything is about you.”

There was a pause, punctuated only by the creak of a chair.

“He was one of the guards during the Golgari raids,” Javy continued, “He should have faced trial and been held accountable.”

“Oh, so he’s another in your series of murders?” said the man, Arbiter Relov.

“Tell me about the raids,” Javy demanded, “The purges, as they are rightfully called.”

“I don’t know anything about them,” Relov replied.

“You ordered them,” Javy reminded him.

Relov made a blustering noise. It was a sound of disbelief, as if she had made some ridiculous accusation against him.

“That’s not entirely accurate,” he protested, “I just signed the paper. And I wasn’t even there. I’ve never been to a Detention Compound in my life.”

Detention Compound? Is that what the Azorius called them? They were prisons, maximum security hell-holes rampant with death and disease. Not some place where naughty children sat in time-out. Children died in those cages! New born babies starved to death atop the limp forms of their mother’s corpses! Vraska bet this Relov couldn’t even imagine such torment from his luxurious abode.

“When you put your little mark on one of those edicts, do you ever think about what it means?” Javy demanded, fiercer now as her temper rose.

“There are people on the other end of them, Relov. People’s lives are affected terribly by your signature!”

“Of course, I think about them!” Relov protested. Even from his tone, Vraska could tell he never had.

“You used to,” Javy stated, “But not anymore. Do you remember all those people we used to help? Ever think about them? Do you wonder if you’re just killing them now, instead of then?”

Relov made a noise like a mouse being stepped on, a gurgling squeak that deflated with his breath.

“What do they have to do with anything,” he snapped, “We have rules. The Boros have rules. I suppose even the Golgari must have rules. Rules are not the problem.”

“So what is the problem Relov?” Javy asked. There was another squeak of a chair, perhaps Relov was getting fidgety in his guilt.

“I don’t see a problem,” he retorted, temper rising. This was of course a lie. He did see a problem but his problem was Javy.

“No, not from your pretty mansion, you wouldn’t,” Javy sighed, “She was right. I didn’t want to think this about you. I wanted to hold onto our friendship, at least a little. But she was right.”
Vraska waited with baited breath.

“Who, your Guildmaster?” Relov accused, “So the rumours are right. Guildmaster Aurelia, we thought she was radicalising you lot. The Azorius will not let it-“

Javy cut across him, the stamp of her feet betraying how angrily she had stepped towards him.

“How Aurelia no,” she spat, “I have found a new teacher, and she eclipses my work with the Boros. She holds the truth. Life into death, and death into life. We must kill the weeds so the flowers may flourish. Death and Life, it’s an eternal cycle, a harmony ruined by those who would deny justice to the wronged. Those who ruin the lives of others to further their ambition, they must experience a profound death.”

Vraska wasn’t entirely sure what this feeling was. Was it flattery? Was it pride? Javy had truly listened to everything she said. She’d taken it so clearly to heart that she could now explain it to other people. She, a single gorgon, had made a better impression on Javy than the entire Boros? She was surprisingly emotional at the thought.

“A person’s death should reflect the nature in which they lived,” Javy continued earnestly, “Those that live at peace with others, should die in peace, surrounded by those they love. Those who murder hundreds for an easy paycheck-“

“J-Javy you’re scaring me,” stammered Relov. Vraska wished she had longer to delight in his terror. However, there were loud footsteps coming up the hallway towards her hiding spot. The doorman was back, perhaps coming to check on their guest. She didn’t have time for him now, she was too busy listening to this excellent conversation.

“Am I?” Javy mused from inside the room, “For the first time in my life, I feel no fear. You sign away people’s lives like they’re rats to be exterminated. You cozy up to men like the one who—who murdered Blazena. Now she’s dead, they’re all dead and look at you, safe behind your endless wall of words. Or at least you think you are.”

The doorman was too close for comfort now. Before he could do so much as glimpse her, she had emerged from behind the statue. A golden flash from her eyes, a loud thud, and the doorman’s body cracked into pieces on the hardwood floor.

There was the sound of a chair screeching back from inside the room. The noise had started the arbiter no doubt.

“That will be your doorman falling dead to the floor,” commented Javy, “Next, your door will open. And you’ll see the face of your judge.”

Vraska took that as her cue. Leaving the pieces of doorman on the floor, she pushed open the door with ease. Now she saw him, a short pasty man in a blue silk dressing gown. He looked like he’d never seen the outside world, his face entirely unblemished from wind or weather. Not a scar, not even a bruise covered his person. Time to change that.

She entered the room, uncurling her hair and letting it writhe snake-like in the air behind her. Relov was backing away swiftly in horror. Looks like someone had never seen a gorgon before.

“You should be honoured,” said Javy, leaning against his desk, “Out of all the killings I’ve done in her name, this is the first one we’ve done together.”

Unable to wait another second, Vraska surged forward, grabbing the squealing senator by the throat. He squeezed his eyelids tight shut, as if that would do anything to dissuade her magic. She
didn’t need to look a man in the eyes to render him in stone. However, it didn’t hurt to play a little. She didn’t want the fun to be over too soon. She drew him close, letting out a low hiss directly into his ear. She grinned as he quivered in terror. Now it was his go. His turn to fear for his life.

“Just before your guard would have killed me,” she whispered, her voice all the more snake-like in its hissing malice, “I was torn from this world. Cast into a dark tomb with no way out.”

Relov tried to protest, to struggle. Tears welled in his eyes and cascaded down his cheeks as he struggled to breathe. Her sharp nails had begun to pierce his throat, blood warming her fingertips as they punctured through flesh.

“It felt like lifetimes before I learned to escape, to slip between worlds. But during the eternity I lay trapped, confused, in agony… I knew then. Even at that age I realised. All must die the death they deserve.”

She reached for his face, her bloody nails scraping at his clenched lids. She glanced at the wojek, standing at attention by the arbiter’s desk. She called her name like a judge addressing her jury.

“Javy, name his crime.”

Javy didn’t hesitate.

“Inaction.”

“And his punishment?” Vraska continued, as the arbiter’s breaths got weaker and weaker. This was Javy’s ex-friend. She should have at least some say in how he left this world.

Javy smirked.

“Oh that’s easy. He was never going to lift a finger to help anyone. Why not just remove that option entirely?”

Vraska got her drift and liked where it was going.

“Perfect.”

They packaged up the statue in white cloth, tied it in rope and left instructions for it to be sent to New Prahv. When Relov’s staff returned in the morning, they would no doubt follow their ‘master’s’ instruction and get it sent off right away. As she positioned the lump of stone by the door, Vraska could still feel the adrenaline racing through her veins. Her heart was beating a mile a minute. Gods, that felt so good. To grasp a man by the throat and see the terror in his eyes. To watch the mighty wail and whimper between her talons. That power! She felt like a woman possessed. Her assassinations, her jobs, were cold and emotionless. She found the target, she killed them, she went on her way. Yet this, this had been fun. This had been therapeutic. To know her tormentors could be reduced to snivelling wretches under the power of her gaze… She gave a little shiver at the thrill of it all.

This was a rush! A rush of what, she wasn’t entirely sure, but she hadn’t felt so alive in such a long time. Certainly not since Jace had become Guildpact, perhaps not since she had walked off with a fraction of Pontiff Musil’s riches. This must be what it was like to love your work. To feel proud of what you could do. Killing that Selesnyan healer earlier hadn’t felt like this. It had been satisfying, but this, she was giddy with the sensation of it all! For once in her life, she felt like she was in control. She felt powerful, mighty, and so gods damn good.

“Fuck me,” exclaimed Javy as they rushed back into the night, “You can put on a show let me tell
you. Nothing I’ve done in the Legion compared to that. Ruby’s right, you deserve a damn title. Lady Death indeed.”

She certainly felt like Lady Death right now. She’d had a tyrant’s life in her hands like she’d never done before and it had been fantastic.

“Don’t tell her I said she was right though,” Javy added, “She’d be insufferable.”

“Our secret is safe with me,” Vraska laughed. Whatever high she was on, it was still coursing through her veins long past Relov’s mansion and back down the promenade. When they returned to the Copper Ladle, they found music issuing from the spiral stairs, and a dim purple glow from where they’d been sitting earlier. Their table was free amidst the mood-lighting. Ruby was already there, and so were Tasia and Edvin.

“You two look like you’ve had the best time!” exclaimed Tasia as they approached, bearing drinks

“You’re not wrong,” Javy replied, sliding across the bench to sit next to Ruby. Vraska took a chair beside Edvin, who was staring at the officer, waiting for her to spill what had got them so excited.

“We just ticked the last name of her ladyship’s list,” Javy proclaimed, raising her glass for a toast. There was a clink of glass as everyone hastened to match her gesture. Vraska, who was on something strawberry flavoured, couldn’t help but join in.

“I see I still pick the best nicknames,” Ruby commented, downing the last of the beer in her glass, and starting on a smaller glass of something purple.

“I’ll concede this one,” Javy replied, “You should have seen it Ruby. Gods, it was art, gorgeous terrifying art. Ah, if only I was, what, fifteen years younger?”

“More than that,” Ruby smirked. Vraska looked between them, slightly confused at that last comment, but she couldn’t let it ruin her mood. She honestly loved the praise. Apparently, her skills were ‘art’ now. It was justice, simple and sweet, with enough time to let the accused squirm in fear of his condemnation. Soon the Azorius would be showing off his lifeless form, displaying his shame amidst all their other monuments. Inaction was his crime. Inaction was how he’d spend the rest of his days. That was artistic in a way.

“Was it really the last name?” Tasia asked, leaning over the table, “The final person?”

Vraska nodded.

“We have them all now,” she commented, “Thanks to all of you.” She smiled into the next sip of her drink.

“Oh congrats!” Tasia replied, though there was definite disappointment in their tone, “I guess I’ll go back to the regular patients now.”

Regular patients? What were they talking about? Vraska was about to ask when Tasia suddenly switched conversations, asking why Ruby was now ribbing Javy about her age. Vraska frowned, slightly perturbed. It had only been a moment, but she was kind of missing the elation. She turned to Edvin beside her, who was merely watching.

“What did they mean?” she asked him. He jumped a little, flaring his facial fins in shock.

“Sorry,” she murmured, “I was just curious. What do they mean by ‘regular patients’?”
He smiled, glancing over at his fiancé before whispering:

“It’s part of their job, at the hospital. It’s different from place to place, but where we work, we call them blue-tags. Blue-tags are Tasia’s responsibility, that’s what they’re talking about.”

“Blue-tags?” Vraska had never heard the phrase before. It sounded like a euphemism, whatever it was.

“Our patients all get a tag on their beds,” Edvin explained, “Usually, they’re yellow, or white in the case of long-stay patients. However sometimes, one of them will come into major surgery with a blue tag. That’s when Tasia’s in charge. When they see a blue tag, it’s their job to…you know, make sure the patient never wakes up.”

Vraska stared at him.

“It pays really well,” he insisted, “And because it’s on the guild’s request, it doesn’t get marked down as a failure, or medical mispractice or anything. It’s just orders really. It’s how we bought our new home, oh, and how we’re funding our wedding. That reminds me!”

He tapped on Tasia’s shoulder and whispered something in her ear. They let out an excited ‘oh’ and delved into their shoulder bag, pulling out two coral pink envelopes, covered in minute seashells.

“Wedding invitations!” they announced, thrusting one at Javy and another at Vraska, “It’s not for a year and a half because the venue’s booked full, but we thought you should have plenty of warning because you’re just so busy!”

Vraska took hers, feeling the thick high-quality paper between her fingertips, still reeling at what she’d just learned. Whatever euphoria she’d been feeling had come crashing down, faster than a bag of bricks. So you could go into a Simic hospital, trusting them with your very life, and they could just dispose of you instead? They could put you under, assuring you they were going to fix whatever was wrong, and then simply never wake you up? Hospitals were places of trust. If you were in a hospital, you were at your most vulnerable, putting your life into the hands of strangers who you trusted on title alone. But then they could simply slap a blue tag on your bed and kill you? No choice on your part, no ability to resist, no talk of consent… Vraska couldn’t explain how deeply disturbed she felt. Yes, she was an assassin. Yes, she had killed hundreds of people over the years, all of whom had not consented to a knife in their back. But this was different! She hadn’t approached these people under a contract of trust! She hadn’t put them in an area that was supposed to be safe, that was supposed to be good for them, before stealing their life away. And Tasia was just fine with that? Fine with promising their patients everything would go smoothly before taking apart their lives on the operating table?

Vraska felt sick. Tasia had enjoyed killing Branko so much and acted like a medical professional throughout. She’d been so worried, so concerned that she’d corrupted a giver of life, a doctor who saved people, that she couldn’t imagine that Tasia would murder under any other circumstances. In a way it was a relief, that she hadn’t been the one to turn Tasia into a killer. Except, still, she’d never trust a hospital again. They were hospitals! Places of healing! Not places of murder!

Her mood spiralled progressively downwards as the conversation at the table turned to how good everyone felt at finally getting their justice. The others expressed feelings of joy, or relief, of how they were so glad that their abusers could never do so again. Vraska couldn’t agree. She’d killed all the guards, all the senators, most of them now washed-up, or retired. Old or weak men who didn’t even remember what they’d done. However, the fault, the true blame for the massacre at Dredgefold Docks, didn’t lie with those corpses and statues. All that death, all those people ripped from their
homes and tortured… that would never have happened if Isperia hadn’t made being Golgari a crime. Without the law, there would have been no purges. Sure, she’d punished all the people who’d ordered the purges, the senators who’d signed them off, the guards who had treated prisoners so foully. Yet, as far as she was aware, it was still a crime to be Golgari. The law Isperia had made was still there, never lifted, and if necessary, it could still be used in a court of law. Isperia had got off free from all this. She probably sat, high in her lofty tower, unaware that these men had met their grisly fates. Passing more laws, condemning more lives, uncaring how her whims affected the masses. She could do it again. To any guild, to any group of people. She had escaped punishment and it hurt Vraska’s heart to know she would never regret what she had did. She would never suffer like so many Golgari had suffered. Vraska had trimmed off the leaves, some of the roots, but the stalk of the weed remained, draining life out of the innocent greenery surrounding it. Isperia was still out there, unpunished.

What was the point?

What had she truly achieved? The personal justice had felt wonderful, but she’d failed to stem the evil at its source. Isperia was free, but not only that, Jarad was free as well. Jarad had let the Azorius into his guild. Had consulted with them, had pointed out where they could purge, where it would least inconvenience him. With Isperia and Jarad still at large… Dredgefold Docks would never truly have its justice. The two people most to blame were the two people she couldn’t kill. Had she really achieved justice? Or had she just gone on a vengeful killing spree?

She excused herself from the table, saying she needed her rest.

The walk back to the Guildpact Offices was a melancholy one as she remained trapped in her own head.

What had she achieved? Had she achieved anything? Had she helped anyone? Had she made any lives better, other than her own? No, the opposite, the reverse! She’d dragged others down to her own level. She’d inspired them to enjoy murder. She’d corrupted an officer of the law to the point she had not only committed several crimes, but she was now misleading the order she claimed to uphold. Guilt clawed at Vraska’s insides with all the sharpness of her own talons. She was a monster. She had corrupted all these good people! She had made them sympathise with a monster like her. Made them think she was worthy of praise. Oh gods, she was a liar and a killer. That was all she was good for, killing and lying, lying and killing… She had believed so hard that she was making the world a better place. But in the end, the guilty were still at large and she’d just delighted in torture. That rush she’d experienced, the sheer joy she’d felt at seeing the terror in her prey’s eyes. That surely made her a monster!

Back home, she stood in the long dark corridor, gazing at locked doors of empty rooms. Her footsteps echoed miserably against bare stone walls. Darkness loomed from every corner, reminding her of the hall of stone, the labyrinth from her first planeswalk… That was why she hated this place. It all made so much sense now. But didn’t monsters deserve to live in mazes? Wandering aimlessly, preying on passersby? That’s what she’d done. She’d bumped into a wonderful officer of the law and now… and now…

She sprinted towards the light, tears welling in her eyes. Her mood had switched completely. She’d had the high and now came the crash. As she entered the audience chamber, seeking moonlight, she remembered what else she was terrible at. She’d even failed the man who meant most to her in the whole world. She’d let him fall victim to that woman. She’d wandered off to get her own selfish questions answered and now he was missing, now he was gone! She was such a terrible friend. Killing truly was all she was good at!
“Vraska?” came a small voice, outside the audience chamber and down the corridor. She stood up a little straighter, wiping the tears from her eyes. Did—did she imagine that? Was her mind playing tricks on her?

“Vraska?” called the voice again, “Vraska? Is that you? Are you home?”

“Jace?” Her heart leapt into her throat and she sprinted out the room, straight towards his bedroom. Lo and behold, there he was. In one piece, unharmed, a little dirty, but…

“Where have you been?” she exclaimed, rushing to his side, “I—I thought you’d gone missing. I—I thought something had happened to you.”

“Are you crying?” Jace asked, sounding alarmed, “What happened?”


He looked at her, still deeply concerned.

“I’m—I’m fine,” he stammered, taken aback by her sudden fussing, “I mean, I’m a bit stuck but other than that, I’m fine.”

Stuck?

Vraska took a moment to get a proper look at him.

Were those handcuffs?

A slim pair of silver shackles were enclosed about Jace’s wrists, almost invisible against the pale trim of his sleeves. He offered them up for closer inspection and Vraska immediately noticed the tiny runes carved on every single inch of the thin metal loops. They were connected by only a few inches of chain, meaning Jace couldn’t move his hands much at all. He was certainly stuck. But why on earth was he wearing handcuffs?

“What—what happened?” she asked, taken-aback by his bizarre predicament.

“Lavinia arrested me,” he grumbled, “Whilst I was on a date.”

He tugged at the chains, trying to wrench them apart but they stood firm.

“She arrested you?” Vraska was still trying to piece this together, “But, you’re the Guildpact. Don’t you outrank her?”

“She did it very politely,” Jace explained, “But she still dragged me out of a restaurant in front of everyone, claiming that I was shirking off my duty. Completely ruined the mood and, what’s worse—”

He tugged at the shackles again, this time his eyes flared with his usual bright blue magic. A light blue haze settled around the cuffs before suddenly, in a golden flare that looked a lot like the Azorius emblem, the magic vanished.

“I can’t get these off!” he exclaimed, “They’re mage cuffs! They counter everything I do to get them off. Telekinesis does nothing!”

“Guildpact magic?” Vraska suggested. Jace let out a sigh.
“That’s not how it works unfortunately. I can only use that when it’s in Ravnica’s best interest. For some reason, Ravnica wants me in these stupid chains!”

He rattled and tugged at them uselessly, causing a racket that echoed horribly up and down the corridor outside. The jangling reminded her of prison chains, of innocent Golgari fighting against their captives.

“Ok, stop it!” Vraska ordered, “Stay still. Stop making that noise! I’ll get my picks!”

Without another word to him, she marched out the room and along the corridor to her own bedroom. She returned a moment later with her sewing kit. Which, along with all the sewing essentials, was an excellent place for hiding lock picks. To the untrained eye, they were just complicated needles.

“Show them to me,” she insisted, sitting down on the bed beside him. Pouting a little, he showed her his hands and the chains between. As she got to work on her thoroughly non-magical means of breaking him free, he had the nerve to ask:

“What happened to you? Why were you crying?”

“It’s not important,” she replied quickly, selecting a finer pick to try and ease her way through the joins in the shackles.

“Of course it’s important,” he protested, “You were crying! That’s important to me.”

Even if he was being sweet, she couldn’t tell him. She couldn’t tell the Living Guildpact how many people had died in her name, and who exactly she yearned to kill. He’d never let her out of his sight again. Hell, if he ever found she had released Lavinia on him and got him into this mess… What would stop him doing the same to her?

“It really isn’t a big deal,” she insisted, going for the hinges now, “Just…my confidence got a beating and I got sad. It happens all the time, I just had a bad day.”

He looked up at her with that patented Jace curiosity. Oh she was in for so many questions. She felt she was the one who’d been arrested.

“Why were you sad?” he asked imploringly.

She let out a shaky sigh, trying not to dwell and make the situation a whole lot worse.

“I just,” she paused. The best way to hide something from him was to give him a different truth. She hated lying to him. She hated herself for wanting to lie to him. So she’d settle for half the story.

“I just wish I was good at something other than killing,” she said, “I-I just want to help people. But who would want the help of a person like me? How am I supposed to help when all I can do is kill?”

There was a click as one of the cuffs finally popped undone. Jace instantly freed his wrist, flexing it a little and wiggling his fingers to generate blood flow.

“Well that’s not true,” he stated, “You’re good at all sorts of different things. You’re a much better politician than I’ll ever be. You have all the best ideas. All the best ways of organising things. You don’t have to be a killer if you don’t want to anymore. I reckon you could change the world if you went into politics.”
She smiled at him for being so endearing. It was a nice thought. She had done a lot around the Chamber of the Guildpact. She’d done more organisation work than he had. However, she hadn’t done all that because she was good at it. She’d done all that for him.

“It’s very kind of you to say,” she replied, “But I’m no good at that kind of thing. I just make it up as I go along.”

“Then you’re a natural!” Jace exclaimed as the other cuff popped off and the whole wretched thing clattered to the ground.

“I’m serious,” he continued, “You would be so amazing. You could change so much with your great ideas. Even if you are making them up as they go along, they work so well!”

Her ideas had certainly worked. Maybe this was something she should be considering, thought she doubted anyone but Jace would actually listen to the ideas she had. No, she was a monster, hiding in the shadow of a human. The only reason why her ideas were accepted was because people thought they came from him.

She scooped the cuffs off the floor and put them on a nearby shelf. With a small yawn, she got to her feet. He was here. He was safe. It was about time she called it a night.

“Vraska?” Jace called, as she drifted over to the door. She turned back to look at him.

“C-Could you stay?” he asked, his stammer betraying his sudden onset of nerves.

“Why?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t want you to go shut yourself away with all your bad thoughts,” he explained, “I know what happens. You’ll go to sleep hating yourself and have terrible nightmares. But if I’m here, well, the nightmares won’t happen.”

Was she truly so predictable? Or did he just know her that well? She gave him another shaky smile.

“Let me get changed,” she told him, “And then, yes, I’ll stay.”

He smiled widely at her and her heart did a funny little leap in her chest. Maybe being predictable wasn’t so bad? She didn’t mind being predictable if she got more smiles like that.
Travellers

Chapter Summary

Vraska resolves to turn over a new leaf - to no longer put her health and happiness aside whenever Jace vanishes off for mysterious reasons. Yet, her resolve is instantly challenged when he goes further than even she can reach.

A week had passed since Jace’s disappearance. He and Lavinia were still at each other’s throats. Sitting in the same room as them was torture. Vraska felt like she was walking around a gas filled room with a match, one wrong step and the whole place was going to go up in a blazing row. She did her best to make sure Jace had breaks, ate, drank water, slept, but there was no way she was getting in the middle of that row. She didn’t have the heart to tell either of them what she thought. She wished Lavinia would mind her tone. The more she yelled, the more she berated him, the less likely it was that Jace would stick around. She wasn’t scaring him into obedience, she was scaring him away. On the other hand, Jace should have known better. He had promised her, many years ago, but still he’d promised, not to lose his head whenever a particularly attractive person came along. He’d sworn he wouldn’t forget about everything and everyone else just because he experienced lust. Thanks to Ruby, Vraska now had a greater understanding of how his mind might work. Ruby had told her about sex drive, and about how some people desired sex more frequently than others, often motivated by the possibility. Vraska could only assume that Jace’s drive motivated him to the point of distraction. Perhaps that was why that woman had persuaded him so easily.

If Vraska couldn’t stop him, then she wasn’t going to waste her time panicking about it. Jace was fine. He’d come back one piece. For all she could get out of him, he’d simply vanished for a few days to go on a date or two, most likely followed by a large amount of sex. He’d made her panic for absolutely no reason. He’d stressed Lavinia out for absolutely no reason. All that fear was utterly unnecessary. It could have been negated completely by something as simple as a note. He was understandably angry at being arrested but he had very much brought this upon himself. Now he had to deal with the consequences. She didn’t have the energy to mediate their every conversation. She had enough issues to work through on her own.

She’d started to make use of their wetroom. They had bathrooms attached to their bedrooms, but there was something very relaxing about having an excess of room to shower in. There were low tiled ledges for sitting on and plenty of space to lay out any number of body scrubs and moisturisers. The en-suite bathrooms were designed for average sized humans. Vraska had to face the fact that she was tall, and not precisely human proportioned. To be able to wash off the sweat of a mission without cramping up your legs in the tub was certainly a pleasure she’d been missing for quite some time. The wetroom was the perfect spot just to sit and think. Vraska loved the feeling of warm water coursing over her scales. There was nothing like heat to help her unwind. There was nothing like unwinding to help her think.

She had come to two conclusions whilst being pelted with water and steam. Firstly, she was done with getting other people to murder for her. She wouldn’t damage the innocent. No one else would be led astray. She was the killer. Killing was what she did well, it was part of her very being. Gorgons were natural born killing machines, just like Lavinia had said. It therefore her role to be the killer, her role to be the monster, and she wouldn’t drag anyone else down to her level. Getting
Javy and Tasia to kill her abusers had been a mistake. She had condemned them to a life of secrecy. To lying to everyone they knew and loved, to dodging the ever-present eye of the law. She was the one who lived in the shadows. She was the monster who stalked her prey in the dark. The blood should be on her hands, not theirs. In giving them that responsibility, she’d been denying her very nature. No more. She’d been trying to fool herself that she was a normal person like them. Her whole existence was defined by the fact she could kill, and kill she would.

Secondly, no more would she let her mood be dictated by what Jace was currently doing. She couldn’t stop herself worrying. She wasn’t going to stop caring about him and his happiness, but she couldn’t put her own health and happiness aside every time he wandered off for sex. She was her own woman, her whole life did not need to revolve around him. He didn’t need to be her only source of joy. There were surely other things she could find happiness in. Other things she could achieve. She’d discovered last night that some kills were more pleasurable than others. If she could just find more of those… well, she was already a monster. Anyway, she had now set herself a mission. She had to make herself happy and not rely so much on Jace.

Two weeks into her new outlook on life, autumn was well under way. It was reaching peak season in the assassin’s year and Vraska was ready to be busy. She had placed her communications cylinder in prime position, directly opposite where she got out of bed every morning. Her knives were freshly sharpened, and she’d invested in a fresh set of poisons from her favourite market in the Undercity. It was time to lose herself in work, a welcome reprieve from the silent rooms and corridors. She started off the week in her usual fashion. Up, clean and dressed, she wandered into the kitchen to make herself a large breakfast. She’d heard the tell-tale thump of a new contract arriving in her tube during the night. A quick glance over showed her it was a simple merchant job in the Undercity. Someone had ripped off one too many customers. Now there was a significant price on his head.

Jace wasn’t in the kitchen, so she took her breakfast to the audience chamber, expecting him to already be at work. Yet even that room was empty, the only difference being a lone newspaper propped on top of a pile of unpassed laws. Vraska flicked through it as she ate. No mention of the Azorius murders. The press were rather fixated on a recent spate of attacks from the goblin gangs on Tin Street. They were attributing the carnage to Krenko’s gang and this particular paper was claiming the attacks were now over. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what Dr Marian thought about it. She hadn’t asked. She didn’t want to stir up any bad memories.

The door to their private quarters gave a loud creak. She turned, expecting Jace, but she was disappointed. It was Lavinia, Florence on her arm and deep shadows under her eyes. Florence fluttered over and perched on the top of a chair, watching as Lavinia joined them both.

“He went out,” the Captain sighed, “He got all his civic paperwork done, so I let him go.”

Vraska nodded, glad they’d come to a compromise. Maybe a reward system was the best way to go about motivating him.

“Did he mention when he was coming back?” she asked.

“He has an hour,” Lavinia stated, “He has a meeting after that.”

Vraska wiled away that hour getting her kit ready and reading up on her target. She picked a particularly thick cloak. Rain was pounding on the windows and there was nothing subtle about dripping water as she followed a target home. By the time an hour had passed, she could hear Lavinia pacing the audience chamber. She got to her feet, ready to go out, and returned to the shared space
“He’s late?” she inquired.

Lavinia let out an angry huff. Florence flapped her wings at the noise, sending papers cascading onto the floor.

“It’s been an hour and a quarter,” Lavinia griped. She turned to Florence.

“Go, you know what to do.”

The owl let out a small shriek before taking to the air. Vraska watched as she flew up over the stairs and through the open door back into the main building. Vraska wondered what she hoped to achieve with the owl. Was Florence trained to seek Jace out? She wouldn’t put it past the Captain to have trained her bird for the job.

Ten minutes later, Florence returned with a scroll attached to her leg. She perched on Lavinia’s arm as she detached the scroll, before fluttering back to the table.

“He’s not in the building,” Lavinia confirmed, “No one has seen him in reception since he left.”

Vraska let out a low groan. Not again. Somehow, she couldn’t bring herself to panic. It had been an hour and a half. He was probably just stuck in the queue at a coffee shop, or having brunch with that woman. Either way, he wasn’t where he was meant to be, which was here. Technically she shouldn’t be here either. She had work to do.

“Well I hope you don’t have to arrest him again,” she told Lavinia, “Unfortunately, I haven’t got the time to wait around for him. I have to go to work now.”

She merely nodded.

Vraska got to her feet and left the audience room, intending to go out the personal entrance rather than trudging through the entire Chamber. She was only halfway down the corridor when suddenly there was an immense shout of:

“Come back!”

She’d never heard Lavinia shout so loudly. Vraska swiftly turned on her heels and raced back the way she’d come.

“What is it?” she called, as she sprinted back into the cavernous room.

As soon as she was inside, she saw exactly what ‘it’ was. A large blue orb of glowing energy was hovering over the audience room table. The size of a melon, it bobbed a few feet over the solid wood. Vraska recognised the colour at once as that of Jace’s magic. It looked a lot like the communication orbs he used to send to their flat, just, bigger for some reason.

She had to climb on the table to reach it, but as soon as her fingers made contact, Jace’s voice boomed throughout the room. Florence screeched at the cacophony of echoes.

“I know that a lot of people are going to be pissed off at me,” stated the orb, “But this is urgent. I have been summoned to Zendikar to investigate an invading force that I may be partially responsible for unleashing upon the world. I go with another planeswalker, and he has the intention to ally with more. With so many of us, I cannot imagine it will take very long to for us to deal with whatever the situation is. I understand that this is not in the best interests of Ravnica, but I must take responsibility for my actions. I promise to be back soon. Stay safe.”
There was a small pop, like a bubble bursting, and suddenly the orb was gone.

Vraska got down off the table, still staring at where the orb had once been. What the – She turned to look at Lavinia who was shaking her head despairingly.

“How do you know where this ‘Zendikar’ is?” she asked of Vraska. Vraska frowned.

“I’ve never heard of it,” she replied. It suddenly occurred to her that Lavinia hadn’t even blinked at the mention of planeswalkers. Did she know? Had Jace ruined their oath of secrecy again?

“Well it is likely another world,” Lavinia commented, “You do know he can do that, don’t you? Go to other worlds?”

Vraska nodded. Well, that was interesting. It appeared Lavinia knew Jace was a planeswalker but not her.

“He is a planeswalker, yes,” she replied, “I thought he might run away to another world at the first opportunity.”

And now he had. She sighed deeply.

“How do you know who he has gone with?” asked Lavinia, “Who is this other planeswalker?”

She sounded like she had the full intention of arresting this man for taking away the Guildpact. That was a fight Vraska would like to see. If Lavinia had made herself Jace-proof, she could probably do the same for another mage.

“I don’t know,” she groaned in reply, “The only other male planeswalker I know of is Ral Zarek of the Izzet League. But Jace wouldn’t follow him to another world, they hate each other.”

“That is two of the three known planeswalkers the Guildpact told me about,” Lavinia agreed, “The other was a soldier working for the Boros. I will have a scout sent to pertain his whereabouts. If he is gone as well, then we have our suspect.”

She definitely sounded like she was going to arrest the man. In a way, it was comforting to know that Jace had gone out into the multiverse with another planeswalker by his side. She’d seen what one planeswalker could achieve, she’d seen what she and Jace could achieve together. Imagine how much three, four, a whole group of planeswalkers could help the world they came to save.

This thought was certainly helping with her new ‘not panicking when Jace was gone’ mission. He had sounded fairly confident in his message. No, she couldn’t bring herself to worry yet, not when she had work to do.

She and Lavinia parted ways, she to the Undercity and Lavinia to wherever her sources were that tracked down Boros soldiers. Vraska made the short trip to the nearest and only beetleback station in the district, travelling cloaked and hooded across Deadbridge and deep into the bowels of the Undercity. Nothing much had changed. A few different advertisements lined the overgrown billboards, a few different faces skirted the streets, stopping by the merchants’ carts. Her job was a simple one, not even worth the extensive prep. It was good to get back into practice, high season was here, but this assassination was practically dull next to everything else she’d got up to lately. She slipped into the merchant’s house, where he was busy with customer orders. She petrified him, and then slipped back out. Easy job. Easy money. Now what was she going to do with the rest of her day? It seemed a waste of beetleback fare just to come down here for what, half an hour?

Vraska idly browsed the nearby markets, inwardly glad to be back amongst people she didn’t have to hide her face around. When shopping above ground, she was forced to go round hooded and
cloaked so she didn’t frighten people. It made trying on jewellery an absolute nightmare. Yet down here, there were enough horrors around for people not to care for one more. She picked up a box of sweet ball-puffs from her favourite bakery. They were impossible to get above ground. Golgari desserts were so much better on your stomach, not relying so heavily on cream. The humble ball mushroom hadn’t caught on overhead. It was a shame. They could do with a few deep-fry places near home. They would make an absolute fortune from weary workers needing a treat.

Vraska ended back at Spinners’ Row. The Silkspinner’s Nest still stood abandoned, apparently haunted, according to the notices pasted over the door. She looked through each tailors’ window, remembering that she had been invited to attend Tasia and Edvin’s wedding. She had never been to a wedding before. Well, she’d technically assassinated someone at a wedding before, but no one had invited her there. As far as she could gather, it was tradition to dress your very best for the occasion, even if you weren’t the ones tying the knot. The happy couple had decided on a very pastel kind of nautical theme, if their invitation was anything to go by. The message inside had encouraged liberal use of shells and other nautical themes in guest’s outfits. Vraska didn’t have anything like that. She’d never worn pastels in her life. It was certainly time to get a new dress. Her height, and general long-ness, compared to humans meant she had to commission all her clothing, whether it be an every day dress or for a fancy occasion. There was only one person she really trusted to get her figure right. The most enthusiastic tailoress of all when it came to gorgons. Yes, if she was going to attend this wedding properly, she was going to have to visit Madame Zdenka first.

Greenhelm was as terrible as the last time she’d seen it. The warehouse that had caught fire two years ago, was still a blackened husk amidst the squat decrepit buildings surrounding it. Gang warfare had torn apart many of the businesses that lined the beetleback route. Where once moss had grown in the cracks, it now spread across whole sections of road and pavement. There likely wasn’t enough money in this area to fix even that. Or at least those who had it weren’t willing to help. She vaulted off the top of the beetle, not caring for the astonishment of the driver. She had been the only passenger and besides, any figure wandering around this ghost town would attract attention, regardless of how they acted. The beetle left as swiftly as it arrived, not back for at least an hour. Vraska stretched a little from the bumpy ride before heading towards Greenhelm Heights – the gated kraul community where Madame Zdenka resided.

It should have been a simple five minute walk. However, as she rounded the corner from the beetleback stop, a high-pitched shriek came from behind a nearby building, followed by indistinct thuds and yells. Immediately sensing danger, Vraska put one hand on the hilt of her blade.

“Get off me!” cried out a voice. It sounded like a young girl. She was clearly crying, in immense pain as she was beset by the owners of several deep voices that cheered and yelled at her screams. Vraska sprinted round the side of a building that smelt like rotting meat. The girl was yelling and sobbing, shrieking at the people to put her down, let her go. Vraska didn’t hesitate. As soon as she found the cluster of men, surrounding someone on the ground, she launched into action. Drawing her blade, she decapitated one before they even had a chance to react. One of the assailants yet out a strangled yell before he was turned suddenly to stone. His friends panicked, the four remaining went for knives on their belts. Too late. Vraska went in, blade first, eyes glowing. She cut and calcified indiscriminately, accidentally petrifying a woman who was already missing her throat. The little square was soon coated in blood and debris. Vraska paused, listening to see if they had attracted any attention. When only silence greeted her, she focused her attention on the girl lying injured on the floor.

She was older than Vraska had thought from her voice. Definitely a teenager, Fifteen, perhaps sixteen, but there was something far more striking about her than her age, or even the fact it had taken six adults to subdue her.
She was a gorgon. The first other gorgon Vraska had seen in years.

“You’re safe now,” she assured her, sheathing her sword and kneeling on bloody stone to get a better look at her injuries.

“I’m not going to let anyone else hurt you.”

The young gorgon looked up at her with eyes the colour of obsidian. Her blue-green tendrils lay long and lank around her face and shoulders. She was wearing a rough black smock, which she held tightly around her chest for the fabric had been torn from neckline to hem, barely staying onto her skinny yet muscular form. There was greenish blood dripping down her cheek, she looked a little dazed as she lay on the pavement, her right leg at a painfully odd angle.

“Can you hear me?” Vraska asked, as she took her cloak off, wanting to protect the girl’s modesty.

“Can you see properly?”

The gorgon nodded. She reached out for the proffered cloak and Vraska helped her wrap it around herself, and pin the heavy fabric in place.

“Who-who are you?” she stammered.

“My name is Vraska. What’s your name?”

The teenager swallowed hard, reaching up with one shaking hand to touch the blood on the side of her face.

“Mia,” she managed, “You’re-you’re real? I’ve never seen an adult, an adult one of us in these parts.”

“I’m passing through,” Vraska explained, “Is there anywhere I can take you? Any clinic nearby?”

Mia shook her head.

“I don’t think so. We could go across town but-but the Jawbone Gang will find us before we get there. They’re everywhere and-and there’s so many of them.”

Not safe to cross town, right. There was only one place Vraska could think to take her. Only one place she knew was safely guarded and off the streets.

“I’m on my way to visit Madame Zdenka in Greenhelm Heights,” she explained, “I can carry you there to safety, and then go and fetch a healer. I’m sure you’ll be safe with Madame Zdenka whilst I’m gone.”

Mia looked about at the gaps between buildings, as if scared more gang members would come at any moment.

“You trust Madame Zdenka”? she asked Vraska.

Vraska nodded.

“She’s very good to our kind,” she stated, “I’ve known her for many years.”

Mia bit her lip before tearing her gaze away from one of the alleys.

“You saved me so I don’t think you’re just going to lead me back to my death. If you think she’ll
have us, I’ll go there.”

“Thank you,” Vraska bent down a little more, “May I carry you?”

Mia nodded.

She was very light. Vraska lifted her with ease, gently carrying her so not to put any pressure on her injured leg. Touching another being was odd, and certainly very uncomfortable, but she was able to quash the sensation behind Mia’s immediate need for medical attention. Vraska made slow but steady progress up to the front gates. One of the kraul guards, of which there were three today, hastened over to them as they approached. Vraska recognised this kraul as Bat – they had been a trainee when last she’d visited.

“What has happened?” they asked, “Why was there fighting?”

Greenhelm Heights was up a small hill, there was a distinct possibility the guards had heard what had just happened.

“The Jawbone gang,” Mia gasped, “They attacked me…whilst I was getting food.”

Bat looked at her in Vraska’s arms and then up at Vraska.

“I’m here to see Madame Zdenka,” she explained, “But I ran into Mia being attacked on my way here. The gang-members are dead. Is there a healer round here who could look at her injuries?”

The guard looked rather surprised but beckoned them to join their colleagues. The three guards consulted with each other in low clicking tones before Bat returned to their side.

“We will contact Clio for you. She will meet you outside Madame Zdenka’s burrow. She is a retired medic but she helps us all.”

“Thank you.”

Negotiating the burrows was a lot harder when you were carrying someone else. The narrow ledges and possibility of rock falls became quite dangerous as Vraska slowly tip-toed her way through dozens of compacted buildings. By the time she got to the belltower, she had already amassed a small entourage of delighted cats, who led her through winding passages, tails aloft with their new found authority. Mia simply stared at them, letting out little murmurs when another one appeared. By the time they reached Zdenka’s porch, they were utterly surrounded by purring felines.

“One moment!” came an unfamiliar voice. There were three passages connecting to the space outside Zdenka’s home. They’d taken the middle route, but there was a great noise coming from their left. Vraska waited. The voice was definitely kraul, there was an undeniable buzz to the words that only came from being insectile. There was the sound beating wings, echoing down the passage, sending many cats streaming forwards in its wake. A moment later, an elderly kraul in rusted armour came hurrying forwards. With her, came two younger kraul, who liked like they might be relatives.

“I’m Matron Clio,” said the first kraul. She offered Vraska a claw to shake before realising her hand were occupied with carrying Mia. She promptly put it down to address the injured gorgon instead.

“I used to work at the hospital up on Frillcap Avenue, I promise you you’re in good hands young lady. These are my sons, Wil and Zezi, they’re both trained medics too.”
“Th-Thank you,” said Mia, sounding a little overwhelmed. She looked up at Vraska, who was about to assure her that everything would be fine, when a much more familiar voice came echoing from inside.

“What are you lot doing dallying on my door?” came the familiar tones of the famous lich-tailoress, “Is that Mistress Vraska I hear? Come in, come in! I’ve got someone you should meet!”

“In a moment, please, Madame Zdenka,” said Vraska, “There’s been an attack. There’s another gorgon out here and she’s very injured.”

There was the sound of shuffling and the echoing tap-tap of Zdenka’s staff and umbrella combination. She poked her head out of the archway into her home and took in the scene.

“Clio!” she exclaimed, “What are you doing standing out here you old windbag. Come, put the lady on a chair so she can rest! Come in! Come in!”

Vraska glanced at Clio, who had merely sighed at being called a windbag.

“Inside would be better than laying her on the stone,” she conceded, “Come on, let’s go in.”

Vraska went first, taking Mia inside and gently setting her on one of the many over-stuffed armchairs. She looked around in wonder at all the odd décor – the stacks of magazine, the collage on the walls, the lace doilies laid on absolutely every available surface. Clio was at her side in an instant, Wil and Zezi trailing behind bearing two large bags of medical supplies. Madame Zdenka had already retreated into the kitchen. Vraska could hear the kettle boiling and wondered how she had set it off so fast.

“May I take a look at your injuries young lady?” Clio asked Mia. Mia hesitated for a moment, before pulling back the cloak a little, revealing her injured leg. Clio chittered in sympathy. Zizi visibly winced.

“Ooh that’s a nasty one,” said Clio, “Looks like something’s broken right out of place there. Do you mind if I do a bit of a magical inspection on your leg?”

Mia nodded again. She was being very brave, Vraska thought. Then again, if she’d ended up six adults and only come away with a broken leg, she had to be strong indeed. Judging by her ragged appearance, there was a good chance she was living in the streets of these parts. You had to be a damn good at surviving to grow up in Greenhelm, that was for sure.

Clio closed her eyes as one of her sons handed her a small wooden rod with jagged runes carved up its length. She waved the rod up and down Mia’s leg like a conductor leading an invisible orchestra. With each pass over, the length of her wave got shorter and shorter until finally the rod hovered on a section of leg a third the way up from Mia’s bare ankle. She passed the rod back and received a thicker one in its place. Holding the wood between two claws, she gently held it above the bruised and battered skin. The runes on this rod lit up a sickly green and Mia gave a little yelp.

“Sorry about that dear,” said Clio, eyes still closed in concentration, “Just trying to see what’s happened in there without cutting your leg open.”

Vraska wondered how she was doing it. From what she could surmise, Clio appeared to be feeling the structure of Mia’s leg through her magic. First she had assessed where the break was, and now she was trying to ascertain the nature of it. Vraska wondered if Clio could literally see the inside of the leg. Was that why she had her eyes closed? Could she see all the bone and muscle in her mind? She’d seen glimpses into the Waters’ Crest Hospital and she was fairly sure they didn’t use
magical runed sticks. This seemed like a very Golgari way of going about it. Undercity medicine likely didn’t have the ease of Izzet built medical equipment and Simic bioengineering.

“Well, that could be a lot worse,” the medic concluded, “It’s a clean break, nothing we can’t mesh back together with a little encouragement. It’s a very simple procedure, done it hundreds of times, but I should let you know, it hurts like the blazes. I’d much rather have you asleep whilst I fix everything up.”

Mia looked a little apprehensive about that. She glanced up at Vraska, who wasn't entirely sure why she was deferring so much to her. Was it age?

“I’ll stay here if you’re worried about anything untoward happening,” she assured her, “I’ll make sure you’re safe every step the way, I promise.”

“That’s fine,” Clio responded, “As long as you don’t disturb the ritual. You can stay for moral support.”

Mia looked between Vraska and the medic, anxious but clearly desperate to get her leg back in order.

“Alright,” she said to Clio, before turning to Vraska.

“Please stay.”

“Of course.”

Vraska took a seat on the armchair beside hers. Watching Mia go under was a surprisingly nerve-wracking experience. She had to remind herself that this was a Golgari medic, not some murderous Simic doctor who could slap on a blue tag. As the sleeping potion took hold, Mia’s head lolled onto the back of the sofa, her hair hanging across the cushions, twitching a little as the draught took its full effect. Vraska stayed closed but utterly silent as Clio and her sons took up positions in front of her, painting odd symbols onto the carpeted floor. The way they moved and drew in unison, reminded Vraska of when the Emmara and the Selesnya healers had cast their healing ritual on Jace. The similarities grew even stronger as the three kraul began to chant, low droning words that were lost under the click of their voices and rustling of their wings. Yet, unlike with the Selesnyans, Vraska could feel the magic surrounding them. Like water vapor, it lingered in the air, cool, light and surprisingly refreshing to the skin. It was then she remembered that the Golgari were the masters of both life and death. They could grow a garden as verdant and natural as any Selesnyan, they just worked with more fungi than the Selesnyans did. Yet there was a reason why those two rituals were so similar. This was life magic. Something Vraska had no hopes of learning or understanding. It was healing, restorative, it encouraged new blood to form, wounds to heal over, bruises to fade. That was what Clio had meant by encouragement. They were helping the body adapt, to reposition what needed to be repositioned, to heal the wound at an expedited rate.

As the last words were said, and the runes on the floor turned into coloured dust, Mia slept on. Vraska was informed that the sleeping draught would wear off in about half an hour, once any last muscle pains had subsided. Mia was not to try walking on her leg for at least forty-eight hours. However after that, it should be as good as new. The cut on her face had vanished during the healing process, a side-effect Clio said, but a good one nevertheless. Vraska had promised to stay with Mia every step of the procedure, so she decided to stay until she woke up.

“Are they gone?” asked Madame Zdenka, as soon as Clio and her sons were out the door.

“Those three give me the creeps! I know it’s all good clean niceness, but there’s something about
that magic that puts ice in my veins!”

That was probably because she was a lich.

“Thank you for allowing us in Madame Zdenka,” said Vraska, “Mia should be out for a little longer, I’d like to stay with her if possible.”

“Of course, of course,” fussed the elderly kraul, “You turned up just at the right time! You’ll never guess who came by to see his old grandmother? Came by this morning to visit yours truly. Got such a busy schedule he has, being in charge of all the kraul now, but still makes time to see his grandma! He’s sitting in the next room because he’s just so magical it makes anyone else’s go haywire!”

She turned in the direction of the kitchen.

“Mazirek! Come see Mistress Vraska! She’s the fantastic young lady I was talking about! She got me my excellent heads on the mantlepiece!”

There was a moment before Vraska could hear footsteps coming from a nearby room. Ducking through the doorway, came the grandest looking kraul Vraska had ever seen. He wore long robes in gold and green with a leathery breastplate far grander than any of his fellows. His head-piece had extended into a full mask made of beetle-shell, painted up with the visage of a screaming skull. In one of his claws he bore a twisted staff as tall as he was, made out of the bough of some rotting tree. As he entered the room and took in the sight of Vraska and the unconscious Mia, he gave a small bow, his wings flitting open in a respectful salute. Vraska got to her feet and gave a bow of her own. This was the head of all kraul? He certainly looked the part. He looked like he could fit quite nicely into the garden under Svothos where Jarad’s court now lay.

“A pleasure to meet you Lord Mazirek.” She offered him a hand to shake, which he did gently so not to hurt her with his jagged claw.

“It is a indeed a pleasure Mistress Vraska. You have made my grandmother a very happy woman. Finally, she has received the justice that even I could not obtain for her. I have heard much about your work from her, and from my other sources. Needless to say, I am both intrigued and impressed.”

Before Vraska could confirm he was talking about the Severance, Madame Zdenka piped up.

“Look at you both! So formal! This is my parlour, not the rotting gardens of our wretched Guildmaster! Sit! Sit! Take a cat! I will go and prepare something delightful for you both!”

Both armchairs occupied, Mazirek sat on a low table that was covered in layers of books. When they were both sat, he still towered over her. Yet it seemed he was making no effort to intimidate her. In fact, his gaze, just visible below the mask, was more curious than demanding.

“Grandmother states you have heretical views,” he said, obediently taking a cat who did not object to sitting beside him on the coffee table. Vraska considered taking a cat for a moment, before remembering she was supposed to be watching over Mia as well.

“I do,” she replied, “And no love for Jarad.”

At the mention of his name, Mazirek let out an indignant chitter through his mandibles

“Heretical indeed,” he said, “I too share no love for Jarad. He has made me the leader of my race, given me a seat in his court, but still refuses to treat the kraul as the people they are. Is it not the
same with you? I have seen it. He employs the gorgons to do his dirty work for him, but will kill a gorgon if they so much as toe the line.”

“You’re correct,” Vraska replied, “The gorgons, the kraul, Jarad does all his can to deny us our personhood, the respect for our achievements, even our part in the running of the swarm. I am sure society would fall apart without the efforts of so many hardworking kraul. And the Golgari would lose all favour with the rest of Ravnica if there were no gorgons out there to kill their foes.”

Mazirek’s wings were shaking slightly, in excitement or fury, Vraska couldn’t tell.

“You have the ability,” he stated, “The ability no other has. One that can end Jarad, permanently.”

“Indeed,” she said, finally relenting to the insistence of the cat she’d chosen then ignored. It leapt up on her lap and settled there as a ball of white fur.

“And I would dearly love to be the one who does it. Jarad took my home, my mother, my entire childhood away from me, like he has done from so many others. I wish to be his judge and executioner. However, he’s always so inconveniently surrounded by liches. Even getting close to him would be suicide.”

“It would not be an assassination,” Mazirek replied, “It would be a coup. The Golgari has festered and rotted under Jarad’s rule, and not in a way that is conducive to life.”

“Oh I understand,” Vraska said, “Removing the head is not enough. Jarad has the entire devkarin race in his pocket. As soon as he is slain, another will take his place and their fury will hurt millions of innocents. The Golgari needs to be turned on its head, swept out, renewed. If my time at the Chamber of the Guildpact has taught me anything, it is that a government can be made in only a few weeks. A whole authority can be restructured by those who love their jobs and care for those around them. Once the plague of the current administration is slain, only then can we create an Undercity where every man, kraul, elf and gorgon can be equals.”

The vibration of Mazirek’s wings was now letting off a very high pitched buzz. Vraska thought the movement was not anger now, but excitement. He clearly liked what he was hearing.

“Equals?” he repeated, “Yes you are right. If history has taught us anything, then one race cannot reign over the other if lasting peace is to be desired. The devkarin ruled over and the Sisters of Stone Death knocked them down. Then the Sisters tried to establish a rule in which gorgons were the superior race. That did not work either and now the devkarin do the same again. We cannot keep failing our guild with this cycle.”

“Only when all people are equal, will the Golgari recover from its history,” Vraska agreed, “The devkarin will be hard to win over once we slay all their leadership, but we will just have to present a guild that has been improved so well, that they must fall in line. They are evil but they are not insane. They will not turn down better lives out of unenforceable pride.”

“You speak like a leader,” Mazirek murmured, “Like a politician. I like this. You have a conviction unlike any contact I have encountered before. Would you do it? Would you seek to end Jarad’s reign?”

That was barely a question. Vraska didn’t even take a moment to think it over.

“If I had the means to, yes. But in my current capability, I don’t have what it takes to fund or even fight for a revolution.”

“It will take much planning,” said Mazirek, “And much time. But… discontent is growing amongst
those Jarad deems lesser than people. I have spoken to many kraul, many trolls, many hybrids, many who lack the funds they need to live above poverty. All these people are victims of Jarad’s rule. Many of them would see it end if just given the right leader, and enough force to back them up. I would like more meetings than a chat in my grandmother’s parlour but… If you truly have the experience you claim, combined with your unique talents, I see their leader in you.”

“Don’t you wish to lead?” Vraska asked. Her heart was racing a little. If they did indeed have such public support, then maybe the idea of a coup wasn’t so whimsical after all.

He shook his head.

“I will lead my people, their lives, their rites. I am a necromancer of considerable renown. Therefore matters of death are my expertise. I do not know how to lead other races. I do not know how to structure an authority. I do not have the ability to garner such loyalty as the one who will slay Jarad. I am happy to be your General in all things death-like. However the Golgari needs order. It needs structure. It needs a Queen.”

A queen? Vraska wasn’t quite sure she could pull off being a monarch, but inspiring others to rise up and change their lives? She could certainly do that. She had already done that, though in not such a productive manner. Still, to be the leader of a revolution. To strike Jarad down from his seat of power. It was a dream that looking a little more likely the longer they spoke. However, it would be just that, a dream, if they didn’t go about this properly.

“Let’s meet,” she said, “In a more formal setting. Then we can create notes, plans, and consider what we have and what we need. I would very much like to change our guild for the better, but it will take months, maybe even years of pooling resources, funds, support… It will not be a dirty brawl like every coup before us. We cannot just cut off heads and declare ourselves the new authority. We need to differ from the Sisters, differ from Jarad, we need the people to want change before we even step underneath Svogthos. The power of the guild lies in its people. To create a successful revolution, we must win them before we win symbols like titles or thrones.”

The high-pitched buzzing was starting to ache in her ears.

“This is why you must rule,” said Mazirek, “This is why you must lead. You are capable of looking at history and learning from it, like so few seem to be capable of. We can indeed meet again, at my own address. That can be our base of operations. Jarad cares not for my home.”

“Perfect,” she replied, “If you could give me the address, we can keep in contact and plan our negotiations.”

They exchanged addresses and choice of messengers, just to make sure no one would spy on their communications. Thoroughly excited for revolution, Mazirek bid his goodbyes to her and his grandmother, insisting that he had to be going despite Madame Zdenka’s complaints. This put his grandmother in quite the huff, leaving Vraska alone in her living room with the sleeping form of Mia.

Or so she thought.

“Did you really mean it?”

Vraska jumped a little. She hadn’t noticed Mia wake up, but judging by her tone, she had been awake for quite some time.

“Mean what?” she asked.
Mia smiled at her. She looked far better now. Colour was returning to her face and there was a distinctly mischievous look in her eyes.

“You know, that whole thing you just did with Lord Mazirek. Killing Jarad. Changing the world. Making everyone equal. Are you really going to do it?”

Vraska couldn’t help but smile back, the younger gorgon’s eagerness was apparently infectious.

“We’re certainly going to do our best,” she said, “I can’t make any promises. We are just two people at the moment.”

“Two really powerful people,” Mia insisted, “And did I hear that right? You can end Jarad forever?”

She’d been awake for most of that conversation, hadn’t she? Vraska couldn’t help but admire her perfect ability to fake sleep.

“I can indeed, if I can get to him,” she replied, “Though I’d prefer it if you didn’t go spreading what you’ve just heard. We’d be dead before we even began.”

“Oh I won’t say anything!” Mia proclaimed, “I just want to know more. You see, I never got the point of joining the Golgari.”

Vraska stared at her curiously and she continued:

“I mean what’s the difference? You can get beat up on the streets, and kicked around because you’re a gorgon. Or you can officially get beat up on the streets and kicked around because you’re a gorgon. It’s not like we get any benefits for signing up. We don’t get healing or schools or jobs or nothing. So what’s the point? Besides, I’m not doing anything for that lich-bastard! He killed my mother!”

“Jarad himself?” asked Vraska. Mia shook her head.

“Not him in person, but it’s his fault! Just like your mother I bet. Mine was a cleaner for a big fancy school right in the middle of city centre. She worked there for years and years before she had me. Then suddenly one day, a parent found out the school had a gorgon working for them and started all these nasty rumours. All the parents believed that crap and started pestering the school, claiming my mother was up to all sorts of crime! She wasn’t allowed to defend herself, because gorgons can’t go to court. So the devkarin just took her and killed her to make everyone shush. She did nothing wrong! She was just working hard, minding her own business. But Jarad encourages snobs like those parents. He makes it legal to kill innocent ladies who are just working! Because she was a gorgon, she got no defence, no rights, and now she’s gone! I hate him and I’ll never join his stupid guild!”

Mia took a deep breath, wiping her eyes on Vraska’s cloak as she glared at her own bandaged leg.

“Well not never,” she mumbled, “If you were leading it, I reckon it’d be ok. Let’s make a deal.”

She turned fully to Vraska, offering her one small sharp hand.

“If you become Queen of the Golgari, I’ll join up and do whatever you say. Promise.”

Vraska couldn’t help but laugh a little. Her passion and determination were very sweet. Oh to be a teenager again! To be able to have dreams and not think of all the paperwork that would be involved!
She took her hand and gave it a little shake.

“If I become Queen of the Golgari, and you join up, I’ll make sure you have a job and a home and everything you need to be safe and happy. That’s my promise.”

Mia beamed.

“You better get a move on then!” she exclaimed, “Go meet Lord Mazirek! Go!”

Vraska laughed.

“Patience, we’ve got to make sure you heal up first.”
Revolutionaries

Chapter Summary

After saving the young gorgon Mia, Vraska returns to the Undercity for a very important meeting. She arrives to plan a revolution and leaves with more than she could ever expect.

Vraska spent two days at Madame Zdenka’s home, looking after Mia until she was ready to walk again. She couldn’t help but wonder if they were burdening the elderly kraul, but Madame Zdenka talked over her every insistence to help out, tidy up, or do anything to pay back her hospitality. She explained her need for a wedding-attendee dress whilst Zdenka was fixing up some new clothes for Mia. The teenage gorgon’s smock was beyond repair. The old fabric so worn and ripped that it fell apart under any attempt to stitch it together. Mia spent most of those two days in Vraska’s cloak and an over-sized nightgown. They were both coated in a layer of cat hair as the other residents of Madame Zdenka’s home cosied up to them at every opportunity. Perhaps due to her inability to get up and about, Mia was a constant stream of conversation beside her. She told Vraska all about the various gangs that fought over Greenhelm and how she hadn’t actually done anything to upset her attackers. She’d been going out to the bakers to collect the last of yesterday’s bread. The baker always gave out what she couldn’t sell for free the next day. Vraska managed to pick up tidbits about her living situation between idle chatter.

Unsurprisingly, Mia was an orphan. When she lost her mother, she ended up on the streets, slowly drifting out to the fringes like so many had before her. She did however have a home.

“I got to go out and get us food and stuff,” she explained, “But I know when I get back, there’ll be a roof and a fire. I handle the hunting and gathering. Eliza handles the money. Emil isn’t in a great state right now but he looks after our living space.”

She lived above an abandoned shop near the subterranean waterway. She had two roommates, Eliza and Emil, a pair of identical twins. Eliza had a full time job doing errands around the neighbourhood, mostly laundry, and occasionally she walked an old couple’s dog for them. Mia mentioned that Emil was still in a lot of pain from his surgery, but didn’t mention what that surgery was.

“We had to do a few dirty jobs to make up the money,” Mia commented, “But it was worth it. You should have seen the state he was in. Couldn’t face his own reflection without breaking down, we had cloths over everything vaguely shiny.”

He was still too shy to go outside however, not aided by the constant pain.

“We got enough for the surgery, but they didn’t tell us it would hurt so much whilst he recovered. I admit, I was trying to pick a few pockets as I passed through,” Mia explained, “That was why they ganged up on me. But painkillers that strong aren’t cheap and I’m not about to go feeding him strange fungi, in case they have bad effects, you know?”

By the time she was ready to get back on her feet, Mia had a whole bag of things ready to take back to her friends. Zdenka had given her a whole case of clothes, some new and some second-hand to share between the three of them. She’d got a new belt and coin purse, hers having been
taken by her attackers. Vraska had insisted on filling the leather pouch to the brim, emptying most of the contents of her purse in doing so.

“You can’t do that!” Mia gasped, as Vraska filled the little wallet with one hundred zino pieces.

“I can,” she replied, “I’m not trying to boast, far from it. I know what it’s like to scrape by with what you can scavenge. I’ve been there, caring for others whilst the guilds turn their backs. I only got to where I am today because an adult gorgon reached out to me. Now, it’s my turn. I’ve been fortunate enough to reach the point where money isn’t a problem for me. So, let me help you get all the food you need, and the painkillers for Emil. And if you ever need any more, you know where to find me.”

She had already let slip she lived in the Guildpact Offices. They weren’t exactly hard to find once you crossed Deadbridge.

Mia’s eyes began to fill with tears. She scrubbed them away on her new black cloak.

“Th-Thank you,” she stammered, “For everything. For saving my life. For-for being so kind and generous.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Vraska assured her, “You can tell Eliza and Emil where I am, and if they ever need help, any of you can come and find me.”

Mia nodded, still fighting tears.

“I-I heard,” she said, “That the ladies of the Ochran call each other sisters. Can-Can I call you my sister?”

Vraska smiled.

“Of course you can. I admit, all the other Ochran are older than me, so I’ve never had a little sister.”

Mia smiled and bounced a little on her heels in excitement.

“Well now you can have two little sisters and a little brother!” she exclaimed, “I can’t wait to tell Eliza and Emil about you. They’re going to be so impressed!”

It occurred to Vraska that she’d never asked what race Eliza and Emil were. Mia made it sound like they were also gorgons, however there was one small question she had about that. Emil was a male gorgon? She’d never seen nor heard of male gorgons before. That didn’t mean they didn’t exist, but it was certainly peculiar. Despite this intrigue, she let Mia go on her way without interrogating her about it. She’d probably find out if she ever met the pair. It was rare enough to meet another gorgon, let alone a pair of twins. If she found them, she would probably know who they were at once.

Mia disappeared into the depths of the Undercity, whilst Vraska made her way back topside via the nearest beetleback station. Once home, she was left to contemplate the empty rooms and corridors, devoid of the sounds of work, frustration, or even the screeching of Florence. Over the next few weeks, Vraska was kept busy with work. She often completed multiple contracts in a day as assassin’s season hit its peak and people tried to kill off their rivals before upcoming promotions and elections. However, when she came home after a long day’s, or night’s, work, she couldn’t help but feel her mood slipping as she walked through lonely darkness. Occasionally Lavina would be there, shuffling papers and looking annoyed. However, most of the time, it was just her in a mansion that could house twenty. Every creak of pipes, every whistle of the wind, reminded her
just how alone she was here. How big the space was. How there was no one else to share her life in it.

She missed Jace. She missed him terribly even if he’d only been away for a month. She’d endured longer absences with no indication of where he was, no note, no assurances that he was going to be in the company of others who could protect him. Yet she still missed him. When she was busy, she could easily forget about the gaping hole that had re-emerged in her chest. However, when she was walking miserable corridors, eating alone in a giant dining room, making a solitary meal in a kitchen best suited for banquets, it was hard not to be melancholy. She fell swiftly into misery when there was nothing about to distract her. There was a Jace-less void in her life that seemed unlikely to be filled any time soon. Occasionally she would pace his room, wondering if it would be strange to take one of his cloaks, or perhaps a hair comb or something small. If she looked after it, maybe it could be a reminder, something to fill the insufferable loneliness. She cast that idea aside as stupid and merely went back to work.

It was an immense relief when finally she got a letter from Mazirek asking to meet. She packed up everything she could possibly need for her trip. Mazirek lived at the very outskirts of the Undercity’s capital. It was certainly the furthest out into the Undercity’s wilds that she’d ever gone. Not that the suburbs were particularly wild. They were mostly filled with acres upon acres of rot farms. For that reason alone, she intended to wear shoes. She hadn’t bothered with footwear for quite some time. Her feet were naturally adapted to travelling bare, and her nails were far too sharp not to pierce through any fabric she enclosed them in. She had a tough pair of boots for when it was snowing, not wanting to expose her toes to sub-zero temperatures. She donned these for her trip through rot-farm territory. Who knew what you might be stepping in down there? Most likely decomposing corpses.

She went as far as she could on beetleback, before taking the next two miles on foot. As she walked along the verge, away from passing wagons and deep gouges in the road left by farm transport, she noticed the a sharp decline in humanoid life, and a steady increase in the races the devkarin would deem less desirable. As wagons thundered on by, they were often escorted by troops of kraul guards, buzzing above the heavily laden carts to protect the produce on its trip into the city proper. Whilst some carts were pulled by horses or mules, others were led by trolls and other hulking figures in various stages of undeath. She passed an entire field illuminated by thin-stalked mushrooms that were doing a very good impression of daylight. The entire green was full of chickens and one very excitable rothound who was chasing its own tail and being given a wide berth by the field’s other occupants. Beside the chickens, was a muddy furrow full of pigs. If either set of livestock were phased by their underground residences, they didn’t appear to show it. The chickens and pigs acted like any she might see overground. The daylight mushrooms probably helped. Considering that the Undercity provided most of Ravnica’s food, there had to be a lot of livestock down here.

Mazirek’s home was very easy to find. Rising above the farmsteads and fields like a dark shadow, the decrepit old manor had probably once housed whoever lorded over these farms. Judging by the large holes in the walls, and the large amount of greenery that had clambered inside, those lords did not leave under their own volition. Now the manor had definitely become a hive for kraul. She heard the buzzing before she even saw the building. The rot farms had steadily increased their population of workers the further she got out. Gone were the livestock, she was now walking alongside rice paddies and swampy fenced off areas where kraul were pulling various roots and tubers out of the mud. A few workers looked up at her as she passed by before hastily getting back to work. Each fenced area was lit by the same spindly mushrooms, dotted like lampposts and emitting a soft blue or green light that distorted everything slightly so it looked like they were underwater. Vraska thought it would be almost impossible for a surface-dwelling race to navigate these areas. Her eyes, and the eyes of the kraul, were adapted for such low light conditions.
However, she thought Jace would struggle seeing his hand in front of his face down here.

She approached the manor, sending two kraul urgently flying up the path ahead of her. By the time she reached the front steps, Mazirek was already there, surrounded by a throng of excitable acolytes, all eager to see the stranger who was about to enter their home. He dismissed them with a wave of his claw.

“Welcome, Mistress Vraska,” he clicked, “I hope the journey wasn’t too hard on you.”

“Good afternoon,” she replied, “It was quite pleasant actually. It’s been a while since I’ve walked amongst any farmland.”

“They are certainly most busy, the autumn harvest is quite bountiful. The topsiders will be pleased.”

He beckoned her inside, shooing acolytes away and back through a series of low arches into the house. The mansion had probably been very fine in its day. The architecture was very Golgari. Low ceilings, deep archways and many shadowy alcoves. However, most of the walls and beams had been completely overrun with plant-life and a liberal amount of cobwebs. She was led through an archway concealed behind a curtain of ivy and down a spiral stone staircase. Two more doors, one of which Mazirek unlocked with a swirl of foul-smelling magic, and she found herself in a large domed room, utterly filled with bookshelves.

“I thought it most pleasant to discuss our venture in here,” Mazirek explained, “This is my personal library. My students cannot venture down here, neither can any of my family.”

She couldn’t help but stare at the space. She was used to floor to ceiling bookshelves by now, the sanctum was full of them, however this library actually looked lived in. There were papers and stationary strewn across the desk at the far end. Odd nick-nacks, from pieces of bone to brass letter-openers lay put to one side on various shelves, about claw-height on Mazirek. They sat, not at the desk, but at a low wooden table beside a grated fire, which crackled at a low heat behind its safety grill.

“I purchased refreshment,” Mazirek explained, pointing to a small side-table which bore a tea set, a plate of biscuits and a packet of tea leaves.

“I understand from my grandmother that brewing these leaves is a much favoured beverage for meetings such as this. I regret to say that I have never tried it, and thus do not know the particulars.”

Vraska smiled. He didn’t know how to make tea? Well, that was easily amended.

“Here, let me show you,” she offered, “Then you can try it.”

After a demonstration on brewing tea, they settled in a pair of high-backed leather armchairs that creaked a little with age. Vraska let him gently sip at his tea, experimentally moving his mandibles to see what angle helped him get a better taste.

“This is pleasant,” he concluded, “I imagine it is a comfort when the air is cold.”

“It is,” she agreed, “I confess, I like it like this. Black without all the sugar Madame Zdenka piles in.”

“Grandmother is rather fanatical about sugar,” Mazirek agreed, “It used to be a rarity here in the Undercity, a sign of high society, as it does not grow very well down here.”
The conversation soon strayed from tea to more serious matters. They had come here to plan a revolution. It was a daunting task, but Vraska had some experience with planning for daunting tasks. It was hard to know where to begin when you were enacting a large amount of change. It had been very hard to know where to begin when it came to planning the Chambers of the Guildpact. So she was going to start off in the same way.

Large sheets of paper and Jace’s box of colourful markers.

Mazirek looked rather confused at her methods, but swiftly became rather enchanted with Jace’s collection of scented pens.

“This one has the smell of apples,” he declared as he took in a whiff of green pen, “And this bears resemblance to raspberry. I like these.”

Vraska was slightly worried he’d make himself dizzy if he sniffed them too much, however they were non-toxic. She resolved to buy him his own set next time she went near someone who sold children’s stationary. She rolled out four large sheets of paper and readied herself for their discussion.

They started by breaking down what a successful revolution would need, adding each point as a title to a separate piece of paper. They separated the definitions of a coup from that of a revolution. They weren’t intending to invade the capital and rule by military might. They weren’t just going to storm in with an army and declare themselves rulers. That wouldn’t solve anything. It would be a repeat of history. Terrible beliefs would remain. The common people would resist the new system they would try to integrate. It would all fall apart as soon as someone with a bigger army came along. They didn’t want a coup. They wanted a revolution. They were intending to change the Undercity, down to its core beliefs, to make a better Golgari. For that they were going to need to start small and work their way up from there. They needed to start with the every day man, elf, kraul, or any other race, and make them want their change.

**What does a revolution need?**

Vraska wrote along all four sheets of paper.

**The Support of the Common People** was her first heading.

But how to obtain that? She and Mazirek went philosophical for a while. Boiling down the essentials everyone needed for a safe and happy life. They were sure to encompass all walks of life, from the city merchants to the rot-farm kraul, but their needs could be whittled down to the essentials – A suitable home, enough income to comfortably support them and their family, and access to resources such as stores, education, medical facilities and options for leisure. This led them neatly onto what would aggravate the common citizen into action. Namely, being denied any of these three things (Home, Income, Resources), or knowing that others had an unfair and greater access to these than they did. Considering that kraul and gorgons were already denied healthcare, there would no doubt be plenty of other injustices throughout the Undercity. They just had to make sure these were known to get people complaining about the current administration.

“We use the press,” Vraska informed Mazirek, “Not the Golgari run press, that is in the pocket of Jarad. However there are plenty of Dimir news houses in the Undercity, and they will gladly print stories that lead to discussion and dissent.”

“Where will we get the stories?” Mazirek asked, sipping at his tea, “I have contacts in many precincts that can gather local news, local disputes, but that will not satisfy the press for very long. We need to target Jarad, slander his name if we are to turn the people against them.”
“If your agents work on local injustices,” Vraska replied, “I, and my contacts, can work on larger guild-scale crimes, especially those committed by Jarad and his court.”

She told him about her access to New Prahr and Jarad’s part in the Golgari Purges and the massacres to follow. He was immediately incensed by the fact that his Guildmaster had wiped out so many innocent communities, and vowed that he would use his contacts to find further survivors, those who could give accounts to the press. They then discussed, after all this trouble-rousing, how they were going to win the hearts of the masses over. They had to, once again, play to the three essential needs - Homes, Income, Resources.

“We make pay equal,” stated Mazirek, “I know that in parts of the Undercity, devkarin get paid more for the same job as other races, even in the same company. We make sure all are paid the same regardless of race.”

“We also set a minimum level of pay,” agreed Vraska, “We find out how much a common citizen has to make to live healthily in each precinct, and we guarantee by law, that they will receive that. It will take a lot of research but—”

“I have connections at Pitch Lane,” Mazirek interrupted, “I studied there for a short while and have supported many budding necromancers find their way into its halls. They research the living of the Undercity. We may be able to get the data we seek from there.”

“I would contact them then,” Vraska replied, “I also suggest we make it illegal to discriminate on terms of race, meaning non-devkarin employees cannot be fired, or refused work, based on what they are. This should also be extended to access to state medical care and education. We need to tear down race discrimination if the Golgari are ever going to function as an equal society.”

They also agreed to build more schools and more medical facilities in impoverished areas, supported by the Guildhall, who would fund the ventures from tax. On the topic of tax, Vraska rather liked the idea of restructuring the tax system based on income and overall wealth. It would make her very unpopular amidst nobles, but a lot of those would probably be dead by the time she ruled, and the others would be too scared to oppose her. The idea was simple and the the fact it did not exist right now, was ludicrous. Charge wealthier people more tax. Charge impoverished people no tax until they could afford to pay and live a secure life. Taking a few more hundred zinos would barely dent the pockets of the Undercity’s aristocracy, but letting those, for instance, in the Chute Precinct keep more of their paycheque, would improve their lives dramatically.

To be able to enforce these ideas however, they needed to address points two and three. A revolution needed:

To Completely Remove the Current Power Structure.

And

The Ability to Reinforce Its Authority.

For that they needed an army. It was unfair for her to expect Mazirek to risk his family, however enormous they were. He insisted that many would fight, however he did not have the numbers needed to take the capital, let alone fend off any future attacks. Vraska meanwhile could probably persuade some of the Ochran gorgons to her side, but that wasn’t anything near an army. One route to go down was to try and recruit as many citizens as possible, promising them a better lifestyle in the future. However these would be untrained civilians who would likely die beneath the blades of Jarad’s well-trained guard. No, they needed an army that was both large and competent, those they would not be too sad to lose. The logical path to this, was to summon an undead army, fresh from
the corpses on the rotfarms. However, this would take away precious resources, and attract a lot of attention from Jarad and his administration. So, they had to somehow amass a secret army, without having their plans ruined from the get-go. This was looking almost impossible. Where did you just find an army lying around? Was there any other way to seize control that didn’t require an army?

Mazirek suggested that they took a look through his collection of literature he had squirreled away from the devkarin administration, in case the books had been banned because they held secrets that would endanger Jarad. Vraska eagerly took to the mission, excited to read more banned literature, the thrill of the heresy a little too much to resist.

After an hour of quiet searching and reading, Mazirek was called away by one of his acolytes to solve an issue that was taking place outside. He apologised profusely to Vraska, who was more than happy to keep researching alone. So far their hunt had been fruitless. Vraska had read some very interesting volumes on city planning, that exposed how the devkarin had redirected multiple rivers and wiped out some small villages. However, that had nothing to do with the mission at hand. Mazirek was gone for quite a while. She could hear the occasionally shout and wondered if the dispute had got heated. It truly wasn’t any of her business, so she kept on task. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached up to an interestingly bound book on one of the highest shelves. It was covered in glossy back leather and had fine gold clasps about its spine. Retrieving it with care, she took in the title. What she saw, surprised her immensely.

A Study of Gorgonkind – Medical, Behavioural and Historical. Dispelling The Mythos Around One of the Undercity’s Most Ancient Races.

By Professor Adrian Bartos, Director of Anthropology at Pitch Lane University.

Vraska frowned at the cover. Of course she’d heard of Pitch Lane. It was the only large university in the Undercity. However, she had no idea they had an anthropology department or they’d ever taken an interest in gorgonkind. She could see why this book had been banned by the devkarin administration. Anyone who sought to dispel the devkarin propaganda about the mindless nature of gorgons, probably wouldn’t live to see the fruits of their labour. Still, she had no idea such a book existed, and couldn’t help but flick open the cover. When was this written? What the basis of these studies? She didn’t trust Professor Bartos not to have his own agenda. Was this honestly a book about gorgons or another attempt at propaganda?

On the inside cover, she found a dedication.

This volume is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Helena. May this be your lasting legacy, a light through the quagmire of lies and deceit about your kind. And to Irenka, who has only just opened her gaze to this world. May you grow up in a city that can understand your beauty, my precious baby girl.

Vraska swore under her breath. A book about gorgons written for gorgons? She could barely believe it. What else could Helena and Irenka be? Suddenly, Professor Bartos was looking very credible. His motivations seemed natural. He wanted to get to the bottom of gorgon history for his wife and newly-born daughter, who had no doubt been much maligned in a devkarin-run society. Her hands shook a little as she turned the next page and was presented with a whole list of names. Names of people who had taken part in Professor Bartos’ research. All female-looking, most without family names, twelve in total. Vraska hadn’t met twelve gorgons in her lifetime, but she had no doubt these were gorgons. If Bartos wanted to know about gorgons, he would ask them. An academic should know better than going to second-hand sources when it came to living people.

Vraska couldn’t help but let out a small gasp. She had been tracing names down the page with a
single finger. She’d recognised the names Antonia and Cecilie and wondered if they were same twins who currently worked for the Ochran. She’d read them with little reaction, but when she moved on, she couldn’t help but stop mid-page, eyes wide and staring. There, nestled amongst unfamiliar names of strangers she’d likely never meet, was a single word. A name that, for a moment, rendered her unable to breathe.

Yveta.

"Mother?"

She scoured the covers for when this book was published. Twenty-Nine years ago. Seven years before she was born. It could be. It was entirely possible. There were other Ochran gorgons on this list. How many Yvetas were there in the Undercity? It wasn’t exactly a common name. Vraska’s heart was racing.

“This is you isn’t it?” she whispered to the tome, “You would have helped him, I know it.”

The need to read this book had gripped her and refused to let go. It wasn’t what she was supposed to be researching. It didn’t help find a way to defeat Jarad. But if there was something, anything, she didn’t know about her own kind, there was a chance it was in this book. Bartos had made this for his own daughter. Yet, her mother had taken part in this study. Well, maybe she had something she could pass down to Vraska. Something she had never got around to telling her when she was alive and Vraska was too young to understand. Either way, if there were things she didn’t know about gorgonkind, things that weren’t common knowledge, then she finally had that knowledge right here at her fingertips. She just had to find out what that was.

The volume was the size of a text-book. There was no way she’d have time to go through it in one afternoon. Instead she flicked through, looking for contents that struck her as particularly interesting. Maybe she could persuade Mazirek into letting her borrow this, but for now, it didn’t hurt to scan through. She tended to pick up on phrases that were either particularly dramatic or were pointing out the difference between gorgons and other humanoid races. She didn’t bother with most of the anatomy section. It was interesting to know that a gorgon’s hair never stopped growing, but she knew enough about gorgon anatomy from her own body. She almost skipped over the section about reproduction. However, a particular sentence caught her eye.

It is estimated that less than two hundred gorgons remain in present day Ravnica. Rates of decline indicate that the race is steadily progressing towards its own extinction.

She knew there weren’t many gorgons about. She’d just assumed they were particularly rare and secretive. But they were going extinct?

The Undercity’s gorgon population was decimated by the purges and witch-hunts following the fall of the Sisters of Stone Death. The race never recovered, largely due to their high infant mortality rate and peculiar reproductive cycle.

Vraska had never thought about reproducing. In fact, the idea of having to bear a child seemed inconvenient and rather disgusting. However, she had no idea how gorgon reproduction differed to that of other races. Considering this could affect her body in some way, she kept on reading.

Gorgons are unique amongst Ravnicans in their dependence on other races to keep their population going. They can bear the children of any humanoid race on Ravnica, but the offspring will always be another gorgon. Paternal genetics have very little effect on a gorgon, making her immune to any genetic conditions that the father may pass on. The only
resemblances a gorgon may have to her paternal figure, are purely aesthetic. Gorgons with devkarin fathers may display the long pointed ears or slanted features of their parentage. Whilst those with vedalken heritage may display their father’s blue pigmentation through their scales.”

Vraska found herself absentmindedly touching her own ears. They certainly weren’t slanted. That meant whoever her father was, he wasn’t devkarin. Good.

“Whilst gorgons mature through puberty at a similar rate as humans or elves, they do not become reproductively mature until much later in life. Between the ages of forty and forty-five, a gorgon will enter a state of known among her kind as a “The Fever”. During this time, a gorgon’s hormones will drive her into a fiercely maternal state, to signal that she is now ready to reproduce.

Those that have experienced The Fever report that it can be handled in a number of ways. The first of which is to follow these instincts and have a child. There are a number of options however, for a gorgon who does not wish to reproduce. Certain fungi, native to the deeper levels of the Undercity, including Dusk’s Whisper, Yellow-Spotted Ghost Flower, and Goldcap can be added to water-based drinks to repress the maternal surge. Other gorgons have reported, that channelling these maternal urges into caring for animals, especially large numbers of dependant pets, can nullify The Fever’s call.

If a gorgon does not reproduce during this allotted period, then she loses her chance at producing offspring. It is unknown as to why this window is so short or occurs when it does, but theories have been put forward that it is conducive to a gorgon’s survival. The burden of pregnancy endangers a race that is often hunted or violently targeted. Therefore gorgonkind has evolved a cycle in which they have time to establish safe surroundings before they have a child, and then not be endangered by the state again.

Vraska had no idea how she was supposed to know all this without a book. Her mother had never mentioned about it. Neither had Simona or any of the Ochran gorgons. Without this text, she would have just got to forty years old and suddenly been beset by strange new feelings she’d never had before. It would probably be quite frightening.

However much this cycle protects the mother from harm, it is also responsible for the decline in gorgon population. The average lifespan of a gorgon in Undercity society is five years. Those that survive childhood are expected to live twenty to twenty-five years. Most gorgons do not live to see adulthood, due to persecution and discrimination inherent to society. Therefore, it is somewhat miraculous when a gorgon reaches the age at which her Fever comes into effect. And more miraculous still, if she successfully survives the birth without state medical care, to raise her daughter.

Vraska swore again. Five years old?! And then, if they did make it to adulthood, they were expected to die by age twenty-five? It was a miracle she’d ever been born at all! She’d always known her mother was exceptional. However, that was just due to her use of the Severance. But Yveta had not only managed to live as an Ochran assassin, she’d also survived to forty years old, had a child without any assistance from public healthcare, and raised that child past the age of five! She was a miracle!

Vraska felt tears well up in her eyes and hastily scrubbed them away. She’d known the odds were stacked against her existence but not by how much. Gods, what must her mother been through to
live so long. What must she have experienced? What must she have endured? She had raised her, whilst fighting off Azorius guards that came knocking at their door. She’d protected their entire building! She was truly the most remarkable woman to ever exist and Vraska had never been able to tell her that. She didn’t even have a grave to visit. Or any sort of keepsake or anything that she could bury in her place. She would have to be her mother’s legacy. She would have to keep her memory alive by living up to being her daughter.

“I’ll make you a better Golgari,” she whispered to the book, “A Golgari where a mother and daughter can be together always. Where they can see doctors and go to school and don’t have to live in fear of their lives. Where gorgons can all grow up and have a family. Wh-When I become Queen, I’ll make sure no one has to suffer like you did. I’ll make you a garden where young gorgons can play in peace and know what you did. Because without you Ma, I wouldn’t be here. Without you, change wouldn’t be coming. “

She wiped furiously at her eyes before any water damaged the tome. Unable to keep reading about how her kind was doomed, Vraska flicked through in an attempt to find something more cheerful. She ended up flicking straight through to the history section. She bypassed the Sisters of Stone Death, hoping there were other famous gorgons, any famous gorgons, that had made a positive impact on the world. One who was recognised not for being an evil murderess. One who had helped others, made people’s lives better.

There was only one.

**Katka Skaya**

*Books of children’s tales are littered with stories about the Wyrmheart Gang. They are a main stay of Undercity literature, fairy tales and have even made their way into opera, theatre and ballet. Many scholars can tell you that the Wyrmheart Gang of fiction is based loosely on the adventures of the Wyrmheart Mercenaries, an ancient party of adventurers whose feats have been recorded widely throughout the Undercity. Whilst popular illustrated tales and theatre productions will portray Katka Skaya – the Wyrmheart Gang’s wise-cracking rapier-wielding heroine - as a particularly beautiful devkarin elf, this is far from the truth. Many original editions of children’s literature, including songs, plays and even tapestries, show that Katka fell victim to the censorship so indicative of the devkarin administration. In the earlier, more accurate, renditions, Katka is a tall gorgon with emerald scales and eyes the colour of flame. Whilst many devkarin academics seeks to deny this, many statues have been recovered from what was believed to be the Wyrmheart Mercenaries’ last battlefield – a place once revered as a site of pilgrimage by Undercity residents. Not a single devkarin figure has been recovered from this site, however many gorgon figures have been discovered depicting Katka.*

This was all very interesting but Vraska was sure she had heard of the Wyrmheart Mercenaries before. Not the Wyrmheart Gang, she had a passing recollection of those children’s stories but she’d never been that interested in them. They had all been too devkarin-focussed not to leave a nasty taste in her mouth. No, she was almost certain she’d read something about the Wyrmheart Mercenaries and recently too. However, only academics would care about the mercenaries now. Most in the Undercity would know them from their warped children’s book renditions. So, whatever she’d been reading had been academic or old. Most likely the later. So, what had she-?

The thought struck her and she dove for her bag which rested on the floor by her seat. She had brought “Midnight Under Svogthos” with her under the pretence of showing Mazirek a bit about the history of the kraul. “Midnight Under Svogthos” was an oddly written volume. The author
clearly knew what they were writing would be controversial, for they had framed the text in a peculiar fashion to distract away from their sources. Each chapter was written from the perspective of a landmark – be it statue, building or river. The chapter would describe important historical happenings that took place around said landmark, as if the inanimate structure had been in the thick of the action. The text was so old that Vraska was forced to handle to book with immense care. She worried that, every time she turned a page, the corners would crumble or rip under her fingers. Fortunately, this edition was kind enough to have an index of contents, meaning she had to do minimal page turning. She gently put the book on the table beside the volume about gorgons and went searching for references to the Wyrmheart Mercenaries.

There was one. In a chapter whose contents dated shortly after the signing of the Guildpact, she found herself following the thoughts of a river that flowed alongside a well-travelled road. The Wyrmheart Mercenaries appeared to have been hired as guards for a long procession of Orzhov aristocrats.

And thus came the silk-footed surface dwellers in biers of gold that shimmered with treasures bought of fear and bloodshed. Each well-trimmed figure, dripped in lace, sat escorted by two dozen of their baying kind, serfs with heads bowed and shaved, scrawled with etchings of unyielding fealty. About the sycophants paced armoured sorts, faceless towers of gold and steel that herded the throng like hounds amongst the flock. Each party numbering at least three score, and with many scores more of noblepersons making their pilgrimage to the bowels of the earth, the road now mocked the river’s flow in its own glimmering procession. Simple mercenaries, the Wyrmheart few, shook their heads as they escorted the masses, too few to even accompany one per party, down towards the heart of the earth.

Vraska couldn’t help but read on. Why were so many aristocrats travelling through the Undercity? Why so many in such a great number? It sounded like the entire Orzhov court had decided to take a trip underground with all their servants and guards in tow. But what was the occasion?

Along, long went the golden stream, cresting the banks of the river, descending deep into catacombs more ancient than the system that flooded them with riches. Deep they delved, seeking the grand halls promised unto them by the upper echelons of their diamond-encrusted state. At the stone arches, the Wyrmhearts were bid to depart. This venture was for denizens of the gilt alone. The hired blades did not complain at remaining safely above stone and earth. Spectators at last, they watched as the gleaming travellers descend into catacombs rich not with splendour but with necrotic vapor. Dipping old rations in the turbulent waters, they fished and chattered their way through the parade, until finally the last crash of footfalls descended from their senses.

With light hearts and heavy pockets, the Wyrmhearts went to fulfil the second task of which the surface dwellers had entrusted them. Ringed with sticks of explosive powder, scattered with errant runes, the entrance to the catacombs was wreathed with destructive power the likes of which could shatter foundations. The hired blades back away, spider silk bound amidst their ears. The entrance decimated, the exit sealed, they scurried back the way they came to further fortune. They cared not for the steady rot which lined the catacombs beneath their hurried feet. Not for the vapors that replaced the breathable air, drawing moisture out of silk-wrapped lungs, desiccating gold-painted fingers. Yet the earth would not let these decorated fools pass unto the grave. Swollen with necrotic power, these were not tombs, but antechambers, lined with space for hundreds awaiting death. Death that would not come, fleeting glimpses perhaps, but unlife awaited the disposed
court of Orzhova. Unlife and centuries of unwavering patience greeted the Erstwhile. Those who had strayed too far from their guild’s order, could stray no further. They wait. Until light comes and an echelon worth serving emerges.

Vraska grabbed a piece of paper and began to make notes. There was a catacomb full of undead Orzhov nobles somewhere in the Undercity? She scoured for more details about the route they took, the location of the river, what other landmarks were nearby. Her heart leapt as Mazirek finally returned, coming down the stairs with a weary sigh and a feeble buzz of his wings.

“Apologies for my absence,” he said, “Students can cause such unnecessary strife.”

“I don’t mind,” she assured him, voice hurried with excitement, “In fact, I may have found something. Have you ever heard of the Erstwhile?”

He went through the sections of text she had discovered, taking particular interest in the mention of necrotic vapor.

“I have not heard “Erstwhile” used in reference to the undead,” he responded, “I have studied necromantic history for many years now and the term has never been raised in any literature. I would think that if these catacombs had been unearthed, it would have been a moment of history amongst our guild. This implies that perhaps, they still wait.”

He went over to another shelf, away from the banned books, and came back with a scroll of parchment.

“Those who study death have always been interested in the vapor,” he explained, “Here under the earth, there are rivers, not unlike those that flow with water, but these flow with streams of gas, or wind, that is full of necrotic energy from the deepest places of this world. I took particular interest in this, due to my grandmother. One such wellspring of vapor, can be found in Greenhelm, and I believe it assisted her desire to continue living past the point of death. It rendered her determination into lichdom, without her being aware of the transformation. What this text speaks of is no doubt a strong flow of necrotic vapor. Many scholars have tried to map its passage over Ravnica, like one might with rivers of water. This is the most they have come up with.”

He rolled the map out on the table. It was a beautiful hand-drawn thing, charting out large portions of the Undercity, flows of necrotic energy marked with looping indigo lines. Vraska instantly sought out a stream that passed by a water-based river, trying to locate the place described in “Midnight Under Svogthos”. Unfortunately there were six such locations, dotted all over Ravnica, with no way of telling which this might be.

“Where is Vizkopa?” she murmured, wondering how far the aristocrats had travelled. If they were the Orzhov court, then they couldn’t have travelled too far from their guildhall.

“I do not know how this relates to the city above ground,” Mazirek said, “However, I am sure you may be able to find a map when you return to the surface. We may compare the two.”

“I’ll do that,” she promised, “Though I may be able to do one better.”

Her thought of Vizkopa had reminded her of a conversation she’d had just over a month ago. A purely theoretical conversation where the secretary to Teysa Karlov had offered her a favour from Vizkopa, if she swore to overthrow Jarad. The Erstwhile were Orzhov history. They were an entire Orzhov court buried deep within the earth. There must be some record, some history within the Orzhov that could explain where they were. This was the best lead they had. As she explained this to Mazirek, they were clearly thinking along the same lines. If the Erstwhile were still buried,
awaiting someone to free them, someone that they could serve in their undeath, then she and Mazirek had the army that they were looking for. Not only that, many of the undead would be trained guards, and most would be armoured for a dangerous journey. It would be the perfect secret force – their history lost to books that Jarad himself had ordered to be destroyed. If the Erstwhile were still there, well, it was certainly worth a shot.

Vraska departed the Undercity that day, having successfully borrowed the book on gorgons from Mazirek. He was slightly confused as to why she wanted a tome on her own kind, however she easily explained that she had no family to explain this to her, for which Mazirek was sympathetic. She wrote out the passages from “Midnight Under Svogthos” and enclosed them with a letter written on her fanciest stationary, before sending the whole bundle to Tomik Vrona at Vizkopa. She neglected to mention why she wanted to know about the Erstwhile, however very clearly specified she wanted more information on their history, why they had the journey, and where they were now.

She gave the letter directly to a courier, the fastest way to get it to Vizkopa. By the time the evening came round, she was informed that a thrull had come into the Chamber’s reception with a letter for her.

Tomik Vrona wished to meet in two week’s time.

How much information would he have by then?
Lawyers

Chapter Summary

Vraska pays a visit to Tomik Vrona, hoping for more information on the Orzhov's long-deceased Erstwhile.

On the eve of her visit to Vizkopa, plans were changed. The message came not by thrull, but by a rather intimidating gargoyle that had apparently caused quite the stir when it arrived in reception. The message however, was simple. Tomik Vrona had to move their meeting. Not the date, but the location, because Teysa Karlov wasn’t allowed visitors at the moment. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what politics were going on behind the scenes that meant such an influential figure had to be cut off from her guests. However, considering the fact that Teysa Karlov was already under house arrest, she could probably handle herself admirably. In all honesty, Vraska was rather glad not to have to enter Vizkopa and pay the three million tithes she’d have to endure to get to the Karlov residence. Her previous visits to the obnoxious temple-bank hybrid had all been assassinations. When you were sneaking about, you got away with not paying the tolls. However, on a formal visit, she didn’t think her purse would be so lucky. Fortunately, the address Tomik Vrona had given her appeared to be residential. Perhaps even Tomik’s own home. It was an apartment in the heart of a very pleasant neighbourhood. Its location was excellent, a short walk to the Transguild Promenade, and easy access to the subway, meaning it was only a short distance from any major guild premises.

The simplicity of the location did not mean she was going into this meeting unprepared. Like so many of the more authoritarian guilds, the Orzhov had customs to be considered whether you went to their halls for a meeting. She was just going to Tomik Vrona’s apartment, but she wanted to make a good impression and make sure all tradition was observed. She found a small book Lavinia had bought Jace for his trip round all the guildhalls and read up on what an Orzhov advokist might expect of her. The morning before the meeting, she went to the best bakery in the Undercity and picked up a selection box of excessively pricey desserts, the sort you might expect to find on the Guildmaster’s table. (Not that she thought Jarad needed to eat.) It was tradition to bring gifts to an Orzhov meeting when they were hosting. She didn’t exactly know what her host liked, having only met him once before, so she thought food would be a safe option. This was especially good food. She’d tried their take on the ball-mushroom puff and it was unlike any she’d tried before. Somehow they’d made the humble puff into a lifechanging experience. Regardless, she hoped that Tomik Vrona would appreciate the trouble she’d gone to get the gift, in addition to the gift itself. It was about sending a message. Sure, they were expensive desserts, but they were expensive Golgari desserts, and she was there on the behalf of reforming her guild.

Dressed in her most formal attire, a black dress she’d only ever worn once at The Prism, she made her way to the meeting on foot. She had a new contract waiting for her at home to complete later, but she’d checked before heading out that it wasn’t for anyone in the Orzhov. She’d had at least twenty Orzhov targets so far this month. It was clearly a time for change in the guild’s calendar. She couldn’t help but wonder how many of those Tomik Vrona was aware of. It didn’t seem polite to ask.

The neighbourhood surrounding her destination was both very new and rather pleasant. It clearly had been through a lot of restoration. Old coffee shops and clothing boutiques stood amidst tall
apartment complexes that shone with the latest fashions in window boxes and stained glass. There didn’t seem to be any multi-floored houses left standing. It was all flats, studios and apartments, around and over modern conveniences such as laundrettes and takeaways. Many of the buildings seemed to have communal gardens, one even boasted a swimming pool on its large banners outside. No one walking the streets seemed to be older than thirty. This looked like the place to be if you were a young professional living near work.

Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to live in one of these modern apartments. She missed their old flat, but even she understood that it would be far too small to support them now. On the other hand, their residence at the Guildpact offices were unnecessarily large. So dark and neglected, it made her miserable just to get up in the morning and realise she was still there. She couldn’t complain. A house was a house. She’d gone long enough without one to feel grateful for whatever she had. But still, it had never felt like theirs, and it certainly hadn’t ever felt like hers. It was the Chamber of the Guildpact, and despite whatever Jace wished, she wasn’t the Guildpact. It was a house but it certainly wasn’t a home. She felt like she owned nothing in that place. It was a cavern full of pressure and misery. With Jace not around, it was also indescribably lonely. Maybe she should look into a smaller place. Just for her, or just for the two of them when Jace needed a bit of an escape.

For now however, she needed to meet a man about some zombies his guild had made.

The stairs up to Tomik Vrona’s apartment were satisfactorily silent, nothing like their creaky old lift near Tin Street. She knocked politely on the door, shifting her bag over her shoulder. She waited as she heard footsteps approach the door.

“Good morning,” Tomik Vrona announced, as soon as he saw her, “Excellent timing, the kettle just boiled. Please, come in.”

He stood to one side in a swish of robes, allowing her to pass into the hallway before he locked the door behind her.

“Please follow me. Don’t mind the boxes, we only just moved in at the weekend and it turns out between us we have far too many possessions.”

We?

“Congratulations on the new home,” she replied, “You and Ral have moved in together?” She was unable to stop herself taking a look round as he led her into their living room.

“Yes,” Tomik replied eagerly, “It’s already so much better than living in a giant empty place full of ghosts. Let me just fetch the tea.”

He left her standing in the living room, which was admittedly mostly boxes. A large red leather sofa sat accompanied by two matching armchairs, around a low glass-topped coffee table. The large dresser against the far wall was empty except for two framed pictures. On closer inspection, they were not pictures at all, but graduation certificates. One, a very gilt commemoration of a qualification in Guild Law and the other, slightly stained, declared its receiver to have a degree with honours in Electro-meteorological Engineering. Whatever that was. Vraska frowned a little at the pair. So both Tomik and Ral had the pleasure of going to university? She was a little jealous.

Tomik’s return was heralded by the flapping of robes and the chinking of cups and saucers. He placed them on the table beside a large bundle of brown paper folders, pushing a few takeout leaflets onto the floor.
“Please sit,” he stated. Vraska felt like there was something that needed to be done before that happened.

“For you.” She presented him with the bag of fancy desserts, “For graciously allowing me into your home and organising this meeting.”

He took them and peered into the bag. His eyes brightened.

“Frost-Frill Palace,” he read from the box, “I think I read about them in one of my mother’s magazines. They’re the bakery worth trying in the Undercity. Thank you, I’m sure these’ll be gone in a day once Ral gets home.”

“Some of them are a bit rich, so I would recommend pacing yourself,” she said, “But I can highly recommend them.”

He smiled as he placed them on the coffee table. They sat. She chose an armchair as he poured tea into two very fine china teacups. The gilt rims, the ornate paintings of birds, she could only imagine these were his rather than Ral’s. They reminded her immensely of the Orzhov tearooms she and Jace had visited when they were younger.

Despite the cluster of fanciful sugar bowls, milk jugs and delicate golden spoons, they both took their tea black.

“Your letter was most intriguing,” he informed her as they settled down with their drinks. He placed his on a sidetable and opened up the box of desserts, the temptation perhaps too much to resist.

“I admit, I’d never heard of these Erstwhile before. And the fact that the Obzedat would dispose of a whole court in such a fashion, well I wasn’t wholly surprised, but it certainly took me off guard. Who knew such scandalous secrets could be found in that volume I located.”

“I do indeed have to thank you for that,” said Vraska, “It turned out to be more useful than I ever expected. Did you manage to find out anything more?”

She waited a moment for him to finish a mouth full of pastry.

“Mmph,” he agreed, taking a saucer from the tea tray and putting the remainder of his cake down. He pulled out a handkerchief and gently dabbed away the strawberry glaze off his face.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, “I, err, skipped breakfast. Yes, we did find out more about the Erstwhile for you, however before I pass on any of that information, we need to come to an agreement. A contract if you will.”

Orzhov and their contracts. Well, she’d come here expecting that. She’d even read up on the subject.

“What is Mistress Teysa asking for in return?” she replied, getting straight to the point. Tomik smiled, seemingly enjoying her bluntness.

“Open practice rights in the Undercity,” he replied, “At the moment, it is far too dangerous to run guild colours in the capital, and all major built up areas down there. The devkarin get incredibly antsy if their authority is being questioned, and they will shut premises down if they suspect they are benefiting the Orzhov rather than the Golgari. What Mistress Teysa requires in exchange for this information, is the permission to run our banks and our forges, without the need for secrecy.”
“Do you have the exact wording in writing?” Vraska asked. That didn’t seem like a lot and therefore she was sure she was missing something. The Orzhov were already practicing in the Undercity, they just wanted to do so openly? There had to be a catch.

“Of course, take a look, I wrote this up myself.”

Tomik presented her with a page of legalese. The language was alphabet soup but at least the handwriting was very pleasant and easy to read. It more or less said what he’d just explained. They wanted the Orzhov to be able to practice in the Undercity without persecution. To be allowed to run their banks, mints, and debt centres in the Undercity under their official guild insignia. They also wished to submit their Undercity offices to the inspection of Undercity law rather than that of the law above ground. Vraska had the distinct feeling that this was because Undercity law was a lot more lenient on such things as necromancy. The contract mentioned flesh-stitching in multiple places, which she was led to believe was the process in which thrulls were made. There were certainly many advantages to Orzhov businesses working away from the eyes of the Boros or Azorius.

“I have a request of my own,” she stated, upon reaching the end of the document, “I can only agree to such terms, and let Orzhov businesses benefit from Undercity law, if they in turn follow and respect that law when my administration requires it. They cannot pick and choose which law they want to follow. If they want the benefits of being in the Undercity, they must follow the rules of the Undercity and respect our cultural practices. Orzhov members living in the Undercity will not be given preferential treatment to members of any other guild. They will be equal.”

“Of course,” Tomik replied, finally having finished off his cake as she spoke, “I will add that into the contract at once.” He reached forward for the paper and she handed it back. From a pouch on his belt, he drew a slightly crumpled black quill pen. With a flick of his wrist, the once-battered black feather straightened out to an impressive length, shimmering like an oil-slick with a rainbow of hues.

“Angel feather,” he said, noting her gaze, “From a Deathpact Angel. Very few quills can channel the magic of a contract, or alter what has already been written. We would be using a ritual otherwise and I’m not using that sort of magic in my own living room. Through this feather, a powerful advokist can write out amendments without marring a pristine document. Once the contract has been agreed on however, no further edits can be made.”

They passed the paper back and forth for a bit. With every new reading, Vraska picked up on wording that she wasn’t quite happy with. Things that could possibly be exploited at the expense of the Golgari’s innocent citizenry. Every time she picked at his sentences, Tomik only seemed to grow more impressed. The more revisions they made, the happier he seemed to become. Vraska could understand enjoying the challenge, liking the process as it played out. They were very much in his playing field right now. He was the trained advokist, he was the one with a law degree. However, he was being matched by the Undercity gorgon who had never had a formal education. If everything went according to plan, well, one day she’d outrank him. They were there for over an hour, re-wording, adding conditions, picking through phrases. By the time Vraska was ready to sign anything, the contents of the contract had been transformed entirely into one that placed a lot more responsibility into the Golgari’s hands and let the Orzhov exert less control over the situation. They still got to run and advertise as their guild, they could even advertise their services. They had a set of rules to follow however when they did.

“I will give you credit where it’s due,” Tomik commented as she finished her final read-through, “I wasn’t sure quite what to expect, but your shrewd mind will certainly serve you well as a politician. I admit, I left a few traps in there, as Lady Teya would expect of me, but you found
them all. Ten out of ten, perfect.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. Honestly, she wasn’t perturbed by the fact she’d been tested. She was more surprised that he’d admitted to the testing. She didn’t trust the Orzhov, regardless of how friendly their representative might be. When she signed the contract, there was a flare of golden magic about the paper and it vanished in a burst of light. Tomik smiled and put the angel feather back in his pocket. He picked up the topmost folder from the table.

“May I know about the Erstwhile now?” Vraska prompted.

He nodded graciously.

“Of course, these notes are for you to take home.” He gestured at the pile of folders.

“None of the documents provided are original copies, but most were so old or valuable they weren’t going to let them out of the archives. A few of these copies aren’t exactly legal so I would appreciate if they were treated with the strictest confidence.”

“I expect everything we say here to be held in the strictest confidence,” she replied, “We’re not exactly discussing ‘legal’ matters.”

He laughed.

“True, true. But the lawyer in me wants everything laid out on the table before we start.”

He flipped open the folder in his hands.

“You’ll find a set of summaries in here,” he indicated said folder, “But I was requested to go through these with you before you take it all home. Lady Teysa is curious.”

“Of course she is,” Vraska replied, settling back in her chair, ready for the lecture.

Tomik cleared his throat before taking another sip of tea.

“So, the Erstwhile,” he began, “Not a name that’s come up in recent memory. Last records we have are bank account closures dating from shortly after the signing of the original Guildpact. Twenty-seven families had their locations changed to “The Chamber of the Erstwhile” and marked as deceased. That’s almost two hundred individual persons, and their households, all accounts closed at the same time and their place of termination is this Chamber of the Erstwhile.”

So the Chamber of the Erstwhile must be somewhere in the vapor-filled catacombs. It was where those nobles were going in Midnight Under Svogthos.

“Did you find out why?” she asked. It was still a lot to imagine that the guild would just murder off their entire court, or at least seal them away.

“A complete guild restructuring,” Tomik stated, flicking a page over in his current folder, “That’s an educated guess, it wasn’t written down anywhere. In the light of the new Guildpact, the Obzedat decided to start fresh. Disposing of their current aristocracy and starting afresh with more favoured families. I admit this is a brutal way of doing it. If you truly believe they are zombies now, then they have been denied the state of ghosthood their contracts would likely allow.”

So the court had been disposed of in a way that meant they wouldn’t come back as ghosts? That made a resemblance of sense. It was still pointlessly cruel. Vraska was sure those aristocrats had been nobody worth saving, but their servants surely hadn’t deserved to share in their fates.
“I can assure you, this is not normal guild practice,” Tomik continued, perhaps noticing her disgust.

“I won’t lie and say nothing bad happens around Vizkopa, but we certainly don’t go to that extent.”

Vraska was about to ask what the usual extent was, when suddenly she heard the clatter of the front door opening down the hall. Tomik sat bolt upright, immediately closing the folder and putting it back on the table.

“I’m home!” came a call from the hallway, “Got to head out early! You here?”

Tomik pulled a face.

“Yes, I’m here, but I’m still working!”

There was the sound of footsteps from down the hall. They grew louder until a weary looking Ral Zarek entered the room. Without looking once at Vraska, or around the room at all, he trudged across the room and plonked himself down on the sofa. Vraska wasn’t sure whether she was supposed to be here as he leaned over to kiss his boyfriend on the cheek. Tomik blushed and hastily readjusted his glasses, which Ral had almost knocked off his nose.

“I’m happy to see you too,” Tomik replied, “But I mean it, I’m working from home today. Also we-we have a guest.”

Ral finally noticed that Vraska was sitting right in front of him. She stared at him as he gave a start.

“Why are you here?” he demanded.

“I’m here for a meeting,” she stated, keeping her tone deliberately level, “With Tomik. Who is working from home today, like he said.”

“You’re doing Guildpact business in our house?” Ral asked of Tomik. He shook his head.

“Golgari business?” Ral tried again, now looking between Vraska and Tomik as if he disliked their secrecy.

“Since when do you hold sway with the Golgari?” he asked of Vraska.

“I don’t,” she replied, “However that doesn’t mean I can’t work with the Orzhov. I would be grateful if you didn’t pry.”

She was struck by an idea and smirked a little.

“You do know what my line of work is, don’t you?”

Ral’s eyes went wide. He stared at Tomik as Tomik let out a small chuckle beside him.

“Are you having someone murdered?” Ral asked of his boyfriend.

“No, no Ral,” he replied, “She’s just messing with you. No one is being murdered. Not right now. I have an idea.”

He shifted a little, carefully putting the box of desserts back on the table.

“How about you go visit that viashino butcher you like and see if he has anymore of that spicy bacon? Then we can cook something nice later to eat before these lovely desserts that Vraska got us.”
“Bacon?” he repeated, “You want me to find bacon whilst you’re having your top secret chat?”

“Exactly,” Tomik replied, “The best bacon you can find.” He gave him a kiss in the cheek in return, as if that closed the agreement.

“But what if she murders you?” Ral asked in the worst conspiratorial whisper Vraska had ever heard. She merely rolled his eyes at him. Tomik probably had this handled.

“If she wanted to murder me, she would have done so already,” Tomik stated, “Please get over your unnecessary grudge against those two. They have been nothing but civil to me.”

Ral shot a glare at Vraska, who merely raised an imperious eyebrow at him.

“Where is the Guildpact anyway?” he asked her.

“Shouldn’t you know better than I?” she replied, “You can track him.”

Ral swallowed.

“So you know about that then?”

Vraska nodded.

“I’m guessing you’ve squirreled it away from your Guildmaster. So where do you think he is?”

He sighed.

“Still Zendikar as far as I’m aware. Any idea why he went there when he should be doing his job?”

“You can ask him when he gets back,” Vraska replied smoothly, “For now, I think your boyfriend wants you to go fetch some bacon.”

Ral grumbled a lot as he got up and retreated back into the hall. Conversation did not resume until they heard the door slam behind him, the clunk of his key turning in the lock.

“Apologies for that interruption,” said Tomik.

“It’s no problem, he lives here too,” Vraska stated “May we continue?”

He picked the folder back up.

“Of course. I believe we’ve covered the basis of the whys, now let’s look at the most important part of this – the wheres.”

The next half an hour or so was spent pouring over copies of old maps. It turns out that Vizkopa had done through many re-builds, re-designs and even moved once over the millennia. The Vizkopa that stood today was not the same cathedral that the Erstwhile would have departed so many thousands of years ago. Fortunately, the Orzhov were almost as fastidious as the Azorius in keeping records.

“How do we know how much everything cost if not?” Tomik replied, when she observed this.

He’d acquired a set of blueprints for the cathedral as it stood when the Guildpact was signed. There was a map for overground and a map for underground. It appeared that the Orzhov once had quite an extensive set of catacombs. More excitingly, one was clearly labelled “Chamber of the Erstwhile.”
“Structures will have shifted in the many millennia since then,” Tomik explained, “I can pinpoint you to where the old Vizkopa was on a modern map, but I cannot say if the underground portions will still be there. Knowing how Ravnica is developed, it would likely have sunk lower and lower beneath the ground. However if you can get some older Undercity maps, perhaps you can track the location through history.”

That was exactly what she intended to do. She was here to get Orzhov overground maps whilst Mazirek was getting the Undercity ones. When she returned to his house, they’d pin down the Chamber and start working out how to excavate it.

“I must ask,” Tomik commented, “Why the sudden interest in hundreds of dead Orzhov nobles?”

“We’re Golgari,” Vraska replied, “Undeath is our business.”

“Assassination is your business,” Tomik said rather pointedly, “So I can only assume you have a powerful necromancer on your side. Otherwise all those walking corpses would be no use to you.”

“That’s true.” She would give him that.

“Does the Guildpact know what you’re up to?” Tomik asked, starting on another dessert, all information relayed and business appeared concluded.

“No,” Vraska shrugged, “He has enough to deal with. He finds the thought that I might be committing crime, whilst he makes the law, incredibly distressing.”

“So you just don’t tell him?” Tomik asked, through a mouthful of sponge. He had at least chosen to eat with a plate and fork this time.

“Do you and Ral talk about all your guild dealings together?” she countered.

“No, you’ve got a point,” he mumbled, “Just wondering if he’s suddenly going to come home one day to discover you’re a Guildmaster. I wonder how he’d take that.”

To be honest, Vraska hadn’t though that far. Jace was gone and she was too busy trying to make the revolution actually happen.

“How would you react if Ral came home and told you he was a Guildmaster?” she responded.

“I’d wonder what happened to Niv Mizzet,” Tomik replied with a smile, “But yes, I would be pretty surprised, and more than a little worried. The higher you are, the harder you fall. In politics, that fall is lethal more often than not. I would certainly worry. I imagine the Guildpact would feel the same.”

“I’ll do my best to prepare him for it,” Vraska assured him, “I imagine he wouldn’t be very happy. He’d lose my day-to-day help that would be for sure. It could ruin his motivation.”

“He doesn’t like his job, does he?” Tomik commented lightly, “I got that impression from him last time we met. He also thinks the world of you. Which makes sense, but does leave me to wonder. Ral asked me once and I wasn’t sure.”

“Sure about what?”

“You both,” Tomik replied, “Are you a couple? Have you ever been?”

Vraska frowned. When had she ever given anyone that idea?
“No, never,” she replied, “We grew up together, that’s all. He has a very distinct, well, type and I’m not it.”

Now it was Tomik’s turn to raise an eyebrow. Vraska inwardly cursed herself. She needed to stop mentioning Jace’s love life to people!

“I’m curious,” Tomik laughed, “But it isn’t really my business. Let me know when he’s back however, we need to talk.”

“I will.”

She filled her bag with maps and documents, already sure she was going to look through them again when she got back. Mazirek was definitely going to be pleased with what she’d discovered. Between them, they should be able to pin down the location in an afternoon. On her way back towards the Transguild Promenade, she couldn’t help but marvel once more at the apartments. Imagine having a space that yours and only yours. She’d had that once, in their old flat. Now she was just living in some centuries old ruin, essentially freeloadng off Jace’s new title. The whole place reminded her too much of prison. Blank stone walls, endless echoes, darkness that did its best to creep round every corner. Just her and the shadows, no other noise, no Jace, just empty loneliness at every turn. She shivered as she walked. She didn’t want to go back there. She missed being up high and watching the sun crest over the rooftops. She missed decorating things how she wanted them. Knowing where everything was, be it in the kitchen, bathroom or even under the sofa. They didn’t even have a sofa anymore. There was nothing relaxing about that place. It was so austere, so miserable, it only fostered the sense of stress that gathered between its walls.

She didn’t have to go back there. She noted down the names of property developers as she walked, taking in the many banners and signs roped around new buildings. There many estate agents selling property near the Transguild Promenade, many of whom had their offices on the main road. Living nearby was expensive, however as Vraska began to browse windows she realised she had more than enough. She barely put a dent in her paychecks – not having to pay rent and barely ever paying for food. (Jace had it delivered these days and it looked like he’d forgot to cancel whilst he was away.) The occasional book or item of clothing hardly broke the bank, and besides, Madame Zdenka insisted on making her clothing for free. It was the height of assassin season. Money was not an object. So why not look for a home somewhere between the Chamber of the Guildpact and Deadbridge? Then she wouldn’t have to take so many wagons.

Choosing an estate agent was as much of an ordeal as choosing a house. She peeked through windows, trying to ascertain which ones would sell to her and which ones would turn her away. She ended up visiting the ones with the most diverse staff, under the logic that if they were willing to employ a wide variety of races, they would sell to them too. She made sure to dress very nicely, going as far as to don jewellery and a little makeup. If she looked rich, perhaps then they were going to be more helpful to her. It was only logical from a money-making standpoint.

It seemed like she had picked wisely. After a few initial startled reactions, she was led around a number of flats by an agent who looked less nervous with every passing moment. Over the next few days, she ventured into different neighbourhoods, finally settling on a new set of apartments being built amidst two new blocks of offices. Most of the buildings surrounding the area were offices. This meant that during the early mornings and late evenings, it would likely be very quiet, which was perfect for catching up on much needed sleep. The apartment building was an odd red cylinder that jutted up from between the offices like a chimney on a roof. A covered staircase spiralled round the outside like the slide on a helter-skelter. Due to its narrow nature, each apartment was set over two floors, the bottom floor containing a large living space and a small kitchen, designed for one. A spiral staircase in the living room led upstairs to an enclosed
bathroom, and a bedroom that overlooked the space below via a railing. Large windows extended from the floor of the lower level right up to the ceiling off the top, flooding the space with plenty of natural light. It was beautiful, airy, and brand new – this space could belong to her and her alone. Not only that, but the building developers were offering to add custom fixtures and fittings, due to the circular nature of every floor, for just a bit extra.

The space was perfect, the location was ideal. She could walk easily to both the offices and the beetleback station without living directly on the promenade. Vraska took great pleasure in choosing the finishes for her kitchen, the accessories for the bathroom, even the curved bookshelves to fit neatly onto the cylindrical walls. She set up payment in three lump sums and left with the assurance that her house would be finished in the following weeks.

Buzzing with excitement, she split the wait between work and shopping. Her own space! To decorate exactly as she wanted! Joyous with opportunity, she picked out paint-swatches, scoured through antique shops, browsed through craft fairs, collecting all number of beautiful items. From chairs to bathmats, from kitchen utensils to throw cushions, she piled her finds in neat stackable boxes, adopting one of the many abandoned guest rooms at the offices for her own purposes. She would leave all the furniture here behind. It wasn’t hers and what had come from their old flat was co-owned by Jace. She had the time and money to start afresh and she was ready to drown all her loneliness in the pursuit of beautiful things. By the time the house was ready for her, she was ready for it. With everything she needed packed into boxes, all she had to do was hire a cart and some help to get everything up into her second-floor apartment. The other flats had all been bought, but no one watched or greeted her as she led a procession of furniture inside. Her guess, as well as that of the estate agent, was that most people who bought these were using them as places to live during the week when they commuted in from other districts. That suited her just fine. She could hear the quiet rumble of distant streets, but it wasn’t enough to disturb the sound of trees swaying or the chirp of birdsong.

This was infinitely better to living that tomb, Vraska thought to herself as she prepared her bedroom. Hanging up clothes in a beautiful old wardrobe she’d found in an antique shop near the Copper Ladle, she hummed contentedly to herself as she unpacked. She’d brought along a set of Jace’s robes, and some of his pyjamas, just in case he ever needed to escape the offices for a bit. Trusting that he was actually going to come back anytime soon. She sighed as she unrolled her blankets and gently lay them over the bed. Eventually there was going to be an awkward conversation where she was going to have to tell Jace why she’d moved out. But for now, she had her own space, she had a plan and plenty to keep her occupied in the meanwhile. For now, she was happy, she was free, and she didn’t need to rely on Jace for either of those things.

So, what to do next?
Chapter Summary

Whilst taking care of work, Vraska unintentionally meets with two different officials. One proves far more intimidating than the other.

She’d looked for it everywhere. Though all the remaining boxes, through all her neatly-arranged cupboards, even in the places where it wasn’t supposed to be. She had scoured her apartment up and down and finally decided it was no use. She’d left her favourite measuring cups back at the Guildpact Offices and she was going to have to go back for them. If they were kitchen measuring cups, she would probably just go out and buy more. However, these particular metal containers were not for regular recipes. The minuscule silver spoons, bound together in a ring, were the perfect sizes for measuring out doses of specific poisons. They didn’t exactly come cheap, and she didn’t want to go hunting around the Undercity for another set. So, there went her morning. She was going to have to go back and root around for them, in case her next mission was a poisoning.

She had a job lined up that afternoon. An Undercity mission that would take her deep into the rotting gardens beneath Svogthos. It was a Severance-related task, high risk, high reward, high recognition. Jarad had moved his court out of the proper guildhall and now the Golgari aristocracy milled about in the putrid-smelling gardens, as if they were constantly attending some high class tea party. Vraska had been there a few times before and hated it every time. The entire place was designed with malevolence in mind. Why would you include so many shadowy alcoves? So many freely growing poisonous plants? So many vantage points where an assassin could easily have your throat. The whole place was a political arena, ringed in stone and fungi. Sometimes the politics were civil, but other times the arena aspect would come into play, ending everything in bloodshed.

Yet that was for later. For now, she needed her spoons. She took the short trip from her new residence, across the Transguiild Promenade, and over to the Chamber of the Guildpact. She entered via the personal courtyard, the corridors beyond even more oppressively dark after she’d become so used to living in such a light airy place. She really needed to encourage Jace to move out too. Surely the lack of sunlight hadn’t helped his mood? With a slight shiver, she made her way back to her old room, hoping that her spoons were exactly where she left them. There was a good chance that they’d just been shunted to the back of a drawer in their cloth bag. All the furniture remained, so it should be easy to find them.

She was halfway down the corridor when she heard her name being called from up ahead. It was unmistakably Lavinia. But why was she requesting her presence? She sped up a little, meeting the Captain outside Jace’s study.

She immediately saw the problem.

The room was stacked with papers, each pile several feet in height, towering over her and the Captain and threatening an avalanche at any moment. Books, folders, loose sheets, it had all been collected in here to the point that it had completely blocked out all light from the large stained glass windows beyond. There was nowhere to stand. Nowhere to sit. She’d completely lost sight of Jace’s desk and chair. There were papers crammed into the book shelves, on top of the cabinets, spilling out into the hallway. This was a problem. A big one.
“You’re here,” Lavinia noted, “I wondered if you had moved out entirely.”

“That was the intention,” she replied, “However I forgot a few things.” She cast a wary eye over the mountain of paper.

“Absolutely no sign of him I assume?”

Lavinia nodded.

“If I may,” said the captain, “Could I please have a meeting with you in the audience chamber, now, if possible.”

Vraska frowned a little at her formality. Lavinia must want something from her, she had never been so politely civil with her before.

“Of course, I don’t have anywhere to be until this afternoon.”

The audience chamber was in a better state, though the table had been thoroughly buried under a great mound of abandoned paperwork. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder if there was any method to the stacking or whether Lavinia had simply started throwing things about in desperation. There was one corner, only a few inches of table, left uncovered, and it about this corner they took their seats.

“As you can see,” Lavinia stated, gesturing at the mountain, “Things have got considerably out of hand since the Guildpact disappeared.”

“Indeed,” Vraska replied, “You have enough paper to outfit a library.”

Lavinia merely grimaced at that.

“After your prowess at organising so many aspects of the Chamber, I wish to know if you have any ideas as to how we might deal with all of, well, this.”

Vraska raised an eyebrow at her. It sounded like someone was requesting her help. Someone who had previously not wanted her involved with the Chamber at all.

“I thought you didn’t want me involved in the running of the place,” she said, “That you didn’t like the influence I was having.”

Lavinia’s grimace deepened into a very uncomfortable looking frown.

“I rescind what I said,” she replied, “In fact, more than that. I wish to apologise for what I admit to saying on a previous occasion. I apologise for casting falsehoods upon your nature. I apologise for taking written documents over firsthand experience of your keen mind and excellent communication and organisation skills. I declare the law of personhood to be biased and unfit for judicial means, and whilst I cannot take back the hurt I no doubt inflicted, I wish to offer amends in any means I can.”

To say Vraska was surprised would be putting it lightly. She was expecting some half-hearted platitudes to convince her into working here. However, a complete turn of face on everything she said before? Saying that the law was wrong and not her? This was nothing short of a miracle! Usually she wouldn’t forgive someone so plainly Azorius to the very core. However, Lavinia had done something so unlike the Azorius in ignoring the laws of personhood, maybe she was worth a second thought. Maybe she should give her a chance.
Perhaps they could get something done here.

“Thank you for your apology,” she replied, “I accept your change of heart, and hope that all ventures between us will be as civil as this in the future.”

Lavinia nodded gratefully.

“As you can see, nothing has passed through the approval stage since the Guildpact vanished,” she explained, turning to the heaps, “Rumours have filled the Chamber and swiftly further afield, that the Guildpact is gone. And though this is factual, we cannot let this destabilise the very peace the Guildpact was enchanted to protect.”

If the guilds got wind that the Guildpact was gone, they would undoubtedly start to push their boundaries again. Just like they had before the maze-running. Vraska could see the issue and it was a large one.

“What would you like me to do?” she asked. The problem was vast but it didn’t look like something she could fix by herself.

“There are two matters to attend to,” Lavinia explained, “Firstly, we have reached the point in the year, where we should be planning the New Year Festival on the Transguild Promenade. Back when the guilds worked in unison, they would arrange a committee to turn the entire avenue into a great festival, for all of Ravnica to enjoy. With the Guildpact back in place, there have been many calls for this tradition to be reinstated. The funds are in place, but we do not have anyone with the time or sufficient knowledge of what the Guildpact would want, to organise this festival in his place.”

A festival all the way up and down the Transguild Promenade. That sounded both enormous and incredibly exciting.

“We can provide extensive list of suppliers, we just need someone to organise, plan and schedule the event. I promise you will be compensated handsomely.”

Planning a giant festival? What was to stop her hiring all the travelling carnivals and just flooding the Transguild Promenade with them? Give Ravnica the biggest fun fair of them all? She’d get the Izzet to do fireworks. Petting zoos and animal rides from the Selesnya. Theatre from the Rakdos, the Simic, the Boros...Dancers from every guild, even the Golgari, and there could be food stalls representing every culture here on Ravnica! With the authority of the Guildpact behind her, she could produce a spectacle unlike the district had ever seen before. The authority would be hers to make thousands of people happy!

“I will do my best,” she told Lavinia, “Please give me the relevant paperwork as soon as possible.”

Lavinia nodded.

“Second matter,” she looked up at the immense piles of paper.

“Is all this. What do we do with it? The longer these go unanswered, the more people are going to speculate and it’s already been months.”

Vraska stared at the nearest piles. It was a series of planning applications for new subway stations in the Second District. Did Jace really need to sign those? Did he really need to oversee all of these in person?

“These,” she stated, pointing at the planning applications, “These have been checked by the
best experts the civil planning authorities have to offer, correct?”

Lavinia took a look at the papers in question and swiftly agreed.

“Why don’t we trust them?” Vraska asked, “So many of these have already been checked through to the highest level of scrutiny. They have been picked through by people far more technically knowledgeable than Jace in these areas. Why can’t we just trust them and put them into practice as is?”

Lavinia sighed, her gaze looked slightly pained.

“You speak sense, however there is procedure to be taken into account,” she replied, “By guildpact law, all major changes affecting cross-guild interests must receive the Guildpact’s signature to be passed into effect. He doesn’t even need to have read them; the authorities just want to see that signature.”

Well, there was a very easy solution for that.

“I have an idea,” Vraska began, “However, you aren’t going to like it.”

She raised an eyebrow at her.

“We don’t have many options.”

Vraska placed her hands on the only spare bit of table. She really wasn’t going to like this but it did seem like the best solution to the situation at hand.

“With the exception of magically-creating laws, the signature is mostly a formality, correct?” she continued.

Lavinia nodded.

“Well, that leads us with two possible options. I assume I’m correct in saying that the Azorius has equipment which allows them to either sign multiple documents at once, or transfer a line of text from one paper to another?”

Lavinia grimaced.

“You are correct. We have both spells and enchanted stationary for those purposes.”

“Well,” Vraska said, “If we trust the experts that produced these documents, we can simply find an example of Jace’s signature, and copy it onto all of these.”

She gestured at the mountain of legalese.

“Either that, or we simply copy the signature ourselves. I was there when Jace designed his signature, I even helped him with that. I could sign it myself very easily.”

“That would be forgery,” Lavinia declared quickly, “We cannot pretend to be the Guildpact no more than we can sign things in his name.”

Vraska leaned back in her chair.

“We wouldn’t be doing anything he wouldn’t. You know, if it isn’t a law, he doesn’t bother to read it. He’ll trust his cherry-picked team of officials who wrote the thing and sign it blind. He’d just slap his signature on it, so why can’t we follow his perfectly-legal example? Just copy his
signature over. If we use a signature that was definitely made by him, it’s not forgery. If we’re doing what he does, it’s not illegal. Who’s going to arrest us? If the blame lies anywhere, it’s with him for leaving us in this state.”

Lavinia bit her lip.

“The law is not meant to be bent in such a fashion,” she replied, “That is not in its nature.”

“Would you rather it bend or break?” Vraska inquired, “Because it will break once everyone knows Jace isn’t here. People will ignore everything you, Jace, and I have worked towards. That seems an awful shame when it would have been so easy just to copy a signature from one piece of paper to another. If this room starts churning out approvals again, then people are going to think he’s back. No one needs to see him, because they’re all going to assume he’s up to his neck in this backlog. Also he’ll be planning the New Year’s Festivals. It’s a perfect cover story.”

The captain looked like she had eaten something spiky. She shifted very uncomfortably in her chair and swallowed hard. Vraska merely waited, giving her time to process what she’d said without denying it outright. Bending the law was a lot for an Azorius to handle. The mere notion would take rewiring all the education that had likely been drilled into them since childhood. So she waited, tapping her long nails against the table top.

“This conversation,” Lavinia began, “Does not leave this room. We do not mention it to anyone else, even in implication. This matter could be seen as treason against Ravnica, even though we are acting in the law’s best interest.”

That wasn’t a no.

“It will require smuggling the relevant apparatus out of New Prahv,” she continued, “Give me a day and report here tomorrow morning. I will also bring the festival paperwork with me. You will be paid for your time.”

Definitely not a no!

“Perfect,” Vraska said, congratulating herself internally on getting an Azorius of all people to bend the law, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She found her measuring spoons exactly where she had left them. Unfortunately, the rest of her day wasn’t going to be quite so easy. Her latest mission had timed itself very poorly with her personal plans. She was required to go into the Undercity, to Svothos no less, to finish up her next job. However, that very evening, she was meeting Mazirek at her new apartment, to go over their maps. It would have been so much easier if both engagements were in the same part of the city. However, now they were getting into specifics regarding their revolution, she thought it safer that they pooled their resources above ground. Mazirek had faith in his family and his pupils, but even he admitted that sometimes temptation overwhelmed even the most sound of mind. Her new apartment was close enough to Deadbridge to make the trip simple for him. It was just bad luck that she had to go deep into the Undercity and back in the same afternoon.

Returning her spoons to her apartment, she quickly ran a critical eye over the place to make sure it was suitable to be presented to guests. It was pristine. Some of the shelves were unfortunately a little empty, but she’d done her best to display her possessions in a manner that pleased her, and hopefully new arrivals. Last weekend, she’d added some hanging baskets beside the windows, complete with sprinkler charms for automated watering, and but also they added a splash of colour to the space. Admittedly, a lot of her display pieces were rather shiny. Old nick-nacks such as jewellery boxes, globes and brass figures lined the shelves, accompanying her book collections, all
sorted neatly in alphabetical order by title, not author, for ease of finding them. Her collection of maps and documents from Tomik were concealed in her bedroom in a large wooden jewellery chest, which had a hidden compartment, underneath the velvet layer bearing her few items of jewellery. Content that she had all she needed, she locked the door behind her and set off for the Undercity.

Korozda, the maze of decay, was quite easy to navigate once you knew how. It was mainly there as a place for clandestine meetings and making sure outsiders never got to the Golgari’s guildhall. There was something charming about it, Vraska thought. The fact was that this labyrinth had managed to remain here for hundreds, if not thousands of years, when so much of the Undercity had fallen apart or been built on top of. Anything that could stand such a challenging test of time, was worth some admiration. Though the bored looking kraul guards that patrolled its winding passages, didn’t look very enthusiastic about their roles in history. They looked generally disgusted with their lot in life as they merely nodded at Vraska as she passed, not even bothering to raise their spears.

She felt their disgust quite plainly when she reached the gardens. There was beauty in all nature, even if it was entirely composed of fungi and lichen. However, Jarad and his court had somehow managed to make an abomination out of perfectly good moss and mushrooms. The gardens had once been a large hall, now stripped of its roof, but the pillars, arches and alcoves all remained. Most paths were filled in shadow, perfect for the darkness-dwelling liches and devkarin who could see despite the low light. Vraska could see perfectly well as she entered an archway strung with two bent corpses. They had been decked out in dresses made entirely out of fungi, growing off their suspended bodies like foul vertical flowerbeds. The dead elves’ faces had been left unobscured, but their mouths and eyes had been sewn shut. Vraska gave a little shudder as she was forced to pass between them. They had the finest gardeners and fungal-mages at their disposal and they decided to create this?! She understood that it was a warning from the court to those who would defy them, but it was still horrific.

The rest of the garden wasn’t much better. She had already resolved to spend as little time as possible within its crumbling walls. Her client, no doubt another terrible scheming noble, had arranged a meeting with her victim, to make sure they were easily found. This made for a simple assassination, for the target showed up at the meeting place, but the client did not. It was a simple matter for Vraska to shroud herself in the shadows of an alcove, wait for the target, petrify the shocked lich Lady, and then carry on her way.

Or so she had hoped.

The actual assassination went as smooth as butter. The lich now stood like an ornamental statue in a bed full of colourful fungi. Vraska was sure, with a bit of dressing, she could blend in straight with the garden. Vraska left as silently as she came, blending in with the darkness that swamped the gardens regardless of the day or night. She was halfway back to the grisly entrance when suddenly she found herself greeted by a round of applause.

From underneath a gilt archway with gold lettering set into the stone, emerged a tall skeletal figure. His leathery skin was overgrown with fungi, giving him the appearance of wearing studded armour and great spiked shoulder pieces. Real metal armour had been fastened about his waist in a grand belt-plate, bound by thick strips of hide and hung with a tattered mouldering skirt. His skull-like face was framed in a grand headpiece made of fungi and human bone. In one hand, he held a staff, at least six feet in length and topped with an outcropping of particularly rare mushrooms that belied their expense with their plain brown hue.

Vraska recognised him at once. She had seen him before, from a distance. Even then, she had
dearly wished to wipe the skeletal grin off his undead face.

“Vraska of the Ochran,” stated Jarad, Guildmaster of the Golgari, Ruler of the Ochran, Tyrant of the Undercity.

He continued to slowly clap as he approached, knocking one hand against the other which gripped his staff. Vraska could feel many pairs of eyes around her, some from under the gilt arch, others in the shadows. She was utterly surrounded. There was nothing she could do. No chance that she would survive turning her gaze on Jarad. For a moment she considered that her client had set her up for this. She was going to have to be careful to get out of here with her life.

She started with a bow.

“Guildmaster Jarad,” she replied, “It is an honour your Lordship.”

The forced deference made her feel sick to her stomach.

“You have done good work,” the lich replied, “Your disposal of Lady Jir was satisfactorily swift. It has been too long since this court was kept trimmed by the Severance.”

He was her client. Vraska had to avoid gritting her teeth in fury. She did not want to do his bidding. She refused to bow down to the man who had destroyed her home and let her mother be taken by the Azorius. She would not simper before the man who perpetuated all the suffering that plagued their city. But she had no choice. If she died now, there would be no revolution.

“It was my pleasure,” she replied, “To put my talent to use for the good of the Swarm.”

She hated this. She hated this so much! Her heart was beating hard in her chest. It was simper or die, but that didn’t mean she was happy about it.

“You are indeed an asset to the Swarm,” said Jarad. He had finally ceased his clapping. Behind him, half a dozen more liches emerged from the arch, sporting near identical gowns and coats, mouldering bones on display between artful rips in the fabric. Vraska could hear footfalls behind her but did not dare take her eyes off the Guildmaster.

“Lady Jir dared to oppose the progress of the Kingdom of Rot,” Jarad declared, more to his court than to Vraska in front of him.

“She dared to oppose my grip upon this fair land. Now she sits in the splendour she earned – as a monument to the folly of defying me. Here.”

He pointed one bony figure at Vraska.

“Is the weapon of your demise if you stray from your assigned path. This gorgon cares not for your bonds upon the earth, the baubles that keeps your soul among us. Defy your guild and you will be a mere stone pillar for the rot to consume. Do you understand?!”

There were many murmur amongst the assembled aristocracy. Now Vraska understood the purpose of her visit. Jarad wanted to use her to threaten his nobles. To provide an example of this Lady Jir, to scare them into line. She did not appreciate being used like a beating stick. Like a dog on a chain to intimidate others into service. She did not want to be a figure of fear. Occasionally perhaps, when it suited her own means, but not for Jarad. She was not his sword or shield. She was not his possession to display at willful nobles. She was her own person. And if all went to plan, his demise.
Of course she couldn’t say any of that, or he’d definitely kill her there and then.

“Do you understand?!” he demanded of his court.

There were a few voices proclaiming their agreement. There were even more murmurs. Vraska had no choice but to wait. She could feel her pulse at the back of her head, her anger and fear swiftly giving rise to a piercing headache. They had seen her. Could she go now?

Jarad knocked his staff against the ground and suddenly there was a chorus of assent, each lord and lady eager to proclaim their loyalty to him. Satisfied, the Guildmaster turned back into the archway.

“You are dismissed,” he exclaimed.

Vraska wasn’t sure if he was talking to her or his court, but knew an opportunity when she saw it. On swift and silent feet, she returned to the shadows, aiming for the entrance, speeding into a sprint the closer she got. She did not appreciate being made an example of. She was sure Mazirek would sympathise with her rage when she met with him later. The sooner she could get rid of that pompous bag of bones the better!

Jarad’s days were numbered. Perhaps those were weeks, or maybe months, but his undeath had become increasingly finite.

He would fall. His garden would grow around him. His corpse would return to earth, as new life surround it, absorbing into the mire.

His reign would be over.

No more gorgons would be used as tools

His throne would be hers.
Proud

Chapter Summary

After escaping the rotting gardens, Vraska meets Mazirek at her own apartment. There she comes to an important realisation. Even if the world has tried to strip her of every privilege life has to offer, she will always have one thing. Her Pride.

Content warning for Gore. The chapter covers the canonical story "The Pride of the Kraul."

By the time she was back above ground, Vraska was fuming. That good for nothing bag of bones didn’t even know she was plotting against him, but he’d gone and made it harder nevertheless! He’d made it so every member of the Golgari court knew who she was, stripping all menace and secrecy her name could afford her. They would all assume she was his puppet, his weapon, no more than a sword to threaten others with. Whilst being underestimated would be convenient, it was if he had taken a hammer to her pride. All those foppish aristocrats saw her as no more than a tool, a monster to sick on people who they didn’t like. She was a person damn it! Sure she looked like a monster and killed people like a monster, and had weird airs and graces like a monster, but she was a living breathing person. Someone who deserved to be treated with dignity! She told herself that again and again, trying to convince herself as she took a beetle back to the Transguild Promenade. She was a person. A person. Not a weapon. Not a killing machine. Not a tool. A person. Not a monster! A person!

She gritted her teeth as she took the short walk back to her apartment. She didn’t have much time until Mazirek would be joining her and she wanted to pick up some fresh tea leaves on the way back. Her hands shook as she handed over a few zinos for a packet, passing through the market as a hooded figure, though the anonymity only served to make her feel worse. Oh for a Ravnica where she didn’t have to hide what she was just to buy tea! She had no hopes of changing anything above ground. Most places in the Undercity she was fine to walk around as she was. Still, when she became Guildmaster… Well, she’d get the personhood laws changed for a start. As a Guildmaster who was best friends with the Living Guildpact, she would have so much sway over how her guild was treated. Maybe she could confirm all of Lavinia’s worst fears, exert her influence over Jace to improve the lives of so many who were deemed too monstrous to live free. The very thought of trying to manipulate Jace made her instantly feel terrible. No. Never. She’d do it the legal way though.

Once home, she changed into a more comfortable outfit and pulled out the maps and documents from their hiding spot. Putting the kettle on, she took her new teaset out of its box. Glossy black cups and saucers with a gold trim about the edges – nowhere near as ostentatious as anything she’d seen in an Orzhov establishment. Next to Tomik Vrona’s tea set it was quite plain. It suited her perfectly though – elegant, a little classy, with no need for excess. Reasonably-priced too.

By the time Mazirek arrived, she was set up in her living room. He came cloaked, but it was hard for a kraul to pass as unnoticed as someone human-shaped, even if they were shrouded in dark material. She hung the garment up for him and gestured him over to a seat. Settling comfortably, she poured tea, allowing Mazirek to add as much sugar as he so pleased. Apparently he’d been experimenting and he liked it just as sweet as his grandmother. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder if
liking exceptionally sweet things was an insectile trait. Many insects liked nectar and honey. However, she didn’t think it was polite to ask.

He was indeed thrilled at her collection of maps, having brought many of his own. They covered the coffee table and many small side tables, with rolls of parchment and slightly crumpled documents. Using several large sheets of tracing paper, they were able to match one map to another, slowly whittling down possible locations for the Chamber of the Erstwhile. The passage from Midnight Under Svogthos, and Mazirek’s maps of necrotic vapor rivers, had given them six potential locations. They started topside but as far back as they could go. First they had to locate the original Vizkopa, back shortly after the signing of the Guildpact. Tomik had helpfully pinpointed this for them, meaning they had to correlate that location to its Undercity counterpart to find the catacombs. Mazirek had found maps dating back to a decade after the Guildpact. They were old and faded, but they managed to roughly locate the catacombs to an area that contained two out of the six original places of interest. Then came the tricky part. Every structure in Ravnica, be it manmade or natural, shifted with time as more was built atop of it. They had to work out whether the catacombs’ location had shifted north, towards a large settlement, or west, deeper into the horror-infested wilds. They marked significant landmarks on their maps, including what they guessed to be the river from Midnight under Svogthos, as well as a long-lost arch that would have been used an entry point for the doomed aristocrats. The arch was marked on many maps as an entry point for outsiders, on a few there was a guard station nearby. They traced the arch through several maps, keeping note of the river before they realised that yes, the catacombs were underneath the wilds now the habitat for many Undercity nasties such as giant spiders and crawling horrors. Using the map of the old Vizkopa, they calculated the distance between the exit of the bank to the entrance to the catacombs. Of course this could have changed, but this would give them a rough idea how much distance would be between its wreckage, no doubt still down there, to the entrance the Wyrmheart Gang had sealed. They talked for hours, going back and forth until they finally had a small circle on their most modern maps, encompassing about half a mile of territory.

“I will send search parties to excavate the site,” chittered Mazirek, “Heavily armed of course, those parts are dangerous.”

“I could hire some guards, if you think that would help,” Vraska offered. Mazirek shook his head.

“Your concern is appreciated; however a party of my own students would be well equipped to handling themselves out there. They know how to control and drive back the beasts, their magic will be fuelled by the vapors, for which they have built up an immunity.”

They finally leaned back from their maps. Vraska couldn’t help but feel like they were finally getting somewhere. This was progress, a lot of progress. She poured them both more tea as she commented:

“Perhaps we’ll have our army.”

Mazirek let out a buzz of contentment.

“Indeed, though it surely is your army. I wish to only be its general and continue to lead my people.”

“And you will,” she promised. A thought struck her. Mazirek had made it very plain that he didn’t wish to rule the Golgari, only work by her side. However, he was already the Lord of all kraul, why was being Guild leader more intimidating than that?

“Excuse me my curiosity,” she said, “But does your responsibility ever intimidate you?”
“I was born for my duty,” he replied, his words interspersed with clicks, “The kraul can only function with a sole leader in their hive. I have spent my life learning our ways, our culture, our tradition. I have trained relentlessly to become a death priest. When the time came, I was fully prepared to lead my people. No other holds the talents I do. It is only natural that I lead.”

“Hm, some might call me egotistical, but I cannot help but hold the same resolve,” said Vraska with a small smile, “I am the one who can kill Jarad, so I feel it is my duty to do so. I don’t think my pride would let be any other way.”

“We kraul have no concept of pride,” Mazirek continued, his head cocked a little in confusion, “We serve the collective, the good of all. What is the purpose of pride to us?”

Vraska set her cup back in her saucer and leaned back in her armchair. She folded her arms, and let out a sigh. It was a good question. What was the purpose of pride? What did she use it for? She thought back on that horrid encounter in Jarad’s rotting gardens. Her righteous fury, born of her need to assert her person-hood over those foul devkarin liches.

“Throughout my life,” she mused, “Many have made the mistake of not taking me seriously. They view me as a tool, a means to an end. Not a person but a thing.”

She glanced at Mazirek, willing him to believe in her honesty.

“So, if I am to be met with such disrespect, then I must first love myself with a fierceness no fool can take away. I must take pride in my own accomplishment. If others would belittle me, I will be proud of who and what I am. What I can do is exceptional. I should be proud of that. That’s what pride is for, it helps you believe in yourself when everyone else wants to grind you down and deny your person-hood. It helps you keep your head up when the world looks down on you. Pride tells you that you’re worthy of a better life, and that if you believe yourself, you can bring about a better life for many.”

Somehow her own words stuck with her like nothing else had. Long after Mazirek was gone, promising he would send a messenger as soon as a discovery had been made, she continued to think them over. She sat in her apartment, maps squirreled away, turning scraps of unused pages into tiny paper birds that she hung off ribbons from the rafters. She was amassing quite the collection by now. She’d found a book on it, an old birthday present from Jace that she’d never got round to reading. Ever since she'd unearthed the book during her move, she had enjoyed making the little birds. It was oddly soothing for her nerves.

Pride. She did have pride. That was one thing Jarad could never take away from her. She was proud of all she had achieved so far. She was proud of this apartment, of their previous flat. She was proud of how far they’d come from street rats all the way up to the political stage. She was proud of Mazirek for overthrowing the shackles the devkarin tried to force upon him. She was proud of herself, now set on a path to change the Undercity for the better. She wasn’t perfect. Look at her, she was never going to be perfect. Always a killer, always a monster, but that didn’t detract from what she’d achieved so far. In that moment of musing aloud, she’d somehow inspired herself. She had been right. If the world was going to disrespect her, she was just going to have to love herself all the more.

This pride carried her throughout the night and well into the following morning. She got up, dressed for a long day of sorting paperwork, and left her apartment into the weak morning sunshine. Crossing the promenade, she headed straight for the courtyard entrance. However, as she rounded the corner towards the Guildpact offices, she saw a familiar figure.

Ral Zarek.
The Izzet guildmage was leaning on the wall round the side of the main entrance as if he was waiting for a wagon. There was no wagon stop outside the Chamber so it was safe to assume that wasn’t the case. Under any other circumstances, Vraska would say he was here to pester Jace. But Ral Zarek of all people would know that Jace wasn’t here right now. He had the tracker after all.

She swept her hood back as she approached him, with more flourish than was perhaps necessary.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Ral turned swiftly to look at her. His eyes narrowed at the sight of her but he didn’t shy away.

“Yes, we need to talk,” he replied, “Is there anywhere more private about?”

Vraska gestured for him to follow and led him to the courtyard. Deliberately guiding him to the side away from the entrance, she chose a spot between two empty trellises before saying:

“What do you want to talk about?”

Ral Zarek crossed his arms, and shifted so he was standing on a raised paving slab. He was doing his very best to look tall and intimidating. It wasn’t working.

“What do you want with Tomik?” he demanded. Vraska raised an eyebrow at him.

“Nothing,” she replied, “He was doing his job, working as a middleman between myself and Teysa Karlov.”

Ral scowled, as if her honesty couldn’t possibly be the correct answer.

“What do you want with Teysa Karlov then?” he accused.

“That,” she responded, “Is none of your business.”

Her answer seemed to only piss him off.

“It is my business if you’re putting my boyfriend in danger!” he growled. Vraska sighed and rolled her eyes.

“I am not putting your boyfriend in danger. We were both doing our respective jobs in a business meeting. Did Tomik send you to find me? Did he feel like he was in danger?”

She already knew the answer to that, but Ral’s deepened scowl only confirmed it.

“No,” he muttered, “But I don’t trust you.”

Vraska didn’t have to put up with this, so she wasn’t.

“Why?” she asked, taking her turn to make demands.

Ral blinked at her, surprised that she was turning this on him.

“Why don’t you trust me?” she elaborated, “Would it have been any different if someone else had met with Tomik? Would you have charged after them? Was he supposedly in danger because it was precisely me he was dealing with?”

Ral said nothing. He bit his lip and continued to scowl up at her.

“You broke into my house,” Vraska continued, “I attacked you to defend it. Later, I connected you
with Marian. You apologised and replaced my damaged book. I accepted your apology. That was it. So what else do you have against me? Is it my profession? Is this guild discrimination? Or is this just good old fashioned racism? I don’t have the time or energy to deal with rampant bigotry right now, so why don’t you just explain yourself so we can both go about our days?”

His mouth was now slightly open in a mixture of shock and an answer that seemed to have escaped him. When he finally regained the ability to speak, he managed:

“T’m-I’m allowed to dislike people.”

“True,” Vraska replied, “But I don’t go around assuming everyone I dislike is going to hurt those close to me. You dislike me for a reason. You decided I was a danger to Tomik despite no evidence to support that. In fact, Tomik respects me and was comfortable enough to invite me into your home, but you’ve decided to come accost me anyway. So why?”

He was certainly uncomfortable with her accusations. If she was a betting woman, (she wasn’t,) she would chalk this up to a hatred of gorgons. Maybe not conscious, but he had surely heard enough rumours and stories not to trust her on race alone.

“Why don’t you go think about that?” she told him, “And let me know when you’ve come up with an answer worth hearing. I have work to do. Good day.”

She turned on her heels and crossed the courtyard, leaving him standing awkwardly under the trellis whilst she went inside.

The following week was spent swimming in an ocean of paperwork. Lavinia presented her with a wand that had already been charged with the ability to print Jace’s signature wherever she waved the tip. Together, they went through the mountains of paperwork that had piled up, accompanied by an ever-flowing stream of coffee and more than a few takeout deliveries. Anything pertaining to law-making was put aside in a set of secure metal drawers, which Vraska decided to file alphabetically and by type of law. Lavinia seemed to approve of this immensely. For all their many differences, it seemed they both shared a love of being organised. They set out a joint labelling system, fixing up plaques on shelves so they knew where everything was by department and level of urgency. They completely remodelled Jace’s office between them. The space was now completely devoid of old coffee cups, sweet wrappers and expired marker pens. They knew where everything was now, all labelled, all sorted, all perfectly neat and tidy. It was such a magnificent improvement, Vraska couldn’t wait to show him if he ever came back.

By the end of that week, they were both exhausted. Florence the owl had taken to sleeping on Jace’s desk chair and the coffee was getting stronger as the hours wore on. Finally both desk and audience chamber table were clear. Lavinia called for a member of every department to come to the audience chamber, told them Jace was now napping, and then dumped on them a mound of paperwork each. Satisfied that the status-quo around here had been restored, Vraska was able to go back and sleep in her own bed. For the last few nights, she’d slept in the extravagant four poster she’d abandoned in the chilly depths of this place. Her own apartment was an extremely welcome sight, after a week in that gloom. An even more welcome sight was the small brown envelope on her doormat.

Lady Vraska,

The time has come. We have found our quandary. Meet me as soon as possible at the place we discovered.

Mazirek.
All thoughts of weariness left her. She grabbed a pair of boots, found her best sword and immediately set off for the Undercity. The location they’d discovered was far out of the way, beyond the beetleback roads, beyond even the rot farms that encompassed the capital. She hired herself a trotter beetle – a steed for a single figure akin to a horse but much better at clambering through rocky or swampy terrain. She rode hard for an hour and a half, through fields and over unkempt earth. The trip was hard, she’d never ridden anything for this long, but the saddle kept her in place and her determination kept her going. As she drew close to the location, following the faintest trail of a set of wagon wheels, she heard rhythmic chanting up ahead. Hundreds of kraul voices, chittering and clicking in unison. It was melodic in a way, a song accompanied only by the percussion of mandibles and the beats of hundreds of wings. They were coming from above, where the roof slowly lowered into the side of the enormous cavern. She headed straight for them, unafraid.

As she got closer, she saw more signs of life upon the road. Deep ruts in the dirt made by carts, footfalls, not kraul, and what looked like heavy drag marks where something had been pulled through the dirt. The chanting got louder as she saw a series of small canvas tents set up in a semi-circle around a large pit of hewn stone blocks. Mining tools – picks, chisels, buckets and protective clothing, lay piled next to the pit, their use seemingly over.

She dismounted the beetle and tied it to a block of stone. On swift and silent feet, she approached the chanting. There she saw Mazirek, stood before a large stone archway filled with a odd purplish fog. Before him, on the ground was a piteous looking devkarin man in long robes covered in his own viscera. As Vraska approached, he let out a blood-curdling scream. He began to gag and blood gushed from his mouth and nostrils, more flowing from his ears and through his eye sockets. Vraska returned her gaze to Mazirek. She’d never seen the kraul lord look so joyous, hell, he looked proud. The very earth about him was moving to his song. A deep green slime, inches thick, settled over a number of corpses that been piled up in the foggy archway. They looked like devkarin guards, possibly belonging to the wailing man on the floor. The slime overtook the corpses, spreading into a fine green lattice.

The elf on the floor writhed and blubbered. It looked like bits of his body were failing him one by one. He looked up at Mazirek as if he was begging for mercy. Vraska felt for magic surrounding him. The death magic, Mazirek’s death magic, was so overwhelmingly powerful she withdrew her connection as if burned. Yet she’d gained enough to learn that this elf was alive only because Mazirek wished it. He was wrecking the devkarin’s organs, withering each one by one, drawing the life out of him one little bit at a time, letting him endure utmost agony as his body betrayed him piece by piece. Now she was closer, she recognised what was left of the elf. His name was Master Sobeslav – not a lord but a high-ranking devkarin all the same. He was an administrator, the Golgari equivalent of a senator. He dealt in words and persecution. The perfect sacrifice to such a grand event.

Mazirek finished his chant. The kraul around him, family, friends, students, finished too and scuttled down the walls to join him. Vraska made her presence known and they hastily parted to let her reach Mazirek’s side. The lord nodded at her in greeting before gesturing down at the dying Sobeslav.

He was still alive just. His eyes were decaying in their sockets but he tried to focus on Mazirek as his remaining lung enabled him to gasp:

“The kraul…will never…lead the Golgari…”

Mazirek cocked his head and clicked his mandibles.
“You’re right, and I won’t.”

He moved his staff to the back of of Sobeslav’s neck.

“You have been graced by the presence of the one who will. And you will help me attain the means to her ascension.”

He glanced at Vraska, clearly seeking permission for the final blow. She nodded and with one last flood of viscera, Sobeslav’s brain poured out his bloody orifices.

Mazirek let out a buzz of joy and turned back to the arch. The kraul around him cheered, clapping and rubbing their wings together in congratulations. Mazirek grasped his staff with two pairs of claws and raised it aloft. The lattice of slime, which now encompassed Sobeslav’s remains, writhed and extended its way up and around the arch. It sucked in the vapors, almost looking like it drew breath with its rhythmic pulsating. Then, without so much of a flash or spark, the necrotic goo vanished. There was a grinding of stone on stone, like an immense boulder rolled aside. Vraska watched and waited, sharing in the surrounding krauls’ nervous sense of excitement.

They came.

Just like Midnight Under Svogthos described, they came as a procession of delicate limbs dripping with lace and jewels. One by one, swarmed by serfs and guards as beautifully preserved as their masters, the Erstwhile filed out. Despite their millennia of repose, they were beautiful preserved, still true to form and keen of sight. Their silk gowns and lace trimmings gave them a sense of class and elegance Vraska had never seen from the undead. It seemed only right, that her undead army would be one with grace to suit their Queen. The surrounding kraul let out exclamations of shock and awe as the age-old aristocrats lined up in rank and file – the most opulent military on all of Ravnica. They were beautiful, in their odd ghastly way. The noble ladies with their gossamer veils, the noblemen in fine silk shirts and moth-eaten cravats. The devkarin administration couldn’t even dream of undead servants like these!

Or could they?

She had an idea. They definitely had their army. They continued to stream out, golden breastplates and weapons aglow in the light of the surrounding fungi. An army was one of the things they needed. The second was the support of the public and for that they were going to need funding. Why not strike off both targets at once?

As soon as Mazirek was done answering questions from his pupils and enjoying their admiration, she drew his attention to one side. They went to the largest and most opulent of tents, which contained a great number of books, maps and scholarly gear.

“This is a great day,” Mazirek told her as soon as they were alone, “But I sense an even greater excitement from you. What is it you have thought of?”

“They are unlike any I have encountered in their finery,” he said.

“How much control can you exert over them?” she asked, “More specifically, at what range? If we were to scatter them all over the capital, could you still rally them together when required?”

Mazirek looked a little confused, but nodded.
“Yes, due to this ritual, I have exact control over each and every one of these zombies. As long as they are in the Undercity, they are mine.”

Perfect!

“No one covets beauty more than aristocracy,” Vraska continued, “No one pays more for beauty than aristocracy. And no one would take such a stupid risk as to let a very beautiful undead into their home, for the sake of appearances, like a member of aristocracy.”

Mazirek seemed to have grasped what she was on about. His wings buzzed in excitement.

“You wish to plant these Erstwhile into the homes of the devkarin, to strike when the time is right?”

Vraska nodded.

“Not just plant, sell. We send a few of those,” she gestured to the tent flaps to mean the Erstwhile that were stationed outside.

“To Jarad. Call it a gift, a token of appreciation. Once he has one, everyone else will want one. You, as the gracious lord, will sell them Erstwhile and all the while gain funds for our plans to reach the masses. I will continue to gather the information we need, and then we can pay our way into damming the court’s reputation – using their money no less.”

“And when the moment comes,” Mazirek continued, “We have Erstwhile in every noble’s home. We can strike them down with a single command. It is most efficient. It is most excellent.”

She couldn’t help smiling but widely at his approval.

They were doing it. They were truly doing it. These was no longer wild plans and mass theoreticals. They had an army. They had an income. And soon, like that wretched elf., the devkarin administration would be torn down piece by piece. First their good-name, then their public approval, and then, with swift blades across their throats.
Contacts

Chapter Summary

With her army found, Vraska sets her mind to swaying over the Undercity to her cause. What better way to reach the general public then to distribute the scandalous truth through newsprint? For this however, she needs to reach out to some her contacts. And to be reached out to in return.

“First of all,” Javy stated, “I’m going to need to know why.”

Vraska took a sip of her coffee and leaned back in her chair. It turned out that the bar underneath The Scarlet Rose Academy did pretty good coffee in addition to their various cocktails. It wasn’t her preferred place of meeting, she’d rather do this in the comfort of her own home, however this was what Javy requested and she needed to make sure she carried as much favour with the wojek as possible. Their location also brought Ruby into the mix, where previously Vraska would have preferred just to keep it between the two of them. The more people you let in on a secret, the less secret it became. However, she did have to go to Ruby first to even get back in contact with Javy, so it was only fair she was invited too.

“It’s very…controversial,” she replied, choosing her words carefully, “The sort of controversial that would easily be grounds for arrest.”

Javy waved one hand dismissively.

“I’m not going to arrest you,” she said, “Our previous adventures haven’t exactly been safe and legal walks in the park. I just want to know why you need more information from the Azorius.”

“Because their records are very accurate,” Vraska explained, “If I can find evidence of collaboration between the Golgari court and the senate, then it will go miles for our campaign.”


She crossed her arms on the table, staring at Vraska.

“In a way,” Vraska replied, “But Golgari politics involve a lot of bloodshed. Power doesn’t change hands without a coup of sorts.”

She paused for a moment. She had trusted these two women with her revenge, she could probably trust them with this.

“The Golgari have had enough with coups. Coups haven’t worked. So I’m starting a revolution.”

Ruby’s eyebrows disappeared into her fringe. Javy sat back in her chair with a low whistle.

“What is your life?” Javy exclaimed, “You’re seriously trying to overthrow your guild’s government?”

“It’s not really a government,” Vraska replied, “It’s a garden full of foppish aristocrats, murdering each other on selfish whims, whilst the common citizen is denied everything from a home to
healthcare based on their race and class. The devkarin will do anything to maintain their stranglehold over every other Undercity citizen. It isn’t just time to overthrow, it’s time to restructure, to rebuild Undercity society into a state where any child of any race can grow up to have a future.”

“Blood and iron, do you hear yourself?” Ruby replied, “Personal justice is one thing. I’m not fool enough to underestimate you Lady Death, but you really think you can build a new government?”

“I already planned out the Chamber of the Guildpact,” Vraska replied, “With a little assistance of course. And I have a lot of assistance this time. More so when I start spreading news of all the awful things Jarad and his administration have been doing, throughout the city press. Starting with all the places he let the Azorius purge, and then whatever else we may find along the way.”

Javy crossed her arms.

“Well, that makes a lot of sense. You planning the Chamber I mean. Believe me, I like your roommate, but he’s going to snap under the pressure of it all one day. I’ve had what, three meetings with him over the last year or so? Even from those I can tell he’s barely got his head above water. I can’t imagine him actually planning the whole thing.”

“He’s trying his best,” Vraska insisted, “He doesn’t want the job. He didn’t ask for it either. He’s just…trying, and I support him the best I can.”

There was a moment of silence between them as they went back to their drinks. A small procession of Selesnyan priests passed outside the front of the café and down the road. They took a moment to watch them pass.

“Let’s do a swap,” Javy suddenly proclaimed, “I’ll go and get as much info as I can, but you have to answer three questions first. Truthfully. Promise?”

That didn’t seem like an equivalent exchange. Vraska’s curiosity was piqued.

“I promise, ask away.”

“Where is the Guildpact?” Javy didn’t even take a moment to hesitate, “Is he in his office right now? Is he actually working? You must know the rumours going round. Is he here or are you just covering for him?”

Vraska sighed, leaning her face in her hand, elbow on the table.

“I think you already know the answer to that. We don’t know where he is. But we can’t let everyone know that or the guilds will start trying to kill each other again.”

Ruby looked between them both, a look of immense concern on her face.

“He just vanished?” she asked, “Like, kidnapped?”

“Of his own volition,” Vraska told her, “He left me a note but didn’t say when he was back. Everything was getting too much for him. He was making some really terrible decisions with his personal life, and then one day, he wasn’t there anymore. Even the Azorius can’t find him.”

“And he just left you behind?” Ruby exclaimed incredulously, “To cover his ass? That’s not what friends do. You’ve known each other for years, he’s got no right to just ditch you like that.”

Vraska smiled a little at her indignation.
“It’s not the first time,” she replied, “He does this from occasion to occasion. I’m getting better at handling it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Ruby interjected, “First he brings his kinky powerplay into your house and then he-“

“He brings his what?” Javy interrupted. Vraska groaned. She knew this was going to happen. She knew it! This was why she didn’t want to give Ruby Jace’s name. She counted the teacher as a dear friend but she had the unfortunate tendency to let things slip in the heat of the moment.

“His what?” Javy repeated.

“We don’t know that was what he was doing,” Vraska interjected. She turned to Javy. There was no way she was going to let this slide. If she didn’t explain, Javy would probably just use one of her questions for it.

“He-he had a woman over earlier in the year. They were sleeping together and I heard them, well, she ordered him around a lot before they, you know- So Ruby thinks that might be his thing. You know, a bedroom thing.”

She tried to hide her awkwardness behind her coffee cup. Javy let out a deep sigh.

“Not something I really needed to know about the man who runs the government, but fine,” she said, “Regardless, Ruby’s got a point. Ditch him as soon as get your revolution going. You deserve better than someone who just leaves you to pick up after him all the time. Guildpact or no Guildpact, if he’s going to leave you that uncomfortable when he’s there and this lonely when he’s not… He’s not worth your time. You’re one miracle of a woman, you deserve better.”

Vraska flushed at her praise but didn’t really want to argue this point. She was doing her best to cope without Jace but she would much prefer it if he was here. The excitement of her new apartment, of her plans coming to fruition, was providing a welcome distraction. She had thrown herself wholeheartedly into her plans for the Undercity but that didn’t mean she couldn’t miss him. Was it too selfish to wish she could make change and still have Jace by her side? Couldn’t they work together, Guildpact and Guildmaster? Those weren’t two separate lives. The day he came back couldn’t come sooner. Preferably, before she took up permanent residence in the Undercity. Being its Queen would certainly require that.

“What else would you like to ask?” She attempted to steer the conversation in another direction.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Javy replied, “I’ll let you know when I do. I’ll get you your information, but you’ll still owe me.”

Somehow Vraska couldn’t bring herself to feel threatened by those two looming questions. If Javy couldn’t think of anything right now, there was clearly nothing more pressing than the rumours flying about Jace’s absence. It made sense for Javy to bank her questions for when something more serious came along. Vraska felt rather bad for ditching them as soon she freaked out about having the Malcontents murder for her. However, it seemed Ruby and Javy understood that she was busy and there were no hard feelings. Besides, between the three of them it was almost impossible to set up a meeting. Vraska had moved and had no idea where Javy lived. They kind of relied on Ruby to get everyone together and Ruby had work to contend with. In fact, work kept them all fairly occupied. She had her day job, her side job at the Chamber, and her revolution, whilst Javy had been promoted to Captain for her work on the Azorius murders. Vraska hadn’t asked what fake solution she’d come up with. That would probably make the Boros a little uncomfortable.
She wasn’t going to solely rely on Javy for information. Over the next week or so, between sessions of festival planning, she tracked down and raided a number of municipal offices. The Golgari had a few offices above ground, mostly for recruitment and negotiating contracts with other guilds for jobs such as food distribution and corpse disposal. As money was the great motivator, she made a point of noting down over-ground deals for different Undercity companies. Needless to say, the devkarin owned businesses were significantly advantage compared to others. Better discounts were offered, cheaper labour was provided, and all in all, the devkarin were profiting most overall. This of course would have a knock on effect to wages in the Undercity. People would be outraged that other companies were getting preferential treatment. And those working for the successful companies, would want to know why that wasn’t reflected in their wages.

Her next destination was various offices and guild-premises in the Undercity. She spent the good part of a week trawling through old archives, looking for discretions present and historic. Mazirek’s collection of banned books had been fairly useful for historic crimes, but the city archives proved a bountiful supply of fresh scandal. She found the most injustices, ironically, in the records of the Undercity guard. Spouses killed for the crimes of their partners. Babies being disposed of in rivers once their parents had been caught. Children being ripped from their families and given to the Boros or Azorius for their correctional facilities. She had names, dates, witness accounts, plenty to keep the media satisfied. She had mastered the wand she’d yet to give back to Lavinia. Whilst the captain had stored Jace’s signature in it, it turned out to be quite simple to reprogram. There were two buttons on the side, one to scan, one to print. Vraska ended up with picture-perfect copies of every record she found.

After the archives, she went after various merchants, official suppliers to Jarad and his court. Vraska pulled out receipts for orders, detailing how much the aristocracy spent on luxuries the common citizen could only dream of. What scandal it would cause, to know that hundreds of zinos were spent on wine every week whilst ordinary people dredged the rivers in hopes of earning a few zibs off scrap! Content with her first lot of findings, Vraska went home to organise who she was going to mail what. There were four large print-houses in the capital. One was devkarin owned, and only printed what the administration wanted. The other three however were definitely Dimir. There was no need to bother with precinct or neighbourhood papers, as soon as they saw the stories in the big tabloids, they’d want to run it themselves.

She had collected examples of each paper, dating back over the last few months. From these, she determined what kind of stories each paper liked to run best and sent them the appropriate material. Sending something discretely from a post office was near impossible. The Dimir knew exactly who sent what the moment you stepped into their territory. Instead, she had to stock up on stamps, then distributed one letter per post box, spreading the origin of each letter around the precinct. She didn’t expect this approach to last very long, but she wanted to at least give the Dimir something to think about before they worked out the origins of all this perfectly factual information.

If they knew it was her, they didn’t say anything over the next few weeks. Vraska bought herself a scrapbook and started collecting newspaper clippings, pasting them in with mounting glee at the public outcry to these revelations. The newspapers were indeed lapping this information up. She’d achieved a few front pages and reactions dominated the opinion pieces of every paper. She noticed that the newspapers had started up small so not to bring down the wrath of the Golgari court. Small mentions here and there during the first week, turned to full blown cover stories during the fourth. No story would state what their sources were, but local authorities had been forced to authenticate the copied documents as perfect replicas of their own. Of course, there had been a backlash. Many wealthy members of Undercity society trying to explain their excessive spending. Various devkarin merchants protesting that their businesses got preferential treatment because they were simply better. However, to Vraska’s delight, the papers were pulling out statistics of their own. Factoids
that Vraska had no hope of getting by herself were displayed across the sheets – facts about unemployment, rates of pay, mortality rates, and company owner bonuses and benefits. The Dimir were only adding more controversy to her already controversial information. They were conducting interviews with workers, labourers, with Golgari representatives on the surface and below. The media were going to town with her information and all she had to do was keep it coming. Between her own supply and what Javy was feeding her, she was never short of content.

Eventually however, her secrecy was thwarted. The Dimir was no doubt looking into where their information was coming from. It was only a matter of time before someone tried to meet her, or silence her. Judging by the increased newspaper sales, she hoped it would be the former. Why would they wish to cut off such a source of profit? What she didn’t expect was to find a simple paper envelope on her doormat one evening. She picked it up, opened it, and found a blank piece of paper inside. With a small sigh, she brought it over to a lamp. Putting it under the light revealed nothing. However, when she held it up to the softer moonlight coming in through her large windows, the message showed itself above the familiar insectile emblem of the Dimir.

**Lady Vraska of the Ochran**

It said.

*It has been brought to my attention that you are using our fine establishments within the Undercity to further your political motivations. The credibility and resourcefulness of your information is to be congratulated. One of our journalists will meet you at the Copper Ladle, eleven pm, to discuss what this will mean going forwards.*

*You will not be harmed.*

Signed.

There was no signature, just the many-legged insignia of the guild. Vraska frowned at it. It was bold move to sign your letter with the symbol of your entire guild. You would have to be a very high ranking member to get away with that, or your Guildmaster would take offence. Of course, with the Dimir, there was no guaranteeing that the person she would meet wasn’t the Guildmaster. Jace had complained extensively about the Dimir’s shapeshifting leader. If she had drawn the attention of Lazav, she was going to have to watch her back from now on. Still, it was ten o clock now which meant she had an hour to prepare and get to the Copper Ladle. She wasn’t foolish enough to ignore such an invitation. She just had to pack enough knives.

The Copper Ladle was extremely busy when she got there, music pulsing from down the trellis-lined stairs. Vraska had yet to go down there, but she wasn’t really one for that sort of night life. As soon as she entered, and crossed to the bar, she was slid a tall glass of strawberry fizz and told it had been paid for before her arrival. The barman gestured to a back table, where a figure sat mostly shrouded in shadow. From this far away, Vraska could make out a short feminine figure in a smart black dress. She was a little too far away however to make out the details of her face. Taking the glass, Vraska made her way over. She was armed to the teeth but in the most fashionable way possible. She’d coated several blades in magic-dampening poison and was wearing a bracelet Jace once got her, which he’d enchanted with runes that repelled mind magic. (It took a mind mage to know how to do that apparently but she was sure Lavinia was using the same.) The woman stood up as Vraska approached and Vraska recognised her face immediately. It was Ada, the very nervous woman who worked in Meetings Department reception. The same woman who had introduced her to Tomik on his first visit. Vraska immediately tried to sense any magic on her. She was free of necromancy but there was definitely something off about her aura. Vraska wasn’t magically capable enough to determine what it was, but this woman was definitely magical.
“Welcome,” said Ada, without her usual stammer. Vraska was now almost certain something was afoot.

“Thank you for your invite,” she said, “I wasn’t aware you were also a journalist Ada.”

The receptionist smiled a little.

“Everyone has a hobby,” she replied, “Sit down, we have so much to talk about.”

Vraska sat. Now they were back in the shadows at the far end of the bar, she decided to drop all pretences.

“As lovely as seeing a familiar face is,” she said, quietly so not to rouse any attention from other tables, “I like to meet all situations with the appropriate level of formality. So, do I call you Ada, or do I call you Guildmaster?”

Ada smirked. Her features rippled like a stone had been cast into the pond of her skin. When they solidified, she was still Ada, but the confirmation was there.

“Very good,” said Lazav, still in Ada’s voice, “Ada will suit our meeting perfectly.”

“You haven’t killed her have you?” Vraska replied, keeping her tone level. This would be her third meeting with a Guildmaster. Well, if you counted Teysa Karlov via Tomik as a meeting with a Guildmaster. As Teysa’s ambitions were very obvious, Vraska did. Teysa had enough power in the Orzhov she might as well be considered a guild-wide authority.

“She was very good at her job” Vraska continued, “And the recruitment process is unnecessarily expensive.”

Lazav laughed.

“You’re receptionist is at home fast asleep,” he replied, “Though she’s always been one of mine.”

“I’m hardly surprised,” Vraska replied, “Her last position was in a post office. Though I’m sure having an agent in our meeting department has been quite advantageous for you.”

“Indeed,” said Lazav, “As is having a competent level of organisation in our central government. It’s much easy to find your way around an organised office is it not?”

Vraska decided not to take the bait. He was clearly suggesting her efforts had assisted in aiding the Dimir. As this was a statement of fact, there was no point getting annoyed at it. What was done was done. She’d rather have a working government with Dimir in it, than no structure at all.

“I don’t believe you’re here to discuss my work with the Chamber,” she continued, “As you have that building so thoroughly covered. We’re here to talk about your press, aren’t we?”

Lazav laughed again. The giggle was slightly odd considering she knew he was some weird amorphous creature under that guise of innocent receptionist.

“We are,” he confirmed, “And I feel we must start with congratulations. Your thorough fact-finding puts many of my own agents to shame. It takes a certain level of excellence to get into New Prahv. I’ve lost valuable agents in trying to reach those archives. You also quite excellently dispatched my fool of an operative in the rotting gardens. Jir was getting far too cocky with her position, but disposing of her was quite the hassle.”
“Well I’m glad to have saved you some time,” Vraska stated, “I’m afraid there’s not much you can recover of Jir. My statues don’t tend to keep their minds.”

‘Ada’ shrugged.

“The value of the gift that appeared in you and your mother is far too valuable for us to regret the loss of one pathetic lich,” Lazav said, “So is the value of the hatred you are spreading throughout the Undercity. All your information has been targeted against the current administration of your guild. Not only that, but an army of decorated undead is slowly making its way into the houses of the rich and powerful. There is nothing I enjoy more than quietly seeding the roots of dissent before the main event happens. If your talents weren’t so uniquely gorgon-like, I would say you were in the wrong guild entirely. Your intelligence is somewhat wasted amongst such petty fools as the Ochran.”

“You’ve missed your chance by a decade,” Vraska smirked, “If the Dimir had come recruiting when I was teenager, I would have been tempted. Now however, I’ve got loftier intentions than mere membership.”

“I can tell,” Lazav echoed her smirk, it looking out of place on Ada’s face, “And I am willing to let this pass. You have made excellent use of our media institutions to further your goal. I see that is not a violent uprising like your predecessors, but a full on cultural shift. So, I will continue to commit the force of the Dimir behind this shift, in exchange for a few of your own services.”

Now this was interesting.

“And what would those be?” Vraska asked.

“There is a sect of vampires that are inconveniencing me,” Lazav said, quite plainly, “Whilst I could bury them forever, that would take far too many resources, far too many minds to reroute. They are mind-drinkers, so they put up a natural resistance to all of this. So rather than putting them between stone walls, it suits me better just to make them stone themselves.”

“Provide me with their information and I can certainly do that,” Vraska replied, “Anything else?”

Lazav laughed.

“Your confidence is not misplaced, but it is amusing,” he stated, “I shall provide this information in the usual way for your career. Those tubes were Dimir technology once, stolen by the Ochran, but it is most convenient that we can use them as well.”

Vraska merely nodded at that. She was waiting for the other favours.

“When you become Guildmaster,” Lazav continued, “I would request access to your court. Jarad has murdered far too many of my operatives, even when they show themselves as mere journalists. He thinks killing them will keep me from spying on him. However, it would be so much easier for all involved if he just let them into his court. Besides, with your administration in my favour, we aren’t exactly going to do much harm.”

“Free access for the press then?” Vraska concluded, “Once I set up court, I intend to operate under in a state of honesty. Jarad and his aristocracy act like politics is a members-only society when it affects the lives of millions. Of course, I will do some dealing in private.”

“As expected,” Lazav cut in.

“But I will make most of my decisions before the court like a Queen should,” Vraska continued,
“In front of all relevant delegations. I would be willing to set aside seats for the press in my guild hall.”

Lazav’s smile widened to almost eerie proportions.

“Excellent. Then you have my terms.”

“And you have my agreement,” Vraska replied, “I will deal your vampire problem, and indulge your press when the times comes.”

Lazav nodded and got to his feet. Vraska also got up.

“A pleasure doing business with you Guildmaster Vraska.

“A pleasure indeed Guildmaster Lazav.”

She left the meeting surprisingly calm. Vraska couldn’t help but feel surprised at herself as she walked back to her apartment. She’d been more terrified of Jarad in all honesty, though Jarad hadn’t made it explicitly clear that she wasn’t going to get hurt at their meeting. She knew what Lazav had done during the maze-running, how he had sewn chaos to get the district blown up. Dissent was what he did best. What he thrived off. It made logical sense that he would want to do the same in the Undercity. Supporting her was a clear way to do that. She would have to warn Mazirek however, that the Dimir Guildmaster was interested. There was nothing to say that he wouldn’t try to undermine her, once she no longer needed his press. She was, however, going to sort out his vampire problem once she had the relevant information. She’d never fought a Dimir vampire, it should be an excellent opportunity to hone her skills.

The details came in the next day through her communications tube, as promised. It was indeed an interesting challenge, but the vampires clearly expected their Guildmaster to keep his assassinations in-house. They were therefore completely unprepared to be faced with a gorgon, a gorgon that had plenty of practice resisting mind magic no less. Two vampires decided to make a run for it, resulting in a rather thrilling chase across the rooftops. However Vraska knew those routes just as well as any Dimir flunky. One vampire came part of a chimney stack whilst the other toppled into an alley. It made a rather large crash and startled a few nesting pigeons. At least it hadn’t broken through someone’s ceiling.

Five days after she sent her mission briefing back to the Dimir, Vraska had to attend to her other non-revolutionary work. The New Years Festival was approaching fast and inspections had to be made of all the contracted services. Vraska had written up two sets of criteria – one for inspecting the safety of ride apparatus, the other for food inspection, that would be given to Lavinia’s trained health and safety officials. She had also set out a list of penalties for inspectors who may be tempted to accept bribes. The festival had to go perfectly, otherwise it would look bad on the Chamber and Jace, who had supposedly planned the whole thing. Vraska therefore was not allowing her festival to contain any dangers to the general public – even if that meant disappointing some Rakdos troops. So far she had made only made one concession. Lavinia had wanted to call the festival the City Fayre. Which made sense, it was a festival celebrating the entirety of Ravnica that was taking up the world’s most influential street. Vraska had allowed her this but stuck the word Grand in front of it. This wasn’t just some funfair showing up in a park. This was a festival the size of the Transguild Promenade, with rides and stalls stretching from Vitu Ghazi, to Vizkopa, to Sunhome, crossing Deadbridge and into the Undercity. It was months of planning culminating in the largest celebration Ravnica had ever seen, at least since the Decamillenial. It wasn’t a city fayre, it was a Grand City Fayre. If anything was going to restore faith in the Guildpact, it was this.

If only Jace was around to actually see it.
Vraska picked up her pace. As she walked towards the office, she saw that the scaffolding was up for the many rows of bunting, flags and garlands that would be spread across the Promenade. During the day there would be bunting and streamers and at night, thousands of colourful lanterns would keep the place aglow for late night celebrations. Boros and Azorius law-enforcement were already patrolling the area so the set up wasn’t disturbed. A few troops of Selesnyan wolf-riders had also been lent to the cause, patrolling the local roads. Shop windows were already full of banners and flowers, displays advertising festival sales and promotions.

Just as Vraska stopped to watch the assembly of an exceptionally large ferris wheel, she heard a screech from overhead. Diving towards her, wings majestically outstretched, was a very familiar bird. Vraska wrapped one arm in her cloak and thrust it out for Florence the owl to land on. During her time spent with Lavinia, planning this festival and covering as much of Jace’s work as they could, she had got to know Florence as much as you could with an owl. She was remarkably like her owner, not just in her natural scowl, but in fact she liked to follow orders by the letter and made a fuss if asked to do anything else. Vraska gave Florence some scritches as the owl settled on her arm – the weight not insignificant, but Vraska was plenty strong enough.

“What’s going on?” she asked the owl. Florence bobbed her head once and offered Vraska a leg. There, in the little leather holder, was a roll of parchment. Vraska took it with her other hand, and gently flicked the scroll so it unfurled.

Vraska.

Your assistance is required immediately in the Guildpact’s quarters. He is back. With him are four more world-travelling mages. Much like the Guildpact himself, they are wilful forces, not to be contained with reason, logic or platitudes. They are forces of destruction, of lawless mayhem and have taken over this once quiet and harmonious home. Despite my many years of training in Order, these are not individuals I can adequately contain by myself.

Come swiftly. Back-up is required before I am forced to surrender against this tide of chaos.

All haste,

Captain Lavinia, Steward of the Guildpact.

Vraska stared at the letter. This was what it looked like when Lavinia panicked. Or at least was on the verge of doing so. Upon re-reading, her gaze stuck on the second sentence.

He was back.

Her walk swiftly turned into a sprint as Vraska charged, full speed, towards the Chamber of the Guildpact.
Jace is back and he's brought some friends with him. How will Vraska react to finding a house full of unruly strangers? What impact will the Gatewatch have on their friendship? Is this sudden development for the better or worse?

There was an elemental outside their house.

Florence had apparently already had enough for one day so simply left.

Vraska drew her blade as the leafy construct of stone and branches tottered its way around the courtyard as if lost. It was roughly humanoid shaped, with a paving slab for a head and a trellis for a ribcage. A large amount of the courtyard outside the personal entrance had been destroyed. Deep gouges had been carved into the stonework as if someone had hit them with a whip or a dragged an immense set of blades across its surface. The elemental appeared to be missing one of its would-be arms. Vraska eyed it as she inched into the courtyard, wondering whether the thing would attack her or not. This was very much in the realm of nature magic – too much like life magic for her to do anything about it. She could petrify, or probably rot the creature if she aimed enough shadow at it. However, she had no idea whether it was friend or foe. It mostly seemed confused, walking about in circles around what had once been a battlefield. Vraska found herself toying with the silver pendant about her neck. If Jace was truly back and in one piece, he'd undoubtedly feel it. Trusting he’d been as devoted to their friendship necklaces as she was.

She pushed a little magic into the green gem of the pendant, squeezing the silver wire between thumb and forefinger. Immediately the signal went, she could feel it take hold and transmit. That meant he was here and he was in the company of his pendant. So did she try to push past this leafy thing that was blocking her way? Stealth was always an option but she needed to know if this thing was a threat to Jace. Maybe the Selesnya had finally got fed up of him. She approached it, sword at the ready. Finally, the elemental noticed her. They stood off against each other for a moment before suddenly it charged. Matter decided, Vraska swiftly petrified it, leaving a rather ugly statue in the midst of what had once been a lovely place to sit. Faintly annoyed, she then made a beeline for the entrance. Someone had some explaining to do.

Entering the long dark corridor, she could hear the sounds of combat echoing through the halls. Immediately concerned that the elemental was only the start, she slipped down the corridor as silently as she could, keeping to the shadows. As she hurried, she noticed that some of the previously locked doors now stood open. She quickly glanced into one and saw the dust was gone, the bed in the guestroom was freshly made and there was a large pair of boots at the foot of the bed. Far too large for Jace. Must belong to one of the other planeswalkers he’d brought with him. So they were actually staying here? That still didn’t explain the elemental, and it certainly didn’t explain the fighting.

The noise was coming from the dining room. The door was ajar and she could definitely hear the ring of metal on metal as she approached. With all her assassin’s grace, she slipped into the room without making her presence known.

The dining table had been cracked in two. There was a large dent in the wall and an even larger one
in the ceiling. The remnants of another elemental lay shattered in the corner whilst two individuals in armour battered at each other with what looked like Azorius-issue blades. The combatants however were far from Azorius. An immensely tall and muscular human man, dressed in gleaming silver armour, was currently engaged with a much smaller woman dressed in red. Her hair was currently on fire, and it looked like she had never used a blade in her life, but she was attempting to wail on him nevertheless. Vraska couldn't help but notice a scorched books smouldering on the floor and her indignation rose swifter than the planeswalkers’ blades. She, and Lavinia, had been maintaining this place for months! Admittedly, Lavinia had mostly focussed on the audience chamber. This place would be a dusty mess if not for her own diligent tidying, the occasional sweep through, just to make sure everything was fine for when Jace returned. She didn’t even live here anymore and she’d made sure to change his bedlinen for him! And these strangers thought they could just stride in here and wreck the place?! Burn their books, break their table, leave great big cracks in the walls? She may not sleep here right now, but she had shared this home long enough with Jace that she still had the right to be house proud. Even without that, she still worked here! That was enough reason for her to be mad about the place getting wrecked!

“What do you think you’re doing?” she suddenly announced.

The sudden noise startled both strangers for the fiery woman dropped her sword. That was the least of Vraska’s problem, for at her sudden appearance, the man had lobbed his sword straight in her direction. With a flash of her own blade, she knocked the weapon aside and stood her ground.

“Who are you and what gives you the right to wreck this house?” she demanded.

The two strangers looked at each other. They then turned to look at the giant dents in the walls, the burnt books, the very broken dining table. They then turned to look at Vraska. The man lifted one hand over his eyes and Vraska sighed loudly. Now he was standing still, it was quite clear where this man hailed from. His armour didn’t quite suit, but how he wore his hair, his skin-tone, his features… He was from Theros. She’d been there enough times to know a native when she saw one. He’d only confirmed it by recognising her as a gorgon and trying to block her gaze from his.

“I’m a Ravnican gorgon,” she informed him, “We’re not like our relatives on Theros. We have feet for a start.”

She used said feet to take a stride into the room.

“And we don’t need eye contact to kill you,” she continued, “So why don’t you tell me who you are, and why you feel the need to wreck the Guildpact’s house.”

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but she was promptly interrupted by the sound of running from the corridor behind Vraska. She turned, ready for a new threat, but was instead greeted by a rush of blue robes.

“Vraska!”

“Jace!”

He skidded to a halt in front of her before offering her his hands. She immediately sheathed her sword and took both hands, smiling widely as they knit their fingers together. She gave him a once over, making sure he was in one piece. He was definitely a little thinner than last she saw him. Apart from that, he was intact. No obvious injuries, no signs of illness, no new scars or bruising or anything missing. He appeared to be doing the same to her. Considering the fact she wasn’t hiding herself under many layers of robe, he was probably having an easy time of it. She did have a few more scars, but they weren’t anything life-threatening.
“You’re here!” Jace exclaimed, “When I came back and you were gone, and all your things were gone, I was worried something had happened to you!”

“I—” She was suddenly cut off by the fire-haired woman. The two planeswalkers had just been standing there whilst she was distracted by their reunion.

“Hey, so you two know each other and we’re still here. Are we going to have introductions or something?”

Jace flushed a little. He let go of one hand but gave the other a little squeeze. They turned to face the room again.

“Gideon, Chandra, this is my roommate Vraska. We grew up together. She’s a planeswalker like us, but she spends most of her time on Ravnica. Vraska, this is Gideon and Chandra, they’re part of the Gatewatch, planeswalkers too. Chandra is a pyromancer, Gideon uses melee weapons and hieromancy. He’s done a lot of work for the Boros.”

Vraska nodded politely at them, but said nothing. So Gideon was the Boros planeswalker that Lavinia had wanted to arrest all that time ago. He certainly looked like someone the Boros would take to.

“Nissa is also about somewhere,” Jace continued, “She’s an elf, from Zendikar. She makes elementals.”

“Including the one outside the house that attacked me?” Vraska asked. Jace grimaced.

“Yes, including that one,” he sighed, “I did say I would rather the house wasn’t destroyed. But it appears I’ve been ignored.

“Well I suggest they do something about the courtyard…and all the other destruction.,” said Vraska tersely, “Like pay for a carpenter, or a new table. Especially if they want to actually eat a meal whilst they’re here.”

The pair of planeswalkers had the sense to look slightly ashamed of themselves. Gideon stepped forward, retrieving Chandra’s blade off the ground.

“I know a place near Sunhome that does large furniture,” he said, “I will speak with them.”

“Good,” said Vraska, “Please do that at the first opportunity. For now, we’ll eat in the kitchen.”

She turned back to Jace, who was looking slightly shocked at how well she had put his new allies into their places.

“I suppose we have much to talk about?” she suggested. He nodded.

“My study?” he replied. She nodded and immediately set off in that direction. He was forced to jog along beside her if he wanted to keep his grip on her hand. It seemed he did, for he kept pace, taking two small strides for every one of hers. Once inside, Vraska finally spotted the source of her distress call. Lavinia was sat on a stool in the corner of the study, arms crossed, brow furrowed, Florence sat on a coat-stand that they’d improvised into a perch.

“You’re here,” the captain announced, immediately getting to her feet.

“Indeed,” Vraska replied, “I’ll take over here if you want to attend any duties elsewhere. I have the festival inspection guidelines you asked for.”
She used her free hand to pull out the bulky folder full of paperwork and hand it to her. Lavinia took it, the relief in her eyes noticeable as she was given an excuse to leave.

“I would also like to add a new policy to these premises,” Vraska continued, “It’s quite simple. If you break it, you fix it or pay for it to be fixed. Two of the visitors have already been informed of this.”

Lavinia nodded.

“An excellent idea,” she agreed, “I shall put it in writing and make all aware.”

Jace looked between them, evidently confused.

“When did you two start getting along? Also, when did we get house rules?”

“During your absence,” Lavinia replied, “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

She didn’t wait for his permission and simply left. Florence fixed them both with a stare before following. Jace watched them both leave before his shoulders slumped and he let out a small sigh. As he ran a hand over his face, Vraska couldn’t help but notice the lack of impact his hands were making across his skin. He had a layer of illusion across his body. Why? However that wasn’t her most pressing question right now. She crossed the room and took a seat on one of the low armchairs she and Lavinia had placed in the corner of the room. They had decided if they were going to spend hours covering Jace’s ass, then they were at least going to do it in comfort. Therefore two armchairs, a coffee table and a small side-table had been brought from an unused lounge and into this study. The side table, which had a few small drawers, was loaded up with spare paper, ink, and everything they’d need to officiate paperwork. The coffee table contained a few books, a couple of coasters, but was ready to receive the next deluge of paper when it appeared.

Jace took the other armchair, crossing one leg over the other. He lent his head back, closing his eyes as if he hadn’t sat comfortably in quite some time.

“You have so many questions,” he stated.

“I do,” Vraska replied, crossing her hands in her lap, “Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been up to? Then I can see how many that answers.”

He sighed again but launched into his story without a moment’s hesitation. What a story it was. Inter-planar monstrosities with the power to eat worlds. Alliances of humans, vampires, elves, merfolk, goblins and races Vraska had never heard of before. Battles for cities. Battles to save the entire world of Zendikar, a plane where the very land could come alive and move around. Research into hedrons, using mana stored in the very land itself, and finally an immense spirit dragon who seemed concerned only with the abstract concept of multiversal balance. It was certainly an adventure. One that Vraska was sure had almost cost Jace his life many times over. Yet here he was. When he left, he said he was going to deal with something he’d caused. That didn’t quite tie into his tale.

“It wasn’t just my fault,” Jace explained, “Also it was kind of an accident.”

He told her about a mission he’d gone on in his private investigator days. She hadn’t even been aware he’d gone to other planes in those years. Whenever he’d disappeared for a few days, she’d always assumed it was because he’d gone and hooked up with someone in a bar and spent some time with them. Yet somehow he, Chandra, and another planeswalker who didn’t seem to be part of
their group, had unleashed these world-devouring monstrosities. It made sense that he’d gone to try and fix the problem. It didn’t sit right with her however, that he hadn’t even tried to keep her informed. Not even when he’d gone to another plane entirely.

Vraska had at least heard of Innistrad, but only because Jace had been there before and told her about it. To be honest, it didn’t seem like the sort of place she’d want to go, especially after what had happened to it now. Fleshy tentacle abominations and airborne madness didn’t make for an excellent holiday destination, and that was the only reason why she ever bothered to exhaust herself to get to another world. Even Jace seemed uncomfortable recounting what had happened to her, but it didn’t seem to be the nature of the plane that was causing him anxiety.

“As soon as I was in the gates, I was utterly surrounded by zombies,” he informed her partway through his tale, “T-Turns out the house belonged to none other than Liliana Vess.”

At the sound of that name, Vraska’s blood ran cold.

“That’s the woman who tried to seduce you when you were eighteen!” she exclaimed, “I was right to think she was a necromancer!”

He nodded and continued with his story. It turned out there were even more planeswalkers about than she’d realised. Liliana Vess wasn’t the only name she recognised.

“Did you say Tamiyo?” she interrupted.

He looked a little surprised this time at the fact she’d recognised the name.

“Yes, have you met her?”

“I have,” Vraska said, “She’s a moonfolk, right? From Kamigawa. Her magic is contained in scrolls.”

Jace nodded.

“She was the other planeswalker I met when I was a child,” Vraska continued, “The one who nursed me back to health after I wildly skipped planes whilst concussed. The one who told me never to mention being a planeswalker to anyone else.”

Jace looked even more surprised.

“Well, she’s fine,” he commented, “A bit shaken from the fighting eldrazi thing, but she survived.”

Vraska was glad to hear it. She was less happy about Jace’s description of slowly going mad and being attacked by an archangel. He survived only to get himself stuck in another war, one that was being fought both mentally and physically. Surviving that seemed nothing short of miraculous, but it came at a cost that meant Vraska wasn’t sure she could be happy about their victory.

“Liliana Vess is part of your little group”? she asked.

“Yes,” Jace replied, looking incredibly uneasy, “She-she saved us and she wanted to join. We couldn’t say no.”

“Is she here?” Vraska pressed, gesturing about the space to indicate the Chamber.

“Not here here,” Jace said, “Well, sometimes she is. She comes and goes as she pleases. There is no need to be so con-“
Vraska interrupted him.

“She is a goodness-knows how old adult woman who tried to seduce a teenage boy. That’s not a person who should be welcome in any house.”

Jace shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Judging by how awkward he was, Vraska had the distinct impression he’d left something out of his story. Something he didn’t want to tell her. She’d just have to wait until he was comfortable enough to mention it.

“I’m back now,” he tried weakly, “And the Gatewatch is too. We’re a group who help people out, and their worlds, when they are endangered by inter-planar threats. Like eldrazi, or other planeswalkers.”

That sounded fine and dandy, but Vraska thought he was forgetting something.

“So that’s why they’re here?” she replied, “Because you being away from Ravnica is definitely a threat to this plane.”

He frowned at her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she sighed, “That rumours of you being away got out and the crime rate dramatically increased. Inter-guild crime specifically. When the guilds learn that the Guildpact is away, gone where he can’t watch over them, they are going to start pushing their boundaries. Remember before the whole maze-thing happened? How the Izzet were just taking over places and blowing stuff up because they wanted to? That will happen again. If the Law of Ravnica just leaves for another plane, we don’t have the magic to back up the laws already made. Guilds will start killing each other if they think they can get away with it.”

“I, err, didn’t stop to think about that,” Jace said, running his hand over his face once more.

“I just didn’t want Zendikar wrecked because of me and- well, maybe I should have come back rather than going to Innistrad? But there were questions I needed answered and a mystery to solve.”

“Which were more important than this plane?” Vraska asked. She kept her tone level but he still flinched as if she’d struck him. She immediately felt bad but this needed to be said.

“There will come a time,” she continued, “When Lavinia and I can’t cover for you. For a start, we don’t have the magic to put laws into practice, and our presence certainly doesn’t maintain the laws that already exist. We have spent months covering for you, reading through and checking every piece of paperwork that comes through this Chamber. It has taken over our lives. We have other jobs. I have other jobs, and one day those jobs won’t allow me the time to pretend to be you. That day is coming soon. Lavinia will be forced to deal with it on her own, and if she cracks under all that pressure, I won’t have the opportunity to help her.”

Now he looked like a puppy she had just kicked but she was on a roll now. Words she had been dying to say for months came in a rush. Her tone stayed gentle but he took her words like blows.

“If you and your friends are going be heroes,” she said, “Then why not be the hero that Ravnica needs? Ravnica’s citizens need their Guildpact to stop them becoming civilian casualties in a guild war. They need laws passed so they can have safe water and plentiful healthcare. They need care centres built and schools maintained. They need a figure to look up to so they can believe they are safe when they sleep in their beds at night. Is that not a heroic enough goal for you? I’m glad you’ve managed to save so many lives on other worlds, but it’s Ravnica you’re bound to. It’s
Ravnica that relies on you specifically to be their leader. Politics isn’t a pleasant job, I understand that, but it needs to be done. And it needs to be done by you.”

He’d wrapped his arms around himself as if trying to defend himself from the cold, or protect his vital organs. Vraska paused and instantly felt terrible at his reaction. However she hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true. It was lovely that he was being a hero to people on other planes. But he was dooming his home by doing so.

“Do-Do you hate me now?” he managed.

Vraska stared at him, her eyes widened. How had he come to that conclusion?

“No!” she exclaimed, “No, of course not. I’m-I’m just trying to make you aware of how important you are. How much you are needed here. Of course I don’t hate you. I’m just a little, frustrated maybe, at everything we’ve had to do in your absence. You’re still my best friend. I still missed you terribly. I just…”

She sighed.

“Lavinia and I had this plan for when you came back. Whoever was with you first had to give you a lecture and I was just making good at that promise.”

She got up and moved her chair next to his. Sitting back down, she leant her arm on the arm of the chair and offered him her hand again. He took it. She could feel him trembling, but he didn’t look like he was. His illusion was covering it up and she couldn’t help but wonder what else he was hiding.

“Jace,” she said, her tone turning gentler, “I missed you. So much. Not a day passed when I didn’t worry about you. But I can’t put my life on hold every time you vanish off to another plane. I have a job, I have hobbies, I have friends, that won’t stay still just because you’re gone from my life. And everything I’ve had to do to keep this place running, it’s just been one big reminder that you’re not here with me. I did miss you, but I couldn’t stop things changing in your absence.”

He nodded, his hand still shaking in hers.

“Until I run out of time,” Vraska continued, “I will help you however I can. But, even if you don’t like it, you need to be Ravnica’s Guildpact. Let your friends run off to other planes in your place. We need you here. I need you here.”

He met her gaze.


He tried to do just that, but his lips trembled, even through the illusion.

“Of course,” she said, returning his smile with one of her own, “Whenever you want. As long as you get some of those laws passed, my time can be yours.”

He nodded.

“We can visit the festival together,” she suggested, “The Grand City Fair is next week. You can see everything I organised, it’s going to be spectacular.”
“Just you and me?” Jace asked.

“If you can ditch those friends of yours for the day,” she replied, “Then yes, just you and me.”

That decided, she managed to persuade him into starting on his work. Perhaps he was motivated by her company. She stayed with him that afternoon, explaining the changes they’d made to his office, and guiding him through the organisation system. Thanks to their diligence, Jace only had to deal with the new laws. Previously he read them letter by letter, but it appeared his reluctance to do paperwork had manifested in a new technique – glancing over the summaries and simply signing. This kept him occupied for a few days, as she kept up a running supply of food, coffee and encouragement. She took up the coffee table in his study with last minute festival preparations. Occasionally, they would interrupted by their visitors, but Vraska couldn’t help but notice that Chandra and Gideon were avoiding her. Perhaps she’d scared them off with her display of authority in the dining room. Perhaps they had decided who really ran this household and it wasn’t Jace. She didn’t exactly like how this had turned out. She wanted them to stop wrecking the place, but she didn’t want to be a figure of fear. If they thought she was in control, then they may lose respect for Jace. Her first introduction to them had been rather harsh, so perhaps she could make amends. She hadn’t even seen the elf who was supposed to be about. She couldn’t help but wonder if Chandra and Gideon had told her to stay away.

As the weekend approached, Vraska decided to make an effort with Jace’s weird new friends. She didn’t exactly know why she had decided that afternoon tea would be a worthwhile bonding activity, however it kept them all in the same room where she could see them. Whether it went well, or ended in complete disaster, she was sure Jace would appreciate the efforts she was making. Well, if Jace was actually there.

She, Gideon, Chandra and Nissa were all sat round the new dining room table. She had supplied a large quantity of tea and Ravnican delicacies – from the Undercity and over ground, to make sure all of Ravnica was represented. Most of these delights were cake, but she had managed to find a caterer who could produce her a platter of savoury pastries on a day's notice. She had boiled many pots of tea in the fine Guildpact office china and had even gone as far as to dress nicely for the occasion. An occasion that didn’t seem to be happening because two members of the Gatewatch were missing.

“Well, I can’t have gone far, I saw them earlier,” mumbled Chandra through a mouthful of cake. She had taken to sweet mushroom puffs like a bear to honey, Vraska counted that as one success.

Gideon sighed. Vraska had never seen a teacup look so small in a man’s hand before. However, Gideon had refused her offer of a coffee mug, stating that it wouldn’t be proper. He set the cup back on its saucer as he got up from his seat.

“They can’t have gone far, I saw them earlier,” he stated, “Let me go find them. I will return shortly.”

Everyone else at the table watched him go. Vraska had decided she didn’t mind Gideon after their initial confrontation. She reckoned Javy would like him immensely, she could see why the Boros had taken to him. He was a matter of fact sort of man, he spoke plainly and honestly. He’d clearly had some sort of military training. He kept his armour to a splendid sheen, and ritualistically trained every morning in his room – which explained all the heavy breathing Vraska had heard when she got up this morning. She hadn’t yet had the heart to tell Jace she’d moved out entirely, so had brought some of her stuff back to the Chamber. Her room was two doors from Gideon’s and next to Nissa’s. She could therefore hear the methodical thumps of Gideon’s training, he’d made
himself a punching bag out of a flour sack and did an inhuman amount of press ups before he
deemed himself ready for the day. She heard little to nothing from Nissa’s room. The elf was
incredibly quiet in lifestyle and voice. She barely spoke and spent most of her days outside the
building, goodness knows where, but it didn’t appear that she was causing any trouble. Jace had
informed Vraska that the elf had led an almost hermit-like life before joining the Gatewatch, so she
was still getting used to people. He guessed that she’d gone to explore some of the greener places
in Ravnica. As long as she wasn’t causing trouble for her or Jace, Vraska didn’t particularly care
what the elf was doing.

Chandra the pyromancer on the other hand, seemed to be a walking ball of energy that needed to be
burnt off. During that first week, she rampaged about the house calling out every discovery she’d
made, from a secret ladder in one of the libraries to Jace’s storage closet full of spare cloaks. She
liked to climb whatever was climbable, poke her nose wherever it could be poked, and Vraska was
rather glad when Jace handed her a ticket to the nearby Mizzjet-races and insisted she get out the
house for the afternoon. From that day onwards, she too spent most of her time outdoors. However
she always came back in the evening, wildly excited about whatever great spectacle she’d gone to
see. Apparently, Liliana had gone to a few of them as well.

Vraska had yet to meet Liliana again. Liliana wouldn’t know that they had ever met in the first
place because Vraska had been in a hedge for that encounter. However, the necromancer was
guilty until proven otherwise. Vraska did not trust her and would have to be overwhelmingly
presented with evidence to change her mind. She’d received an invitation to this tea party, hand-
delivered by Chandra, who confirmed her attendance, but she wasn’t here. She and Jace were both
missing and Vraska’s mind was already ringing alarm bells. Those bells only intensified when
Gideon returned alone.

“I, err, don’t think they’re coming,” he replied, “They are occupied.”

His tone was very wooden, as if he was struggling with getting the words out.

“Why not?” asked Chandra, who was swallowing her third bun of the afternoon. Vraska watched
as Gideon sat back down.

“Is he working?” she asked. Gideon shook his head, hastily picking up his tea cup and draining it.

“No,” he replied, “They are, how to put it… They are presently dipping the wick.”

Vraska frowned at him. Chandra looked similarly confused. Nissa didn’t seem to care. Sensing
their confusion, Gideon tried again.

“They are engaged in negotiating the forested chasm.” He went slightly pink in the face as he
poured himself some more tea.

“They went exploring?” Chandra asked, “Neither of them seem the outdoorsy type. Did they leave
a note? Do you have-”

“No,” Gideon interrupted. He looked extremely uncomfortable. Vraska’s alarm bells were ringing
so hard they were going to give her a headache. She had admired Gideon’s ability to speak plainly.
Why wasn’t he doing it now?!

“They’re riding the one-headed hydra,” he tried again.

“That’s not a hydra then,” Nissa commented, “That’s wyrm, or possibly a large lizard. Hydras
always have multiple-“
“The beast with two backs then,” Gideon corrected himself, getting increasing flustered “They’ve secreted themselves away to-“

“Fuck!”

Vraska leapt to her feet. She finally got it. She understood why a proper man like Gideon couldn’t get the words out. She understood why he was so awkward and why both Liliana and Jace were gone at the same time.

“Yes,” mumbled Gideon, “That.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Vraska put her teacup down and looked round at them all.

“This is really really bad,” she exclaimed, “I should have known this would happen!”

Now everyone was looking at her as if she was weird.

“She tried to seduce Jace when he was eighteen!” she explained, panic rising clear in her tone, “She, a fully grown adult, tried to seduce him when he was a minor!”

“What?!” Chandra exclaimed, “That’s super gross!”

“She was manipulating him into something,” Vraska continued, “Lied to him about being a fan of his work. She was probably trying to take him back to his abusive mentor. Who knows what she’s after now, but Jace is really… easily convinced by sex.”

Now they were all on her feet.

“We will aid you in rescuing him,” said Gideon, “Come, before it is too late. They were already quite…heated.”

Vraska strode towards the door, Gideon and Chandra in tow. Nissa hung back, seemingly wary of the situation, but Vraska was sure three planeswalkers would be sufficient. She marched to Jace’s door, which was locked, and pressed her ear against it. At first she could only hear heavy breathing, but then she heard a voice that immediately set her into a panic.

“Such a good boy for me. I think good little boys deserve a treat.”

It was the sultry-voiced woman. Liliana Vess was the sultry voiced woman. She and Jace were… They’d already- All that time ago- Fuck.

“STOP!” she yelled through the door, hammering on the wood with one fist, the other hand drawing her sword.

“Get your hands off my best friend!” she shouted, “I don’t care what you’re after! Touch him one more time and you won’t even be fit for a rockery!”

There was a moment of silence from within the room.

“Oh bother,” said Liliana, “It appears your pet monster has got wind of what we’re doing. That oaf’s fault I suppose.”

Livid, Vraska struck at the door, causing the lock to judder at the force.

“Call me that one more time and rend your flesh to ribbons!”
She struck the door again. It wobbled but didn’t budge.

“Allow me,” said Gideon. Vraska hesitated for a moment before stepping to one side. The soldier’s muscular arms glowed with a golden sheen.

“Jace if you’re near the door, get away now,” he called out. He gave a moment for him to clear the way before charging shoulder first into the door. There was the sound of wood splintering, metal snapping, and a great crash as parts of the door landed in the room beyond. As soon as there was a gap wide enough, Vraska rushed inside, just in time to see a underwear-clad Liliana vanish from sight in a purple swirl of energy. She had planeswalked away, leaving a mostly-naked Jace kneeling at the foot of his bed. Vraska immediately took off her cardigan, trying to offer him some sort of modesty as Gideon averted his eyes and blocked the view off from Chandra, who couldn’t see past his burly frame.

Jace shuddered as Vraska wrapped the long black cardigan about him. It was nothing Vraska hadn’t seen before, but there were guests in the house. He had undressed down to his briefs, which were doing absolutely nothing to hide his arousal. Vraska made sure he was decently covered before making quick work of the bonds around his wrists and his blindfold. When they had entered, he had been kneeling on the floor, Liliana stood before him in a dominating stance. It didn’t look like he had much choice as to what was about to happen to him. He could have probably run, and he did have his telekinesis, however that would have been a lot harder with his arms bound and eyes covered. Vraska noticed that his emergency pendant had been carelessly tossed aside and now lay battered on the stone floor. She picked it up and put it back round his neck as he blinked at her, mind clearly catching up with the sudden series of events.

“You’re safe,” she told him, “She’s gone.”

She turned to Gideon.

“Could you give us some privacy?”

He nodded and led Chandra away, despite her protests at not knowing what had happened. As soon as they had left, Vraska closed what was left of the door. It didn’t give them much separation, but the gesture was there.

“Jace?” she said gently, kneeling down beside him. He stared at her as if he didn’t really know where he was or what he was doing. He didn’t seem to recognise her at all, like his mind was somewhere else entirely.

“Jace, it’s me, Vraska. Liliana is gone. Your friends are in the dining room. It’s just you and me in here.”

He blinked at her.

“Where-?” He looked up at where Liliana was. Vraska realised he would have been crotch-height on her and only grew angrier.

“She planeswalked away,” said Vraska, “She can’t hurt you right now. She can’t force you to do anything. And she won’t again, not whilst I’m here.”

He looked incredibly confused.

“She wasn’t- I mean,” He blinked up at her, “I-I wanted to. She wasn’t forcing me.”

Now it was Vraska’s turn to look confused.
“You were on your knees, blindfolded and bound,” she reminded him, “Did you want that?”

He shook his head. Then nodded. Then shook his head again. He frowned, clearly conflicted.

“It made her happy,” he managed, “And-and I like making her happy. So I kind of wanted it and-and I kind of didn’t. She’s really nice to me when she’s happy so-so I wanted that.”

Did he hear himself? Gods, he was already under her control! If she’d learned anything from Ruby, it was that consent and communication were the most important things of all when it came to sexual relations.

“Do you like this?” she asked, “Did you want to be tied up? Did you go into this knowing she was going to tie you up and call you a little boy?”

He shook his head, then nodded, then sighed. He tried to meet her eyes then failed. Drawing her cardigan around him a little tighter, shame radiated off his posture – his slumped shoulders, his downcast gaze.

“She didn’t say she was going to,” he replied, “But-but this is how it usually goes. She doesn’t say nice things about me if I don’t do exactly as she says and-and well, sometimes she says stuff like that too.”

Vraska shifted so, if he looked up, they would be face to face.

“So you let her tie you up because you were scared of displeasing her. And if you displease her, she doesn’t give you compliments?”

He nodded. The anger filling Vraska was burning bright in her eyes. At least in her mind, that didn’t count as consent. Consent through fear was not consent at all.

“Jace,” she said, doing her best to keep her rage out of her tone, keeping it gentle for his sake.

“Jace, please, look at me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he did. His gaze was brimming with tears and shame now the confusion had died down.

“Jace,” she said softly.

“Yes?” he replied. She met his gaze directly, fierce gold to watery blue.

“You deserve better.”

He blinked at her in surprise.

“You deserve better than a woman who’ll only show kindness if you obey her every whim,” Vraska elaborated, “You deserve respect. You deserve admiration. You deserve every compliment life can throw your way. You do not have to feed the lust of a disgusting woman who only wishes to use you.”

“But-“ He stammered. She shook her head.

“No buts, just facts,” she said, “You are Jace Beleren, the smartest mage in all of the Ravnica. You’re clever, brave, bold, handsome, a hero even. You’ve got a whole world in your debt. You’ve saved thousands of lives using your intelligence, your curiosity, your ingenuity. You are extraordinary. Please don’t forget that.”
She offered him her hands and he took them once. Recalling the gesture he once showed her, she gently rubbed her thumbs over the palms of his hands. He looked at their joined hands in surprise and then back up at her.

“You-you remembered,” he stammered.

“I did,” she replied, “Because you comforted me when I was down. And I’m always going to be here to do the same, for you.”

He gave her a very shaky smile.

“Thank you,” he said, “Thank you Vraska. For-for everything. For not being mad at me. For-for breaking my door.”

“That was Gideon, but I’ll let him know,” Vraska replied, “And you’re welcome, you’re always welcome. Any time.”

“I,” He looked down at his cardigan-clad body, “I-I want to talk, just the two of us. This evening. If that’s ok?”

“Of course,” she said, “Do you need anything now?”

“A bath,” he said, “I-I can do that by myself. I think I just need a wash and maybe, some time alone to think.”

She nodded.

“I’ll go and entertain your friends,” she said, “Take all the time you need.”

That evening, just as Vraska finished getting ready for bed, there was a soft knock on her door. She recognised the sound at once and hastened to open it, ushering Jace inside. Neither of them spoke until the door was firmly locked behind them. Vraska sat on the end of her bed as three layers of illusions slid off Jace like butter, revealing the weary pyjama-clad man underneath.

Vraska patted the bed beside her, gesturing for him to come sit. If Jace cared that she was in her nightgown, he didn’t say anything. He looked freshly groomed but exhausted. A bath did nothing for the deep dark circles about his eyes, and a slight grey pallor to his cheeks. He hadn’t had those when they’d spoken earlier, despite his state. He hadn’t had them all week, despite how exhausted he might be for the dark circles to get so bad. Now she knew what he’d been hiding under an illusion for the last seven days. Vraska couldn’t believe he’d kept up an illusion for this long around people who were supposed to be his friends.

“You wanted to talk?” she asked gently.

He nodded but said nothing in response. He’d lain both his hands in his lap and was staring at the rug. He wasn’t injured, but his state was alarming. She tentatively reached forward to take one of his hands in her own. He looked up at her in surprise at the sudden contact, but did not resist as she knitted their fingers together.

“I really missed you,” he managed, “The last week, our discussion earlier, it just made me realise how much.”

“I missed you too,” she said, “I’m always here if you need me. No matter how big or small a problem is.”
He gave her hand a little squeeze and let out a shaky sigh.

“I know,” he murmured, “I had to go but, I should have come back sooner. I never should have gone to Innistrad. I-I’ve fucked up so badly.”

“How so?” Vraska asked. She kept her voice soft even as her worry deepened. He’d told her all about Innistrad. However, she’d felt like something was missing from his story, was he about to explain what?

“It…” Jace swallowed hard. He clung on a little tighter to her hand. Vraska’s heart hurt to see him in such pain.

“It’s her,” he elaborated, “Liliana… she’s the same woman who came looking for me as a teenager. The one who tried to seduce me and-and…”

Vraska of course had already realised this, but let him talk it out.

“She visited me, shortly before I left for Zendikar,” he explained, “She wanted my help with something and… when I said no, she changed tactics.”

Vraska had already realised this too. She would never be able to forgive herself for not protecting him back then. She hadn’t known that the sultry voiced woman was Liliana, but she should have acted despite her confusion. She should have gone in, right there and then and petrified her. Her confusion had cost him so much.

“And I didn’t want to,” Jace protested, anguish building in his voice, “But she’s always been there. In my dreams, from the moment we met. I was so stuck in my own head during that time. So tired, so lost, so easily persuaded… I wanted to see whether it was anything like my dreams.”

She gently squeezed his hand, encouraging him to let it all out, to keep talking.

“It wasn’t,” he continued in a low murmur, “At first, it was exhilarating, then terrifying, then both all at the same time. She said such nice things about me. That part was good. But every compliment was a double-edged blade. I couldn’t be kind without being called pathetic. I couldn’t please her without having my confidence wrecked from every angle.”

He finally raised his head to look at her properly. His watery gaze was so open and honest that Vraska felt a sharp pain course through her chest. She could have prevented this, all of this… She’d failed him.

“Vraska,” he said, in a voice that trembled with unshed tears, “I-I’m scared. I thought that was it. I thought I’d never see her again. No more. But on Innistrad… I accidentally found her house. I was being chased by werewolves and she offered that I could stay the night.”

Vraska couldn’t help but know where this was going.

“I’m so scared,” he murmured, “I’m scared of her, of what she does to me. Yet for some reason I keep going back. She’s like an addiction I can’t shake. I want to stop. I feel so used. Earlier…when Gideon, you know… She called me a puppy, a puppy so desperate for affection that he’ll come back to the hand that strikes him. And that’s what I’ve been like. No matter what she does to me, I come back for more. The effect she has on me… I’m terrified.”

There was a fire burning in Vraska’s chest that was slowly making its way up to the source of power between her eyes.
“Where is she?” she hissed, “Where is she staying?”

Jace blinked at her, surprised at her sudden ferocity.

“She rented out a penthouse in the city.”

“Where?” Vraska continued, rising to her feet. Jace was forced to rise with her, as he didn’t seem to want to let go of her hand.

“I-I don’t know,” Jace replied, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get rid of her,” Vraska stated, “She’s not getting away with this. I’ll wait for as long as it takes. When she returns she’ll be stone before she can lay another finger on you.”

“Vraska!” he tugged against her as she made for the door.

“You can’t just kill her!”

“Why not?” Vraska turned back to him, “She hurt you. She made you feel like her pet. A quick petrification is too merciful for the likes of her.”

“But!” Jace took a deep breath. He offered Vraska his other hand, which shook as he proffered it. She hesitated a moment before taking it. They stood, holding hands, facing each other, under the silvery gaze of the skylight.

“I want her gone,” Jace said, “I do. But killing her? The Gatewatch will fall apart before its even properly begun.”

“How?” Vraska asked, “I’m not part of the Gatewatch. I can do whatever I like.”

Jace shook his head, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“If you kill Liliana, then the others will see you as a threat, they might try to kill you,” he explained, “And then, I’m going to pick you over them and there won’t be a Gatewatch anymore.”

Vraska couldn’t help but feel pleased that she was his choice. On the other hand, after her little outburst today, she thought the Gatewatch might be on her side rather than Liliana’s. However Jace hadn’t seen their reaction, it was understandable that he feared the worst.

“I think the Gatewatch will achieve good things,” Jace continued, “I want them to continue, but-“

Vraska couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at the ‘but’.

“But, the more time I spend around her, around the whole Gatewatch,” Jace confessed, “The more I hate myself. When I look at them I see everything I’m not. I’m not bold like Chandra, or wise like Nissa, or even half as strong or brave or good-looking as Gideon. I’m just me and, I don’t think me will ever be good enough.”

No, no no no. He was putting a stop to this right now. No more insulting himself. No more self-hatred. Vraska acted almost in spite of herself. She let go of his hands entirely and drew him into a tight embrace. One with all the warmth and sincerity she wished they could have shared during their time apart. Jace let out a little ‘oh’ of surprise, but returned the gesture after only a moment’s shock. Slowly, gently, so not to alarm her at the extra contact, he held her tight, burying his face in her shoulder as tears began to drip down his cheeks. It was the most physical contact Vraska had engaged in in a very long time, and somehow it didn’t hurt at all.
“You are always good enough,” she murmured, one hand lightly pressed against his back, cradling
him as he hid his face in her nightgown. There was a fierce heat in her eyes that had nothing to do
with spell-casting, but she couldn’t bring herself to let go to wipe away the tears.

“You are amazing. After everything you’ve been through, after all the battles you’ve fought,
against horrors, against your own doubt. You’re so strong. You’ve survived nightmares the others
can barely imagine. You’ve saved an entire plane by yourself and made thousands, if not millions
of lives better by shaping the world around them. Don’t you see how brilliant you are? You’ve
saved multiple planes from world-ending monstrosities. I’m sure the Gatewatch would have
achieved nothing without you. But before them, before all of that. I know you. I’ve known you for
so long and I know you’re as brave, and wise and handsome as any hero of any plane. You are you,
and that’s all I ever want.”

Vraska felt the colour rise to her cheeks as Jace let out a funny hiccupping noise. He looked up,
their gazes meeting, bright blue against soft gold. He was crying in earnest now. She gently moved
one hand away from his back, reaching forth to gently wipe his tears away with the sleeve of her
silk nightgown.

“You-you really mean it.” It wasn’t a question. Jace couldn’t doubt her sincerity, not when they
were so close, so emotionally vulnerable.

“Of course,” she whispered, “I missed you. Now you’re back, I’ve realised it more than ever.
Having you here, even if we’re just working together in silence, Getting to see you every day, your
face, your smile, even when it’s just breakfast… You being here makes my life better, happier. I
wouldn’t change it for the world”

Jace let out another hiccup, his face rapidly gaining colour as he blushed all the way to his ears.

“I’m a wreck when you’re not around,” he told her.

“Me too.” There was no point denying it. Her mood, her opinion of herself, had dropped so
dangerously low in his absence. They were truly better together. Apart they sank straight into the
depths of self-loathing.

“I can’t persuade you to join the Gatewatch, can I?” Jace asked, though there was little hope in his
tone. Vraska shook her head.

“It’s better with me here. If I went with you I’d spend all my time trying to kill Liliana. You know I
would. Besides, someone has to keep Lavinia sane in your absence.”

Jace gave a nervous chuckle, it was more like a hiccup.

“I missed you,” he said again, “So much. I can’t count how many times I wished you were there
with me. But I was also so pleased you were far away from the all the horrible things that were
happening. If something happened to you… You’re my strength. Without you, I don’t think I could
go on. Not with being Guildpact, or Gatewatch, or anything. I only believe in myself because you
do.”

“And I, you,” Vraska replied, “You look at me and see a person. You see a side of me that I can
never find in the mirror, never imagine even on the best of days.”

She dabbed at her own eyes with her sleeve.

“Promise me you’ll stay safe,” she begged him, “Wherever you run off to, wherever they take you,
promise you’ll come back safe. Don’t let the eldrazi, or the vampires, or the angels take you from
me. I need you too. You make me believe in myself…and what I can do. We’re stronger together.”

“I promise,” Jace replied, “I promise I won’t go away for so long again. I’ll say no, if it comes to that. I won’t let them tear us apart.”

He tried a shaky smile and Vraska felt like crying again. He was in so much pain but he was still trying to make her happy.

“Do you want to sleep in here tonight?” she offered, “You-you don’t have a door and I won’t let anyone in here. You’re safe with me.”

Jace nodded. It wasn’t quite Jace’s pillow nest but the enormous four poster was more than enough for both of them. They disentangled themselves momentarily and crawled up on top of the covers. Vraska slid to the further side of the bed, allowing him plenty of space. Yet as soon as he was under the covers, he looked at her with a sense of longing in his eyes. She drew a little closer, with the intention of offering him a hand. However, she remembered her moment of boldness – the embrace. It hadn’t hurt at all. It hadn’t brought back any bad memories and she knew it was because she had embraced him. Only with him. She opened her arms in the offer of a hug. He hesitated only for a second snuggling up close to her, one arm gently around her midriff.

“Thank you.” Jace murmured as he rested his head upon the pillow. As he closed his eyes, he took a deep breath, her sheets no doubt smelling of the candles she’d burnt in here earlier. Lavender – simple yet one of her favourites.

“All right,” she replied, but he was already fast asleep.
Vraska and Jace go to the Grand City Fayre and meet a few friends along the way.

That night, Vraska had a very weird dream. She was in a shadowy cathedral, far darker and a lot less grand than many Orzhov buildings she’d visited. There were rows of shelves everywhere, some book-cases, others filled with various weapons and pieces of armour. She seemed to be searching for something, anything, that could help her out of her current predicament. However, she had no idea what that predicament was. For every corner she turned, she was presented with yet more shelves. They were endless. Miles and miles of dusty tomes, useless instruments of war, all shrouded in relentless shadow. The darkness was impenetrable, even though she could usually see perfectly well in such low light. That was the first indication that this dream wasn’t quite right. She’d had dreams of getting lost before, plenty of them, nightmares too. But in this dream, she didn’t interact with her surroundings like she had in those dreams. She couldn’t see in the dark. She felt slower, less nimble, perhaps even slightly smaller. She tried to peer at shelves and found them too high for her to easily read the spines of the books there. They were at a height she expected herself to reach. Yet, she couldn’t. Lost in the cathedral, her footfalls echoed disturbingly loud. She willed herself to quieten, to blend in with the plentiful shadow. However, her body wouldn’t obey. She couldn’t even get the shadow to move. She just kept on going, kept on looking, kept on searching, for answers she couldn’t find.

What answers? What were the questions even? She had no idea what she was looking for. All she knew was that she had to look. There must be an answer, somewhere, anywhere, to beat this confusion! What confusion? This didn’t make sense! She huffed and stuck her hands into the pockets of her robes.

Wait.

Robes?

As her feet carried her down yet another long line of shelves, she suddenly realised how much fabric she wore. It flapped behind her as she strode on too-loud feet. Her hands felt smaller, softer perhaps, with no trace of her talon-like fingernails. She swallowed heavily in the dusty darkness. The feeling was odd. Her teeth were wrong too. Not pointed enough. Certainly not as sharp. As she glanced through shelves, comprehension dawned slowly as if reaching out through a fog. This wasn’t her body. Her thoughts yes, but she had no will over what this body was doing. This wasn’t her dream. She was in it. She felt it. But this wouldn’t be the first time a certain someone had accidentally broadcast his dreams. He’d done it all the time during nightmares when he was younger and Vraska had always felt flashes of random things when they’d shared a room together. It had never been this vivid before, but then again, she hadn’t shared a bed with Jace for quite some time.

Upon this realisation, Vraska opened her eyes. She was greeted by a tuft of fluffy brown hair, sticking up at an odd angle, mussed by sleep. They had somehow shifted in the night. She’d fallen asleep with Jace loosely in her arms, his head beside hers on the pillows, facing each other chest to chest. However now... Well Jace must have rolled over in the night, but they’d somehow managed
to get even closer. They lay with his back against her chest, their legs intertwining as he fit himself perfectly up against her. One of her arms was about his waist, slotting the curve of his back perfectly against her torso, his hips against hers. Due to her larger height, he had nestled up into her as she surrounded him. As she stirred, shifting to get a better look, he let out a sleepy whimper as his source of body heat left him. She immediately corrected herself, and he gave a small smile and leaned back into her embrace, still fast asleep.

Vraska lay there, not wanting to disturb him again. Especially not when he looked so adorable. In addition to his fluffy bed hair, Jace had a look of contentment on his face that she certainly hadn’t seen in a long while. As he slept, he looked like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, as if months of stress had simply been wiped away. The shadows under his eyes had lightened. The morning sun through the stained glass windows left rosy freckles across his cheeks. He no longer looked so grey and gaunt. It was as if he’d found some sort of peace here in this room. Warm, sleepy, happy… Vraska was rapidly losing the will to get up. Warm and sleepy wasn’t bad. She especially liked the warm part. Resting against him, she dozed off once more.

What felt like seconds later, the sound of trumpets echoed loudly through the room. There was a series of crashes nearby, the sound evidently startling the Chamber’s other occupants. Vraska’s eyes flew open as the trumpets turned into a rousing fanfare, joined by the rest of a marching band. Vraska blinked at the harsh light of day before realising what was happening. The Grand City Fayre! The festival started today. The festival was starting right now! Damn it, she’d kind of wanted to watch the opening, she must have overslept. Not that this hadn’t been nice. She was still pleasantly warm. However, the music being played right outside the Chamber wasn’t going to let any one have more of a lie in.

Jace let out a sleepy groan.

“What’s that noise?” he murmured, before letting out a small yawn.

“Marching band,” Vraska replied, “The fayre just started.”

Jace nodded as if that made perfect sense and he could carry on as he was. Then, as his senses caught up with him, he flinched in surprise.

“Are-are we spooning?” he asked, his voice still a little groggy with sleep.

“Spoonling?” Vraska repeated, wondering what he was talking about. It was definitely time to get up so she turned over and sat up a little, stretching her arms before her as she roused herself into action.

“We were,” said Jace, “I-I must have moved in my sleep.”

“What do you mean by spoonling?” Vraska asked, half her sentence almost lost to a yawn. As he sat up, Jace was definitely blushing under the tinted light from the windows.

“That,” Jace said, gesturing to where they had been lying, “That-that’s what you call it when you cuddle in that position. It’s like two spoons stacked together?”

“I see,” Vraska commented, wondering why there were names for different positions of hugging.

“Do you want to go to the festival today? Might as well go on the opening morning. I imagine there’s more to see that way.”

He nodded.
“After breakfast?” he suggested.

That seemed sensible. Vraska knew that there was going to be a lot of carnival food at this festival. Perhaps it was best to have a proper meal first so they weren’t so tempted to fill up on deep fried snacks and mountains of sugar. She thought about suggesting this to the house’s other residents. However, it seemed the rest of the Gatewatch had got a head start on them. She didn’t see any sign of Gideon, Chandra or Nissa as she went into the kitchen. Merely a few plates on the draining board to show that they had been and gone. When she reconvened with Jace in the dining room, she noticed he was opting to go about hood down today. As she approached, he asked:

“How do you think I should throw on a disguise? Should I go about looking like me?”

“I think you’re fine as you are,” she replied, “People actually seeing the Guildpact out and about will only confirm that you’re here. It’ll stop all those rumours dead in their tracks.”

He nodded, settling down and returning to his toast. Music was still echoing from outside as they sat and ate. The marching band were certainly giving it their all. Vraska wished she hadn’t positioned them so close to the courtyard though. Anyone in these personal quarters were going to end up with a rather large headache if they hung around too long. She’d positioned musicians up and down the Transguild Promenade, written up rotas so each band or performer didn’t have to play for too long. There were multiple line ups, each tailored to the part of the festival they were in. There were more child-friendly entertainers in the soft play area, more bawdy performers for the couple’s only night later this week, and pretty much everything in between. Living on the Transguild Promenade was going to be a thoroughly noisy affair this week. She should probably fetch some ear plugs from her apartment. On that note, it might be a good time to show Jace where she lived now. If he wanted somewhere to sleep away from the twenty four hour festivities, her new place was certainly enough out of the way.

After breakfast, they set out for the fair. Vraska knew where each ‘zone’ of the festival was, but that didn’t really help with knowing where to start. There was simply so much of it, she doubted they could see it all in one day. The safest bet was probably just to wander round and see what took their fancy. There were maps and leaflets dotted about in their pre-designated displays. If they were looking for anything in particular, it wouldn’t be too hard to find.

As soon as they stepped outside, their senses were blasted from every angle. Triumphant music, accompanying a duet of bellowing singers, boomed from right outside their gate. Whenever the music lulled, they were instantly beset by the sound of excitable people – talking, shouting, singing and laughing as they browsed the maze of colourful booths and tents. The Promenade beyond was a riot of sights and smells. A large tent, shaped like a balloon, was visible through the railings, striped in shades of pink. The smell of scented candy wafted like the aroma of a perfume shop and filled with courtyard with an artificial floral fragrance. Nearby, a sizzling wagon, metal-plated and manned by three men in uniform, were selling battered sausages on sticks, deep-fried in the sizzling vats before their waists. On a large podium, surrounded by a rope fence, a pair of acrobats in red striped leotards were performing for a crowd of delighted families. Pulling themselves into seemingly-impossible poses, the two acrobats acted like one body, the upper performer wrapping their legs around the lower so they moved seamlessly as one. There was a loud clatter and a roar from a short distance away. Vraska look up in time to see a bright yellow cart clear the top of a tall coaster, occupants screaming as they plunged back downwards.

“You organised all this?” Jace commented in amazement.

“Lavinia helped,” Vraska replied, “With all the money stuff mostly. I organised, she made sure the paperwork was in order. There’s also lots of guards, inspectors, and officers we had to employ.”
He nodded, staring round at it all with wide eyes. Absent-mindedly, his hand closed about her own, as if he needed something to anchor himself as he took in such a marvel. She gladly took it, taking it as a sign she’d done well.

“Shall we?” she prompted.

“Yes!” Jace bounced a little on his heels as they set off to explore the fayre.

Holding hands turned out to be a very practical idea because they were soon lost amongst the crowds. Vraska kept a tight grip on Jace’s hand so not to lose him to throngs of excitable Ravnicans, hastening this way and that to various stalls and attractions. Even though she’d planned all this, mapped out where every feature would be, where each tent would pitch, it was still staggering to see it play out in real life. She’d created the biggest fun fair in existence! The Transguild Promenade had transformed into a child’s dream – a place where the fun never stopped and there was everything and anything to look at, watch, play with, taste… The most important street on Ravnica was utterly unrecognisable. Sure the spires and buildings were still there, but they had been liberally coated in flowers, flags and streamers. Vraska was hardly surprised when Jace insisted on stopping and looking at almost everything in this little section alone. This was almost too much for the curious mind. Of course he had to see all of it!

Their first big surprise came as they stopped by a petting zoo, full of rabbits, guinea-pigs, cats, sheep, fluffy looking hybrids and even a baby kronch. The petting zoo was mostly full of families, but Vraska wasn’t going to tell Jace that he couldn’t hold a rabbit. She sat on a small bench, a purring cat in her lap as Jace tried to keep hold of a squirming bunny.

“Here, let me.”

A familiar voice came from over Vraska’s shoulder. She turned just in time to see Emmara Tandris lift the rabbit out of Jace’s hands before placing it gently back in his arms.

“There, be gentle,” she said with a smile. She then turned to Vraska.

“Long time no see, I hope you’re well.”

“I am, thank you,” Vraska replied, “And yourself?”

“Very well,” Emmara nodded. She turned around and it was then that Vraska noticed the small train of children she had behind her. All dressed in simple white and green tunics, they were holding festival leaflets like they were precious treasures and were staring up at the adults with wide eyes full of awe.

“I’m volunteering at the Little Root Orphanage this week,” Emmara explained, “Taking the children around the fayre. We’ve raised enough that every child at all our orphanages should get a trip out, but we’re going to have to stagger the trips over the week due to staff numbers.”

“That sounds wonderful, we won’t get in your way,” Vraska said. She gently deposited the cat out of her lap so a child could have a turn petting it.

“Jace?” she called, “We should probably clear out so these children can have some space.”

He looked at the long line of children. Before he could say anything, Emmara got there first.

“Children,” she announced, her voice soft yet commanding, “Children, this is the Living Guildpact. He’s the one who helped us build our new Ladybird Centre. Should we say thank you to the Guildpact?”
There was a chorus of shy ‘thank you’s from the assembled children. Jace looked rather taken aback and Emmara chuckled. Another elven woman, who Vraska didn’t recognise, began to usher the children into the petting zoo. Jace passed her the rabbit he was holding and she gave him a smile and a little curtsey.

“Ladybird Centre?” he asked of Emmara. She smiled

“We opened up a new wing in the orphanage thanks to Chamber funding. We can now house an extra hundred children, including some of those you just saw. The Ladybird Centre also offers physical rehabilitation to children with life-changing injuries, such as those who’ve lost limbs or their sight. It’s been utterly marvellous. We can’t thank the Chamber of the Guildpact enough.”

Jace gave a nervous smile. He was clearly wondering if he’d been there for that or whether it was something Vraska and Lavinia had signed off on.

“You’re very welcome,” he replied, “Anything we can do to improve the lives of Ravnica’s most vulnerable is an action worth taking.”

Emmara beamed at him.

“You’ve grown so much Jace,” she commented, glancing at the pair of them, “You both have. Keep up the good work. I know you’ll continue to be amazing.”

With that, she departed to aid her little throng of children. Vraska turned to Jace, who had gone a pink at her praise.

“Nice to know she’s doing fine,” she commented. Jace nodded.

“Yes, that’s a lot of kids to handle. I don’t think I could handle that many.”

Thankfully they didn’t have to. They left the petting zoo and wandered around a little section full of handmade crafts. From jewellery to leathercraft, confectionery to woodwork, this little section was certainly a shopping zone in the midst of the festivities. The merchants were clearly doing a roaring trade, with each stall’s queue extending to such a length that often the lines got mixed up. They pushed through, stopping briefly at a stand selling leather pendants and bracelets. However upon discovering the vastly inflated festival pricing, they moved on.

After the shopping zone, they returned to an area full of food stalls and tented amusements. Sitting beside a fountain, a permanent feature of the Promenade that had been drawn into the festivities, was a familiar figure. How he was dressed however, was distinctly strange. Tomik Vrona was sat on a low stone bench beside the fountain. In one hand, he was holding a leather bag, and in the other, what looked like a frozen chocolate-covered banana on a stick. It was his attire however, that struck Vraska as unusual. Whenever she saw the advokist, he was usually in a set of flowing white robes with ornate trimmings, suited to his position in the Orzhov. It was usually easy to tell what guild someone was in by what they wore. However, not only was she seeing Tomik dressed casually for the first time, but he was wearing something that looked so totally un-Orzhov, it was bizarre.

Tomik noticed them as they approached and waved. He was wearing a set of black leggings that were tucked neatly into a pair of brown leather ankle-boots. The peculiar part of his attire however, was the oversized shirt he was wearing in place of a tunic. It swamped him, clearly made for a man far broader of chest and shoulders than the advokist. He’d rolled up the sleeves to his elbows and put a belt round his waist to make it look more like a fashion choice. However, Vraska couldn’t help but wonder why a man, who was usually so pristine, had come out in a shirt that
clearly didn’t fit. The shirt itself was a rich navy blue, with a slight stripe in the fabric that was only visible where it touched the light. The underside of the collar and rolled up cuffs was a dark wine-red with gold detailing. The colour scheme alone was enough to tell who this shirt might actually belong to.

“Good morning!” Tomik exclaimed, jumping to his feet as they approached. His bench was promptly stolen by an opportunist family. As if he neither cared nor noticed, he joined them, shirt flapping a little in the breeze.

“Morning,” Vraska replied, “Having a good time?”

“It’s great,” Tomik replied, “I’ve never seen the Promenade so busy, It’s a little overwhelming to be honest, but I’ve never been anywhere like it.”

He smiled at them both before turning to Jace.

“Nice to know you’re back in time for this Guildpact. It’d be a shame if you missed out on the fun.”

“Call me Jace,” he insisted, “It feels a bit off to be called that outside work.”

Tomik gave a gracious nod.

“Of course, I understand completely. I’m very excited to have two days off this week. Ms Teysa gave me opening day and the couples night. I feel bad that she can’t come herself, but I’ve promised to pick up the fayre-exclusive chocolates from her favourite vendor. Ral managed to get today, but I reckon he’ll just walk out for couple’s night. They can’t exactly stop him.”

He certainly sounded excited. He spoke in a rush, glancing about as if he couldn’t wait to get back to exploring. Vraska couldn’t help but note that Tomik expressed his excitement a lot like Jace. He bounced a little on his heels and fiddled with his sleeves as if itching for something to do with his hands.

“You’re here with Ral?” Jace asked. The planeswalker was nowhere in sight. However, Tomik nodded.

“A full day’s date,” he said, a blush extending over his cheeks, “It’s been a while since we’ve got to spend a whole day together, we’re usually both so bogged down with work.”

So that was why he was acting like a kid in a candy shop. The fayre combined with his date was making him almost dizzy with excitement.

“I could barely sleep last night I was so looking forward to this!” he exclaimed, “We could double up! How about it?”

Jace went very pink in the face. Vraska merely frowned and looked between the two men. What did he mean ‘double-up’ and what was Jace so embarrassed about? Was this another strange name she didn’t know like spooning?

“We’re not here on a date,” Jace managed, “Though-though I appreciate the offer.”

“Really?”

Tomik frowned a little, staring at their joined hands. It was then that Vraska realised that somewhere after the petting zoo, she and Jace had held hands again. How did that give the
impression they were dating?

“We’re not dating,” she added, “We’re just having a trip out together.”

Tomik looked unconvinced.

“Is that Ral’s shirt?” Vraska asked, hoping that would distract him. It worked instantly. Tomik blushed a little pinker and laughed.

“Sure is,” he replied, toying with the hem, “I’m getting revenge on him for being rude about my regular attire.”

“What did he say?” asked Jace. That wasn’t Vraska’s first choice of question. She wanted to know why wearing another man’s shirt was deemed ‘revenge’.

“Oh, he made a very crude comment about the fact I wear so much white,” Tomik replied, “As a member of the Orzhov, I’ve always found the idea that white means purity a little stupid. No one wears white as a sign of virginity anymore, it’s so old fashioned.”

If Vraska got this right, then Ral was teasing Tomik about dressing like a virgin?. How did the shirt help?

“So why are you wearing his shirt?” she asked.

“Because if he’s going to make snide remarks about my lack of virginity,” Tomik continued, blush ever-deepening, “I’m going to wear the one thing, well, the one thing I can wear in public, that constantly flusters him. You should see the static that came off him when I appeared for breakfast this morning. Also I’ve learned that he goes one shade of red darker for each button I undo. It’s fantastic.”

He laughed and Vraska couldn’t help but smile at what Tomik evidently thought was a very cunning plan.

“Where is Ral?” Jace asked, a little pink in the face himself.

“He’s trying to prove a point to the goblin on the balloon game over there,” Tomik replied, fiddling with the aforementioned shirt, “The goblin pretty much told us it was rigged but he’s still trying to prove he’s the better man. I-“

“Tomik!”

Tomik was cut off by a shout of his name. They all turned to see a familiar figure wending his way through the crowd. A task made harder by what he was carrying.

“Ral,” Tomik said, “Ral, you didn’t… seriously? That’s really…That’s not going to fit in our house at-“

Ral jogged up to them grinning from ear to ear. Tomik promptly stopped protesting as he was presented with an enormous plush cat. At least four foot from fluffy head to stripy tail, Tomik could barely get his arms round it whilst keeping it off the ground. It was creamy-white in hue with brown tabby markings on its face, paws and tail. Around its neck was a thick golden ribbon for a collar. Vraska couldn’t help but notice the colour scheme compared to Tomik’s usual attire. She also noticed that as soon as Tomik held the gigantic plush, his hair fluffed up to an extent that rivalled the soft toy’s.
“Ah *ah ow*, static,” Tomik fussed, juggling the plush as he shook himself, trying to get rid of whatever shocks he was feeling.

“Whoops! Sorry.” Ral leaned forward, pressing a kiss to his boyfriend’s forehead. There was a small flash of blue light and a fizzle of sparks against the pavement. Well, that was certainly one way to discharge a person.

Problem solved, Ral stepped back one hand on his hip as he grinned.

“I told you I could beat that bastard,” he announced smugly, “Am I not the best at carnival games?” Tomik rolled his eyes but smiled affectionately as he gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“You certainly showed him. Do you have a name for our new friend?”

“I won it, that’s your job,” Ral replied. It was only then that he seemed to notice they had company. He stared at Jace and Vraska as if they had suddenly appeared out of thin air. After a moment of staring, he evidently returned to his usual self.

“See that Beleren?” he pointed at the over-sized cat plush, “*That* is proof that I am the best boyfriend. Bet you couldn’t do better.”

“I bet I could,” Jace said, his tone was even but his eyes glowed faintly in annoyance.

“Judging by all the static on that cat, you cheated. What did you do, zap the balloons so they burst?”

“As if,” Ral retorted, “I don’t need to cheat. I’m not some sneaky mage who has to lie and trick his way into getting what he wants.”

“Yes you are,” Jace stated, “I think everyone here knows you are both a liar and sneaky.”

“This isn’t a competition,” Tomik interjected, but neither man was listening.

“Fine!” Ral announced, with a contemptuous toss of his head, “See if you can do better! Go over there and bring back a cat!”

“I don’t want a cat,” Jace interjected, “I don’t need a plush to prove that I’m-“


Jace huffed loudly.

“I am a perfectly good boyfriend, thank you very much,” he said, “And I’m sure I’ve had more boyfriends in my life than you and your ego.”

“Bla-bla-blah,” Ral rolled his eyes and made a talking motion with his hand, “Where’s your proof, I don’t see a cat anywhere.”

Jace scowled. Vraska suddenly wished that she was the telepath to tell him not to rise to this very obvious baiting. She opened her mouth to tell Jace to ignore this very childish display. However she was too late, he’d let go of her hand and was already striding around the fountain in the direction Ral had come from.

“Oh for Gods’ sake,” she said, looking at the couple, “Firstly, *we-*“
She gestured at herself and where Jace had been.

“Aren’t dating. Secondly, why do you have to rile him up like that? He’s just going to cheat like you did. He’s telekinetic!”

Ral frowned a little.

“I might have forgotten about the telekinesis.”

Vraska sighed. The family on the bench had just vacated it, so she crossed over and sat down. The other two joined her. They were quiet for a moment, taking in the bustling crowds and brightly striped booths. Tomik was struggling to eat his banana on a stick around the enormous cat in his arms.

“Vraska?” said Ral, after a moment of staring at his boots. Unlike his boyfriend, he was dressed as he normally was, gauntlets and all.

“Yes?” she replied.

“I did some thinking,” he stated, “About what you said the other day.”

Oh? Good to know he had.

“And what conclusion did you come to?” Vraska asked.

Ral run a hand through his hair which crackled with yet more static.

“You were right,” he shrugged as he spoke, “I was judging you because you were a gorgon. I was judging you by all the horror stories I’d heard. However, as a man of science, I shouldn’t have put stock in conclusions with no research behind them. Especially when all first-hand evidence was contrary to what I thought. You aren’t particularly bestial or horrific, and the only time you attacked me was when you were defending your home. So I was wrong. And I was racist. I’m sorry.”

Vraska smiled. Tomik looked like he was going to cry, he was so proud.

“Apology accepted,” Vraska said, “And thank you, for explaining yourself.”

Ral merely nodded. They returned to people-watching for a moment as Vraska wondered if Ral had chased Jace off just to make an apology. If Jace was around, his pride would have probably got in the way of any honesty he was trying to show. For some reason, those men brought out the worst in each other. She understood academic rivalry, but this was something different.

“May I ask something of you?” she said to Ral. He raised an eyebrow.

“Shoot.”

“Jace,” she stated, “Why do you hate him so much?”

Tomik sat up a little in his seat as if he wanted to hear this answer too.

“It’s complicated,” Ral murmured, “A combination of things.”

“Well let’s work it out,” said Tomik, “So you two can stop having hissy fits and try to get along. I haven’t got any problems with Jace, so that’s one reason gone.”
“We’re supposed to be on a date,” Ral groaned, turning to face his boyfriend, “Do we have to do this now? Can’t we enjoy ourselves until I have to go to work later?”

“You’re going to work later?” Tomik replied, “I thought Niv Mizzet gave you the whole day off?”

Ral frowned. Vraska thought she saw something like fear flash through his gaze and was immediately curious.

“He-he did,” Ral continued, “But this is different work. Last minute stuff.”

“But you’ve been working pretty much twenty-four seven for the last week,” Tomik complained, “Don’t you deserve a break? I thought we were going to spend all today together?”

Guilt joined the fear. It was practically radiating off him. The sheer terror in Ral’s eyes, poorly masked, was making Vraska wonder whether the man was in trouble. She wasn’t an expert in relationships, or working in a lab, but you didn’t get that scared because you were spending a few less hours with your boyfriend. You didn’t look that guilty over something you could easily reschedule for later in the week. No, something was up here. Ral wasn’t telling Tomik something and that meant it was bad. Judging by how attached these two were, how affectionate they were, if Ral was hiding something from Tomik he was probably doing it for the man’s own safety.

“I have to,” Ral protested, “I’m sorry Tomik. This job doesn’t really let me make up excuses.”

“Then I’ll be your excuse,” said Tomik, “I’ll get in trouble. You’ll just have to tell work that your needy boyfriend decided that you had to devote all your attention to him all night. You couldn’t even get to work if you tried, because he used his naughty Orzhov magic to bind you to the bed as he r-mph!”

Ral put one hand over his mouth, face as red as his shirt. Tomik must have licked his fingers because he suddenly withdrew his hand and wiped them on his trousers.

Meanwhile, Vraska was thinking hard. She wished she had Jace’s abilities and not her own. If she could read minds, she could find out what was wrong and deal with it! Tomik didn’t deserve to have his day ruined like that and Ral didn’t deserve to be forced into this situation of denying him. She didn’t have Jace’s powers so she was just going to have to use Jace.

As if on cue, he appeared. The blue of his robes completely obscured by another gigantic cat plush. This one was grey with darker grey stripes, but was equally enormous. He brought it over to the fountain and offered it to Vraska. Who sighed, but laughed.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the cat with greater ease than the shorter Tomik. Her toy came with absolutely no static whatsoever.

“You didn’t have anything to prove, but thank you.”

Ral rolled his eyes and got to his feet.

“Well,” he said directly to Tomik, “No point sitting on our asses all day, let’s get exploring, shall we?”

Tomik got up with a fraction more grace, still very red at his own ‘excuses’. Ral offered him his arm like a gentleman at a formal occasion and Tomik laughed, taking it. Vraska offered a little wave goodbye as they disappeared off into the crowds.

“Are you ok?” asked Jace, taking the seat beside her before it could get stolen. Vraska clutched the
cat a little tighter, careful that her nails didn’t pierce the plush.

“I think Ral might be in trouble,” she replied, deciding just to come out with it.

“He’s really scared of something and he won’t even share what with Tomik. He’s doing some sort of work outside his guild and he’s so scared he’s even sacrificing his date for it. I know you don’t like him but, I think we should be worried, at least for Tomik’s sake.”

Jace frowned a little.

“Ral’s a planeswalker, he should be able to handle himself,” he said, “Though, if he’s feeling threatened then… What threatens a planeswalker more than another planeswalker?”

“You think there’s someone other than him, us and the Gatewatch?” Vraska questioned, “Wouldn’t he be the one to know if there was? Project Lightning Bug would tell him, right?”

Jace nodded.

“If he finds out I’m reading his mind, he’ll kill me,” he commented, “But, if we see them again, I can try and move in as subtly as possible. If he’s that scared, it’ll be in his surface thoughts. It’s worth knowing if there is another planeswalker around and if the Gatewatch needs to scare them off.”

Vraska agreed. What were the Gatewatch for other than dealing with dangerous planeswalkers? They just had to keep an eye out for Tomik and Ral in the crowd. Then maybe they’d find their answers.

Their mood slightly dampened, they nevertheless set back out into the festival. Regardless of whatever was going on elsewhere, Vraska still felt like this transformation of the Promenade was a huge achievement. She’d never seen so many different people in one place, walking the same paths, enjoying the same things. The role of the Chamber of the Guildpact was mediate between guilds, to remind them that despite their affiliations, they all lived on the same world, breathed the same air, and were equally responsible for the lives of Ravnica’s citizens. Was this not a perfect example of every guild coming together for the betterment of society? Rakdos performers mingled with Selesnyan artisans, Izzet alchemists stood proudly beside Boros metal-workers and Simic jewellers. Wanted food from a particular culture in Ravnica? You could find it. Alongside the usual festival fair, you could find everything from candied beetle legs to fire-steak sandwiches. People who would undoubtedly never have tried such foods would now have the opportunity! The Grand City Fayre was a marvel and Vraska couldn’t help but feel very proud of her part in it.

“That woman over there is waving at you,” said Jace as they rounded a corner past a stage where actors were performing to a crowd of laughing children. Vraska turned to see Ruby was standing next to a ‘Test Your Strength’ game. Javy was beside her, hefting a large rubber mallet, perfecting her stance as she judged the large target before her.

Vraska waved and Ruby waved back. She pointed at Javy, made a heart shape with her finger and mouthed *First Date*, very excitedly. Vraska gave her two thumbs up and smiled widely. Good on them. Javy had said she didn’t think she could date after losing Blazena all those years ago. However, she and Ruby were incredibly good friends. It seemed only natural that they might share some affection for each other. There really were a lot of couples on dates here. Maybe that was why Tomik had got so confused. That only led to more questions though. How did you tell when your feelings for someone went from platonic to romantic? Did you just wake up one day and decide, yes, this is platonic love has become romantic love now? There was so much about relationships she just didn’t understand. She’d read up on the sex part, Ruby’s leaflets had been
very informative. However, she knew that sexual interest and romantic interest were two different things. Why didn’t someone just write a guide book on all of this? If they had, why wasn't it in major book stores?

She watched Jace as he had a go at a hook-a-duck game. He knew a lot more about relationships than she did. Maybe she should just summon the courage and ask? She was too used to being the competent one out of the pair of them. She liked the responsibility of looking after him, being the answer to his problems, protecting him when life got too harsh. If she suddenly started asking him about these things, he might think she was stupid. Especially when everyone else seemed to know about all this. It would completely ruin her role as his confidant. Maybe he’d lose faith in her after discovering she was so oblivious to something that played an important role in his life. As he’d said, he’d had lots of relationships in the past. He knew what he was doing.

As for her. Well, there was only one person she could imagine going on a date with. Only one person she would be comfortable enough to be alone with in a romantic setting. Only one person she could ever imagine loving to such a personal extent. She’d already decided, despite Ruby and Javy’s advice to ditch him, that she wouldn’t live a life without Jace in it. She was the one he trusted. She was the one who had held him through his most vulnerable moments. He was the one who had accompanied her through her most vulnerable moments. The only person who she’d willing share her bed with, the only one she wasn't ashamed to be emotional around.

She bit her lip as he attempted to swipe a duck with a hook on a pole.

She didn’t think she should really consider this. It was only going to end in disappointment. Everyone she knew Jace had crushes on were very human, or very elven, which was enough like a human in appearance for her to group them together. She was far less human than Emmara, than Ral, even less than a monster like Liliana Vess. She had tendrils and sharp teeth and fingernails like claws. What was desirable about that? Why would you love someone who could accidentally stab you whenever you hugged? She squeezed the cat plush a little tighter, resting her chin on its head. No. Jace knew what he was doing with relationships. Unlike her, he knew how to find them, how to start them, what you were supposed to do when you found on.

The fact remained that if he wanted to their relationship to be romantic, he would have told her. If he wanted her as a girlfriend, he simply would have asked.

And he hadn’t.

So that was that.
Prisoners

Chapter Summary

Vraska discovers she shares a surprising amount of common ground with another member of the Gatewatch. But who? And how does this common ground become exposed?

They didn’t see anymore familiar faces whilst at the fayre. Whilst this meant they had more times to themselves, it didn’t help with discovering what could potentially be endangering Ral. Between them, they concluded that they would probably see Tomik about eventually. He visited the Chamber from time to time as a representative of Teysa Karlov. Next time he turned up, they would see what he knew and go from there. When they got back from the fayre, they found that Chandra had crashed in her room. The door was wide open and they could hear her snoring loudly. Gideon was sat at the dining room table with a paper basket containing hog-roast in a bun. He nodded at them as they returned and went back to eating. Wherever Nissa was, she wasn’t making her presence known. Regardless, no one seemed to have the energy to talk to each other. Worn out thoroughly by the fayre that was only just starting, they had six more days of this to go.

Fortunately, they didn’t have to attend every day, just constantly hear it outside of the house. It came as no surprise to Vraska that she didn’t see the other Gatewatch members for the rest of the week. Either they were caught up in the festivities, or they were trying to put a considerable distance between themselves and the racket.

However, just because celebrations were going on outside, didn’t mean there wasn’t work to be done. If Lavinia had been about the fayre at all, she didn’t say anything. She returned on day two of the festivities with a fresh batch of laws for Jace to look at, keeping him thoroughly indoors. Over the next few weeks, Vraska was forced to juggle her time and priorities. Her revolution did not stop just because Jace was back. However, with Jace being back, she felt responsible for keeping him both at his desk and in the dark about what she was doing in the Undercity. She didn’t feel ready to tell him yet. He didn’t need to know about her movements until it got to a point where the law couldn’t stop her. They were friends, however he was the Guildpact. An Undercity uprising would be in his interests when it came to inter-guild relations. Also her deals with the Orzhov and Dimir would undoubtedly alarm him. She justified her secrecy by thinking that it would only benefit them both. He didn’t need any new sources of stress. She didn’t need any interruptions.

It was by the same reasoning that she justified not having told Jace that she’d moved out. She had intended to at the fayre. However, they simply had never got around to it. She also really wanted some time to clear up before he visited. Her apartment was spotlessly clean, but it was full of a lot of stuff. The sort of stuff that almost certainly had a dubious origin, and it wouldn’t take a genius to realise that they were all trophies. Vraska personally liked her displays of trinkets, guild lockets and other valuable oddities. Jace however might think they were a little macabre. Even though he knew what she was, somehow what he thought of her mattered a little more these days. Enough that he didn’t need to see her hoard treasure like a particularly choosy dragon. She didn’t want him to change his mind about her being monstrous.

He wondered what she was up to in the Undercity, but clearly assumed she was just going on missions. Vraska made sure to return to the Chamber each day, occasionally stopping by her...
apartment for a fresh change of clothes or to drop off an item or two. Jace’s door got fixed two
weeks after the incident with Liliana, but he seemed loathe to go back into his bedroom. He told
Vraska that the room brought back too many bad memories and too many bad feelings. She had no
objections to letting him sleep in her bed. Certainly not when he was in a cuddly mood, which
seemed to be most nights. If Jace was fine with being held by her, then she was more than willing
to. Her new-found ability to hug him was welcomed by the both of them. Vraska couldn’t help but feel she’d made progress. To be so close to another person, to feel so warm and liked… She’d been missing out on this for so long. To have him there, so close, and feel happiness rather than fear was something of a revelation. Even if it was only with him.

Two months into the Gatewatch’s stay on Ravnica, Vraska found herself coming home from an early morning mission. This one was genuinely an assassination. She hadn’t had to go far. An Azorius lawyer who had made too many enemies. A typical target who thought he was safe within the walls of his overly-opulent townhouse. She returned in time to find Jace attempting to eat an entire bag of apples for lunch. She took the bag off him and led him back towards the kitchen. After putting all the components of a sandwich in front of him, she took the two remaining apples and went to see what state the dining room was in. Gideon was in there, reading through a small cluster of papers. A passing glance revealed them to be letters, some of them containing what looked like drawings done by small children. The letters had been tied together with a white and red striped ribbon, complete with a brassy Boros seal. Letters from people he’d assisted when working with the Boros? That seemed like the most likely explanation.

“Afternoon,” he greeted her as she sat down with her own sandwich and apples.

“Good afternoon,” she replied, “Does the day find you well?”

He nodded.

“It does, thank you. And yourself?”

“The same.”

There was a moment of silence in which Vraska ate and Gideon continued reading through letters. Neither spoke until she had finished her food. As soon as she did however, Gideon inquired:

“Do you have plans for this afternoon?”

Vraska frowned at him. An odd question. Did he?

“Not especially no,” she said, “Why?”

Gideon reached under his seat and pulled out one of the Azorius issue blades she had caught him duelling Chandra with. It looked a little too small for him. It was a perfectly ordinary shortsword but Vraska couldn’t help but wonder if he’d prefer a hand and a half, or even a broadsword.

“I noted when we first met,” Gideon explained, “That you are a most proficient swordswoman. Jace has allowed me to clear a room to use as a training facility of sorts. I wondered if you would do me the honour of a bout?”

Through her surprise, Vraska couldn’t help but feel a slight thrill at the praise. What an interesting proposition. It had been a very long time since she’d had an honest one on one duel – straight up fights weren’t exactly an assassin’s area. It had been even longer since she’d come up against someone who’d learnt to fight on another plane. His sword style may be entirely different to anything she’d faced before. This could be very insightful.
“It would be my pleasure,” she replied, “When shall we start?”

Half an hour later, once she had washed up and he’d stowed away his papers, they found themselves squaring off in the newly cleared training room. Vraska had the distinct impression this had been an unused bedroom. There was a little door leaning off to the side that was either a walk-in closet or an ensuite bathroom. Gideon had hung a few of his homemade punching sacks from the rafters and there was a set of weights, emblazoned with the Boros fist, stacked neatly in the corner. As she drew her blade from its sheath, Vraska couldn’t help but wonder how many of those she could lift.

Gideon was using the Azorius shortsword. It was far too small, but Vraska didn’t have a better alternative. She only owned two swords, and the other was her hand-me-down from Mistress E all those years ago. The sentimental value meant it would never see combat again, especially after she got her current weapon. Her newer blade was a beautiful curved piece made of Undermine Black Steel. It was a metal made only in one particular forge, with ore from one specific mine in the deepest darkest bowels of the Undercity. The Undermine was an incredibly dangerous place, filled with horrors so terrible they made their cousins in the wilds look like livestock. One surviving miner claimed to have found a Dimir stronghold deep within the mine, and that was the source of all the horrors. There was no way of proving this. However, the fact that the horrors went for the minds rather than the bodies of their victims, led the story some credence. If you survived the trip towards Ravnica’s core, you could find Undermine iron, a dark black-ish metallic ore that was used to create a steel so perfect for creating blades, the Golgari immediately claimed the entire area for their own. Undermine iron never made it to the surface. It was reserved only for the blades of the elite, and occasionally, the Ochran. About five years ago, three Undermine blades had found their way to the Ochran, freshly forged, and were placed as a reward for some of the trickiest assassinations the organisation had on record. Vraska had naturally gone for the target above ground. She’d had to travel deep into the Rubblebelt to even discover where this crazed Dimir inventor had hidden himself. Yet she’d found him, eventually, evaded his wide array of death traps and then found the man, taking his stone head back as proof of her victory. As a reward, she received the lightest of the three Undermine blades, and counted herself perhaps the only living gorgon to have owned one.

There was no reason why Gideon would know or care about any of that. She readied her blade as he seemed to size up the opposition. His stance was defensive before they’d even begun. His size made him a veritable wall of muscle, and judging by how he held himself, one he was used to putting in front of those who needed protecting. Admirable, but not useful for a one on one duel. She whipped her blade up horizontal at shoulder level, presenting the length, blade flat against her open palm. She drew the blade back, letting the black metal glimmer in the low lighting. Blade still one show, she gave a low bow, displaying all the discipline Mistress E had once taught her. Gideon bowed back, clearly understanding the ritualistic nature of what she was doing. Then, they both resumed their stances.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I am,” she said.”

“You’re not wearing any armour,” he pointed out, “Or shoes.”

She merely smiled at him.

“I don’t need them.”

He met her grin with smile of his own.
“Let’s see. Blades only. No magic. A test of endurance. We spar until one of us calls Stop?”

“Yes,” Vraska confirmed, her voice soft and dangerous with mounting anticipation, “Loser buys the winner a drink after we’re done.”

Gideon chuckled.

“I agree to those terms.”

Without another word to her, Gideon charged.

Her dodge was nimble, almost effortless. In a slight swirl of skirts, she twisted about, dodging his blade entirely to strike at his sword arm as he came barrelling towards her. He deflected her attack, attempting to strike again. Yet his swing fell short as she slid backwards, ducking low to avoid the obvious arc of his blade. Using her momentum, she aimed low, her sword clanging off his armour. She’d assassinated heavily armoured men before, she just needed to find the gaps in his shell. Gideon however, wasn’t going to give her the time for a good look. He swung downwards, giving her a split-second to dart out of the way. So she did. Backwards on silent feet, she stepped back, rising to her full height as she flicked her blade upwards. She was reminded of fighting Mistress E all those years ago and her intent had shifted to disarm.

Their fighting styles were almost complete opposites, and they both understood that. Vraska had no doubt that he had as good a read on her as she did him. She was also aware that, as the finesse fighter in the duel, she was using a lot of energy in her movement that he didn’t have to expend. However, the fact remained that she would not be able to beat him if she opted for his approach. Gideon’s fighting style was shaped around the fact he could take hits. He didn’t try to dodge her blade at all, either deflecting it or trusting in his armour to take the damage for him. What his strikes lacked in precision, they made up for in sheer power. The amount of force in his every blow had Vraska’s blade ringing on impact. He’d yet to hit her, but if he did, she had no doubt she’d be feeling it for days. His way to win this would be to tire her out before forcing through one of those crushing blows. She couldn’t let that happen.

As it had been when she was fourteen and challenged by her soon-to-be teacher, Vraska’s style was flighty and nimble. With no armour and no shoes, she was incredibly quick on her feet, and more flexible than either of their blades. Whilst Gideon struck like he was wielding a hammer, Vraska’s blade was an extension of her arm, just as fluid and graceful. She ducked and weaved, like a moth fluttering about a flame, striking and retreating at a speed unmatched by Gideon’s sword arm. If he had realised she was trying to disarm him, he hadn’t changed his means of attack. She successfully cut a nick across his sword hand but he rode out the pain like a professional.

At the sight of his own blood, Gideon grinned.

“It’s been a while since I fought without my shield,” he stated, breathing hard, “I’m impressed.”

She smiled.

“You hold your own very well without your shield and your first choice of weapon,” Vraska commented, “You’re not usually a swordsman, are you?”

She had noticed from how his swings often fell short. It was as if he expected to be wielding something longer, much longer, than a shortsword.

“You noticed,” Gideon replied, “I can fetch my sural if you wish to try and best me at greater strength.”
“Sure.” Vraska took a step back, shaking out her arms to relax her muscles a little. Admittedly, she had no idea what a sural was. This should definitely be a learning experience. She hadn’t been quite so out of breath for some time, but she was eager to find out where her limits lay these days.

He was gone for a matter of moments. When he returned he had abandoned the sword and added an extra gauntlet to his already impressive suit of armour. This gauntlet however was more than just arm protection. As Gideon took his place back in the centre of the room, she couldn’t help but notice the long metallic ribbon-like structures that wrapped around the metal plate. They momentarily glowed golden before unfurling into three long whip-like blades. Gods. She was right about him expecting something longer. Those were horrendously lengthy, and they would undoubtedly cut her to shreds. She narrowed her eyes at them as she readied her blade. Here went nothing.

Their second bout started much like the first. Gideon came running into the fray and she immediately started dodging and weaving. However, with the sural, Gideon’s reach was far wider than with the shortsword. She was forced so far away from him, that it was difficult to get in with a swipe of her own. She couldn’t help but feel the odds were horrendously against her as she darted back, forth, barely grazing his foot as she ducked low under the gleaming metal.

“You’re not one for straight up fights,” Gideon commented, as she was forced to duck into a roll out of his way.

“Correct,” Vraska replied, “You evidently are. Though you’re not the drilled soldier type I expected.”

“I can adapt,” Gideon replied, “As can you. Spy, or assassin, if I had to guess.”

“Assassin,” Vraska confirmed, “Though I have my own fair share of magic.”

He nodded appreciatively.

“Does Jace know?” he asked, lashing out at her ankles, causing her to twist out of the way.

“Yes,” she said, trying to get in close but finding her efforts thwarted by a flick of those blades, “He was there when I was recruited.”

“Yet you don’t leave Ravnica to-“

Gideon cut himself off as Vraska felt three streaks of searing pain course across her shoulder. The effect was almost instantaneous. With just enough to drop her sword, she crashed to the ground like a fallen tree. The world grew dark around her. Pitch black. So dark that even her eyes couldn’t pierce through the shadows. It grew cold. So cold that she curled up into a ball on the stone floor, trying to preserve any heat she could muster. Shaking, she felt the blood drip down her shoulder blades, bracing herself for another blow she was certain would come. They never stopped. Even when she was bleeding out of the ground. Even when she was barely conscious. The whipping never stopped. They wanted to tear her to pieces. They wanted her to die in the most agonising way possible. What would it be today? Would they beat her until all she could see was her own blood? Or would they let her lay there until the wounds became infected and she rotted away in her prison cell?

She heard a loud voice, but it was too muffled for her to make out the words. More guards perhaps. The voice started shouting as she lay shaking on the floor. Hot tears streaked down her cheeks as she felt the floor echo with thunderous footfalls. She felt very small. Very small with no idea where she was, who was with her, and whether they would let her live to see daylight once
more. Breathing hurt. Her lungs seared in her chest as she took short desperate gulps of air, willing herself to power through the pain, even though she could be whipped again at any moment. Was this it? Was this when it ended? She shook so hard her teeth rattled against each other. The darkness pressed in on her like a vice. Cold and unyielding as the shouting continued. There must be a riot going on somewhere else in the prison. They must have forgotten about her for now. They would be back. They would always come back. Unless they had finally decided that she should rot.

Suddenly the footfalls returned, more this time, louder. She covered her face in her arms so they couldn’t strike her there. She felt a hand on her shoulder and hissed through her sobbing. The hand withdrew. She heard a voice, quieter than the last, but still completely alien to her. Why weren’t they dealing with the riot? Why couldn’t they just leave her alone?

“Vraska?”

A soft voice, young and male, echoed through her head. It wasn’t outside her. It wasn’t in her cell at all, it was in her head. It knew her name. Why did it know her name?

“You’re not in prison, Vraska,” he said, “You’re stuck in your own memories. You’re free. You’re home. You’re with me in the Chamber of the Guildpact. Open your eyes. You’re safe, here with me.”

She shook her head. His words meant nothing to her. This was just like when the guards said she could have food if she behaved nicely. Then they would just spit in her face.

“Open your eyes,” he repeated, “Please, Vraska. Believe me. You’re safe. You’re safe with me. I’ll make sure no one will ever hurt you again. I-“

The voice hesitated slightly. Then, somewhere in the darkness, Vraska saw a figure. A man dressed entirely in blue appeared through the darkness, approaching her silently as she lay on the floor of her cell. He wasn’t dressed like a guard. He had no armour whatsoever, just robes so unlike those in the Azorius style that he must be a fellow prisoner like her. Yet one who in a far better state that she was. A recent arrival? Had they put him in here in the hopes of seeing them fight? Was she supposed to petrify him?

“You’re not in prison, Vraska,” the man insisted, “I’m proof that you get out of the cell. That you go on to have a better life. I’m not someone you saw in prison, am I? You get out, you end up exploring the multiverse and you become one of the best assassins Ravnica has ever seen. Don’t you remember?”

She frowned slightly. This didn’t make sense. He was right. She had never seen him before but nothing else he said made sense. It was nice to have company though. Company that didn’t look like it was going to hurt her quite yet.

“If you open your eyes, I’ll still be there,” said Jace, “You’ll have all the company you could ever...
ask for and no one will hurt you. Just open your eyes, please.”

It was too much. She tried for him. She tried to open her eyes but she felt like they were already open. She was surrounded by darkness. Just darkness and the faintest hint of blue. She wanted out. Didn’t he see how badly she wanted out? She didn’t want to die in this cell but what choice did she have? Even after losing track of how long she’d been there, she hadn’t lost her desire to survive. To live if only to spite her captives. She wanted out. She so desperately wanted out. Her sobs picked up as she felt her own nails claw into her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but gave no explanation as to what he was sorry for. Suddenly the pain dulled. Her heart rate slowed. Before she could even comprehend what was happening to her, she felt her breathing level out. Panic faded, fear subsided, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

When she awoke, she was in her own bed - the enormous four-poster that she now shared with Jace in their private quarters. The curtains had been drawn around her to block out the weak afternoon sunshine, and she had been wrapped in a blanket as she snoozed fully clothed beneath the covers. As she sat up, she felt a twinge of pain on her shoulder, and looked to see that it had been wrapped up in neat clean white bandages. She rubbed at her cheeks to find there were sticking plasters there. There was blood encrusted on a few of her nails, and judging by the colour, it was definitely her own. Flexing her surprisingly stiff fingers, she pulled aside one of the curtains. Leant against her dressing table was her sword, back in its ornate sheath. It was then that she remembered what had happened.

With a groan she flopped back against the covers.

Fuck

Not again.

And in front of one of Jace’s friends no less!

At the sound of her groan, footsteps quickly approached from down the hall. The door clicked open and Jace appeared, looking pale and worried.

“Vraska,” he said, hastening over to her side, “You’re back?”

She nodded against the covers as he settled down next to her. He picked up the blanket that had fallen off her shoulders, and draped it back on as she sat back up.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he tentatively put an arm round her, trying not to put pressure on her shoulder.

She leaned into the gesture, seeking out his hand with hers.

“Better,” she replied, “Pretty awful, but better. I didn’t know that would happen just from something that felt like a whip.”

She gave a shudder.

“Gods, this is so pathetic. I’m pathetic.”

“No it isn’t,” Jace turned a little to face her better.

“And you aren’t pathetic at all,” he insisted, “The trauma we face doesn’t ever really leave us. Sometimes it rises back to bite us when we least expect it. I can attest to that. We both can.”
She nodded, there was no point disagreeing about that.

“And you’ve been through a lot,” Jace continued, “So when it rears back…a lot happens. It doesn’t make you weak, or pathetic, it just proves how strong you are to have survived such terrible things.”

She didn’t really know what to say to that, so she just nodded again.

“I’m sorry for going into your head,” he said, “I wouldn’t have if I felt there was any better option. I know you don’t want me in there, but you were really stuck in your memories. There was a barrier around your consciousness, pure pain and fear. You were blind to anything but your own thoughts, so, I just had to become one of them.”

“It’s ok,” she replied, “Thank you. For doing what needed to be done. I-I just wish you didn’t have to.”

He attempted a smile, it was shy, a little tentative, but it immediately warmed her heart.

“It’s no problem, believe me,” he said, “You’re not the only one who’ll always be here. This time let me take care of you.”

She drew him into a hug, however it didn’t take any telepathy for him to know what she truly wanted. He embraced her tightly, warmly, and whispered reassurances all the while. They sat like that, for how long, Vraska couldn’t say. However, she was loathe to give this up. To let go. To part from him for even a second. After all she’d just experienced, such a vivid revisiting of her own past, she wanted to revel in this comfort for as long as possible. This was more than her child self could ever have dreamt of. At eight years old, withering away in that cell, she could never have possibly imagined that one day she’d have someone who would treat her gently, tell her she was precious to him, that there was no need for her to be afraid. At her lack of discomfort, Jace grew a little bolder. He stroked her damp cheeks and smiled as she blushed at the gesture. They lapsed into silence, no need for any more conversation. She had him. He had her. What more needed to be said?

Vraska realised she must have fallen asleep in his arms, when there was a soft knock on their bedroom door. She sat up, still fully clothed, to find that she was alone.

“Come in?” she murmured.

She expected it to be Jace, returning from work or goodness knows where. As the door opened however, she saw that it wasn’t Jace at all. It was Gideon. He was carrying a tea tray in one hand and a large paper bag of takeaway food in the other. Vraska frowned a little, still half-asleep and confused at the sight. Gideon entered, looking about for somewhere to put his tray but finding no where.

“I, err, came to talk,” he said, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

Vraska considered him a moment, before getting up off the bed and looking about for a suitable place to sit and talk. She didn’t have any chairs in here. There was the rug? She pulled a few cushions off the bed.

“Sorry, is the floor alright?”

He nodded.

She set out a pile of cushions on the floor, before taking the tea tray off him and placing it in the
centre. They both sat, cross-legged on the ground, leaning against the bed. Gideon took two plates out of the takeaway bag, before retrieving two foil wrapped packages.

“Jace recommended we order in today,” he explained, passing her one of the packages, “He says this is what you like best.”

Curious, she unfurled the foil to reveal the large confection of meat, flatbread and salad inside. He wasn’t wrong.

“Thank you,” she said, “I suppose I owe you a drink at some point.”

Gideon shrugged, digging into his own wrap. He swallowed hard before replying:

“You drew blood, I drew blood, I would call us even.”

It was then that Vraska noticed the bandage around his hand. Had she really struck deep enough to warrant that much linen? Well, he had bled a lot.

They ate in silence for a while, the plates only a formality as they mostly ate out of the foil wrappers. The Transguild Promenade may be famous for its important guild buildings but it also had some phenomenal fast food vendors. She and Gideon ate with such gusto, you would think they’d just been fighting a battle rather than simply sparring.

“I feel like I should apologise,” Vraska stated, as soon as she’d picked her wrapper clean. Gideon shook his head.

“You owe me no apology,” he stated, “I was unaware you dealt with War Blindness. I should have been more careful before we started fighting.”

“War Blindness?” Vraska repeated.

“It is what they call it on Bant,” Gideon explained, “At least, that is what the soldiers call it. When a veteran has been through a particularly traumatic battle, they often return with the condition known as War Blindness. A sight, sound or even smell that reminds them of said battle can blind them to their surroundings, make them feel like they are on that battlefield again. They relive what is often the worst parts of their lives. War Blindness is perhaps an ill-suited name for it. I know that it affects those who have experienced terrible situations other than war.”

He stretched a little, placing his foil wrapper back in the bag.

“I know it too well.”

Vraska stared at him, but wasn’t quite sure how to reply to that. Had he confessed to having this ‘War Blindness’ as well? She wanted to know what had happened to him, but it would be far too rude to ask.

“I went and fetched Jace,” Gideon continued, “As you two know each other well.”

“Thank you,” she replied, “It was the best thing you could have done.”

He nodded in understanding.

“He wouldn’t explain exactly what was happening,” he said, “Said that it was your story to tell. But he eluded to imprisonment. Imprisonment when you were a child. When I heard this, I wished to speak with you. I guess I had hoped, believed, that other planes would show more compassion to
their children. That elsewhere it would be different.”

Now she was extremely curious. Was he implying what she thought he was implying? Had she somehow managed to find a kindred spirit? Someone who knew what it was like?

“You were?” she managed, “On Theros?”

He nodded.

“I was arrested during my thirteenth year. My entire street gang were rounded up, just for punishing some local thugs. The thugs got off free.”

Vraska couldn’t help but feel amazed. Almost every planeswalker she knew had grown up on the streets. Imagine! If they’d all just travelled sooner. She, Jace, Gideon, Ral Zarek… They would have been one hell of a street gang! Little planeswalkers making the most of wherever they found themselves!

“Youself?” he prompted.

“I was eight,” she replied, “They—they killed my mother a few years prior. There were raids.”

She told him about the Golgari purges. Despite his time on Ravnica, it was clear he didn’t know about this particular chapter in guild history. So few did. He was appropriately shocked and appalled. Enough so, that she considered telling him what she’d done in revenge. However, there was always a chance he’d repeat the information to Jace. So she kept quiet and let him tell her about his Irregulars instead and the lives they’d once lived. She smiled and nodded through his stories of youthful misadventure, occasionally chopping in with a story about her own exploits, or those with Jace. They took a moment to congratulate each other on their youthful tomfoolery, skirting around the topic of prison as much as they could. There was a melancholy look in Gideon’s eyes, often turning mournful when he talked about his childhood friends. Often his confident tone stopped being quite so sure, quite so reminiscent. Vraska didn’t need to ask where his Irregulars were now. He’d mentioned more than enough battles and the fact he too had War Blindness. He was a warrior who could withstand an army. A soldier who wielded a shield of light that gave him near-invulnerability. Yet a shield couldn’t be everywhere at once. She could only guess that his friends were not behind him at the time.

“Thank you,” she told him, as the room grew dark around him. They had talked long into the night, mostly about tiny irrelevant things – successful instances of theft, times they’d got the edge over pompous authority.

“For coming by. I enjoyed this chat.”

“As did I,” he replied, “It was an honour to spar with you today, Vraska. I hope to one day count you as a comrade in arms.”

“And I you,” she said, as they both got up from the rug, knees a little stiff.

“And thank you, for sharing,” she added, “I feel a lot better about what happened.”

He smiled at her.

“Of course. See you tomorrow.”

She merely nodded as he left the room.
Vraska changed into her pyjamas and sat deep in thought until Jace returned, ink-smudged and weary. He was already in his pyjamas, but was wearing his cloak over the top as if that somehow made him appropriately dressed for work.

“Did Gideon come by?” he asked, as he sat beside her on the bed. Vraska nodded, still surprisingly tired despite all the naps she’d had today.

“He brought dinner, we talked,” she explained, “He’s a good man. I like him.”

She yawned as he glanced at her, clearly anxious.

“M-More than you like me?”

She stared at him through another yawn.

“No, don’t be daft,” she said, “You’re still-“

She waved one hand about shoulder height on herself.

“If there was a scale, then Gideon would be about here.”

She then moved her other hand until it was as far above her head as she could reach.

“And you’re about here.”

Jace instantly looked relieved and got into bed as Vraska lowered her hand to stifle another yawn.

“Just wanted to check,” he murmured into the pillow. She sighed and curled up next to him, drawing him into her arms.

“You’re the best, don’t forget that,” she murmured into his hair, “Write it down if-“

She made a last ditch attempt to finish her sentence. However, she was too warm and too sleepy to make any real effort. As Jace shifted to get comfortable beside her, she felt the emotional events of the day finally catch up with her. He might have said something like ‘good night’, but she had dosed off too soon to hear it.
When she awoke, Jace had already left the room. His cloak was still on the chair but he was no longer in sight. Yawning, she dressed for the day and deposited the dirty clothes in her hamper – she’d get them laundered another time. She picked up a well-used leather shoulder bag and decided she would make the most of the day checking upon her contacts in the Undercity Press. She had put them in touch, via Mazirek, with an anonymous source at the Golgari’s only university, who was more than happy to feed their historical research to the newspaper. The academics had access to archives and accounts that would otherwise have been destroyed by Jarad’s administration. Banned literature had been instrumental in her revolution so far. Therefore, she was more than happy to receive their aid.

As she left her room, she turned to lock the door behind her. There, she noticed her first peculiarity of the day. Pinned to her door was an embossed silver notecard. It looked like corporate stationary, something you might find beside the bed in a particularly fancy boutique hotel, near the greener edges of the precinct. Wherever it was from, it had been attached to her door with a hairpin. She plucked the pin out of the woodwork, scowling at the mark it made, before catching the paper as it fluttered to the ground. On closer inspection, it was indeed from a hotel. An Orzhov hotel at that. She recognised the name as she’d killed a few people there. The carpets had been so plush in those rooms that you barely needed to sneak. Flipping the card over, she was greeted by a simple yet elegant handwriting that she’d never seen before. The words however, made her lip curl and her eyes glow with rage.

What will he do when you’re too busy to play?

Come back to me of course, tail between his legs, whimpering for approval.

He’s a weak man and you know it.

She considered incinerating the paper, but decided no, Jace needed to see this. He needed to know what Liliana Vess truly thought of him. How she was possessive enough to leave such petty notes upon her door. Like a child trying to threaten an adult with crayon scribbles. Coward. If she had a problem, why not talk to Vraska face to face? Why should she believe anything so meekly written and left to read in passing? She hadn’t seen Liliana since she’d chased the woman out of Jace’s bedroom. If Liliana had a problem with her, she could say it to Vraska’s face. Vraska would give her just enough time to apologise for her wickedness before turning her into stone. Any word except for “sorry”, would shorten that time drastically.

Locking her door with a little more force than necessary, Vraska stuffed the note in her bag and stormed down the hallway. She hadn’t even had breakfast yet and her day was thoroughly ruined. Woe betide anyone who got in her way right now. She did not have the patience to deal with any
Gatewatch stupidity, obtuse diplomat or even a funny look. Not before she’d had her coffee. Damn that necromancer! Damn her straight to the deepest blackest hell-pit in Rix Maadi! Let the devils rip her apart and dance in her ashes! Breathing deeply, she took a moment to pace the kitchen back and forth as the water boiled for her coffee. Someone had bought pastries and left them on the side. She finished one off and chose a second as she filled her mug. Right, she’d sit for a bit to cool her head, check on Jace, and then head out.

Yet even that wouldn’t go her way. As she approached the audience chamber with a fresh cup of coffee and her solitary pastry, she was greeted by the sight of Lavinia dressed in her full Azorius regalia. With her was a tall slender man who was unmistakably a vedalken. She didn’t know any other races who were quite so blue. However, judging by his strangely ornate attire, he wasn’t a vedalken from anywhere she knew about. The pair of visitors stopped in their tracks as they saw her approach. Lavinia gave a polite nod whilst the vedalken seemed to be sizing her up from her topmost curls down to the tips of her toes.

“Is the Guildpact present?” Lavinia asked.

“I assume so,” Vraska stated, “Would you like me to go check?”

“No need,” the captain replied, “Inspector Baan, if you would please follow me.”

It turned out they were all heading to the audience chamber. The room was full of neatly stacked piles of paper, positioned on various surfaces and labelled as to whether they were coming or going. Thankfully Jace was there, and judging by the lack of shadows under his eyes, he had an illusion up for this meeting. The last time she’d seen him, the previous night, there was still a little grey about his lids. Not right now however. The rest of the Gatewatch was there too, including the loathsome necromancer, who sat in the tallest chair as if she ruled the place. At the sight of her, Vraska had to use all her self-control not to petrify her on the spot.

“Vraska, please,” came the warning in her mind. She took a deep breath to steady herself and decided to take her breakfast elsewhere.

Whatever meeting was going on in there didn’t take very long. By the time she’d had her breakfast, steadied her temper, and prepared herself for a trip to the Undercity, it was over. As she headed towards the door, she encountered the vedalken again. This time however, he was alone.

“A word, if you please.” His voice was curt and immeasurably precise, like he used no more breath than was absolutely necessary.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Inspector Baan folded his arms. Once again, he appeared to be scrutinising her. His behaviour was so…so Azorius, it immediately set her on edge.

“Are you part of this so-called “Gatewatch”? he inquired. Though his tone was impartial, there was something about it that angered her.

“No,” she replied, “I’m not.”

He nodded, as if this was perfectly understandable.

“I see, somewhat wise,” he stated, “Though that does lower their overall level of competency to almost zero. How unfortunate.”

“Excuse me?” Vraska wasn’t exactly sure what he was trying to tell her. The Gatewatch were incompetent? Did that mean they were in danger? What was he on about?
“I mean nothing by it,” Inspector Baan continued, “I was merely warning you, one competent individual to another, that this little venture is doomed to failure. Though I would also advise against placing all your self-worth into the hands of the illusion mage. He is rather breakable.”

Before she could summon any sort of response for that, he disappeared in a trail of silvery-blue. Vraska glared at the place he’d just left. *Planeswalkers.* They were always more trouble than they’re worth! As soon as she felt she’d dealt with one, and learned what their powers were, another showed up to confuse her. The vedalken wasn’t a telepath. If he had, she’d have felt it when he’d gone into her mind. However, he’d taken a long look at her, declared her competent and then listed out what could arguably be her greatest flaw. Was that what his spark gave him? The magical ability to nitpick? Well, as long as she never had to deal with him again, he could remain unharmed.

She stuck her head around Jace’s office door to say goodbye, however he wasn’t there. A quick walk by the audience chamber revealed that the Gatewatch were making plans with Lavinia and discussing their recent visitor. Regardless of her curiosity, she was determined to stay out of their little organisation. She had her own business to attend to today. Business that she preferred they didn’t know about yet. The first stop of which, was a quick trip back to her apartment. She kept anything to do with her revolution safely in there. Jace didn’t know the place existed and no one in that little district cared about what their neighbours were up to. It was therefore a most convenient place to keep everything from fresh newspaper content to her correspondence with Mazirek. She had not seen the kraul lord in a few months but their letters were regular enough to keep her satisfied. Glad to be away from the Chamber, she cut a direct path through the streets and towards her much-missed home. Up to her floor, she entered the cylindrical building to find that very little had changed. The large living space was as spotless as she’d left it, her trinkets gleaming from every shelf and table. The ribbons full of paper swans were a little dusty as they hung prettily from the rafters. However, that was nothing a once-round with a feather duster couldn’t solve. She closed the door behind her with secure clunk. However, what she wasn’t expecting was the gentle thwap of parchment against her wooden floor.

Looking down, she saw a thick parchment envelope, coffee-brown in hue with her name written on it in glimmering golden ink. She picked it up and instantly got a whiff of sandalwood, cinders and magic, it was a delicate scent, and one she couldn’t help but enjoy. Whoever had written this to her evidently had class, both in their choice of stationary and perfume. However, the fact remained that she hadn’t given anyone this address. No one should know where she lived, not even Javy or Ruby, who didn’t have quite such a refined taste in parchment anyway. She sniffed the corner of the envelope again. It smelt like the air after a thunderstorm, fresh but weirdly energised, like it contained a power that could be unleashed at any moment. It was the smell she associated with planeswalking. That ‘zing’ in the room after someone arrived or departed from another world. So this had come from another planeswalker? A planeswalker who could send letters across the multiverse? She really didn’t need more planeswalkers today, but, they had gone so far as to make such an aesthetically appealing letter, she couldn’t refuse to read it.

Flipping open the envelope, she pulled out another thick piece of parchment. It had only two words on it.

**MEDITATION PLANE.**

She glared at it. Was this some sort of joke? No sooner had she wondered then she felt a familiar tug on her consciousness. Telepathy. Or mind magic at the very least. She held the words up to eye level, the light from a nearby window streaming through the lettering and only the lettering. It shifted slightly, a blue haze covering the letter like a puff of smoke. It was certainly mind magic, it felt a little like one of Jace’s communication orbs. If that was the case, all she had to do was put her
Suddenly, she knew where she was meant to go and what she was supposed to do when she arrived. It came to her like an epiphany. Flashes of a faraway plane, an artificial world, made entirely of stagnant water and distant hills. A place she’d never seen before. Yet this letter, this magic, had somehow cemented its location in her mind. Enough that she could step there quite easily, and cast the spell for entrance when she arrived.

This was wholly too strange. This whole thing felt like a trap. Except she didn’t know any planeswalker who might hate her so much that they would lure her away to a secret plane just to murder her. Well, Liliana Vess might have a few thoughts about that. However, she wasn’t a mind mage. Besides, she had a home on Innistrad, did she really need a whole plane to herself? Somehow Vraska was certain that this wasn’t anything to do with her. Frowning at the parchment, Vraska crossed to her shoe rack and picked out her one pair of flats. You never knew if it was safe to go barefoot to an alien world, she had to take every precaution. If this was a trap, well, they would not find her easy prey. She was armed, she was fast, and she could always just walk straight back here. This seemed like a lot of effort to go to for a simple death trap. Curiosity was getting the better of her. She needed to find out what this was about.

Concentrating on the location, freshly planted in her mind, she turned on her heel disappearing into the shadows of her bookcases. As soon as she reappeared into the light, she instantly regretted her choice to wear shoes. She was standing in ankle-deep water that was swiftly soaking the soft leather to the point it would take days to dry out. With a sigh, she looked about, taking in the crumbling ruins of buildings, sunk into the water, which seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. She was in the remains of a courtyard of sorts. The pillars surrounding her, currently crackling with an odd purple energy, made it look like this place had once been a walled garden of sorts. Now lost to time and perhaps a flood, bits of stone now jutted out of the waters like odd teeth, battered and chipped. She frowned at the purple energy surrounding the courtyard, remembering the second thing the spell had imparted to her.

Vraska wasn’t a traditional spellcaster by any means, but she understood enough to trace a circle in the air, fingers flickering with a dark green energy. Using the other hand, she cut runes into the solid air, using her talons like a knife through soft clay. Where her hands struck, deep lines were left in her wake, murky green or pitch black in hue, standing out like scars amongst the pale scenery. Satisfied with her markings, Vraska channelled all the mana she could in the circle. It flickered once, twice, then vanished entirely. So did the purple energy surrounding her.

Just as Vraska wondered what she was supposed to be doing now, a dragon appeared before her. She’d only seen one dragon before, but she could reliably say that this one was far larger than Niv Mizzet, and perhaps dozens of times older. He was bright gold, making Orzhov armour look plain in comparison. The dragon was sinous like a snake but his face was wide, crested with an enormous pair of horns. He had no frill or webbing like Niv Mizzet, resembling the dragons of storybooks, evil rather than idolised. Despite his sheer magnitude, his expression was unreadable but oddly person-like. This unnerved her slightly, but she refused to be intimidated by any dragon – planeswalker or no.

“Vraska, assassin of the Ochran,” announced the dragon, his voice rumbled like thunder and boomed like Steam Festival rockets.

“She who would be Queen.”

Vraska raised an eyebrow at him to show she was listening.

“I am glad you received my invitation. I am Nicol Bolas, and I would like to hire you for the use of
your talents.”

Well this was an unusual way to go about it. Was he too good for a communications tube? Besides, she was a bit busy at the moment, as he should well know if he was aware of her aspirations.

“I’m not currently looking for new clients,” she stated. Nicol Bolas let out a rumbling sound that could be laughter, or could be disdain. There was no way to tell.

“I am uninterested in your skills as an assassin.”

Oh?

That rumbling again. Did he find her amusing? She watched as he lifted himself to his full height. He towered over her, almost human in his posture, but disconcertingly not so.

“I require your leadership skills,” he continued, “Your survival instinct. Your determination against all odds that has kept you alive thus far.”

He had her attention. Now what did he want her to do? Suddenly, Vraska felt a familiar pinprick against the side of her head. Mind magic! She tried to force it away but the pinprick turned into a searing pain. The force was too large, larger even than her skull. It was as if one of the dragon’s claws was piercing through her scalp. It was less painful to just let him in. Her breathing turned ragged as she felt his presence slide into her consciousness. She hated it. She hated this. Was this supposed to endear him to her?

“There,” said the dragon, in her mind, “Now we may be honest with each other.”

“I had no intention of lying to you,” she gasped out. He said nothing to this and merely continued.

“You wish to lead,” he stated, “To create a better world for those you call your own. You have already worked so hard to achieve that end. But as your efforts stand, you will provoke a massacre. Innocent lives wasted, thousands dead, and what will you do then?”

“I-I don’t know what you mean,” she retorted, desperate to force him out of her mind but helpless against such an assault.

“I have an army. I have the-support of my people.”

“And yet you have no means to remove your adversary,” Nicol Bolas interrupted, “Jarad vod Savo is not an opponent you can just step before and petrify. He commands such power, and such forces, that you march towards an inevitable ruin. Do you think one kraul will maintain control of an entire army whilst fifty liches seek to rest that power off him? You fight undead with undeath, yet their side is boosted by an ancient lord who believes himself immortal.”

Unfortunately he had a point. Her plan for Jarad had just been to march upon the gardens and petrify him. Jarad was undeniably powerful. Some even called him a hero due to his involvement in saving Ravnica during the Decamillenial. Even with an army behind her, it would be a bloody battle and many lives would be lost.

“So what are you offering?” she demanded. He wouldn’t be saying all this without some plan to change it.

“I offer you Jarad vod Savo,” the dragon replied, “Isolated. Bound. Away from his elves and his liches. Ripe for the calcifying and displaying on whatever mantlepiece is large enough.”
There was that rumble again. She was now sure it was laughter.

“With Jarad gone, the path is wide open for your ascension. You may march on Svogthos without losing countless innocents. You will have what is rightfully yours, Vraska, Guildmaster of the Golgari.”

Her breath caught in her chest. To have Jarad just handed to her on a silver platter... No need to lay siege to the gardens. To cripple the devkarin forces before they had even begun. She would be a fool not to take this opportunity.

“What is it you desire in return?”

The dragon shifted slightly, tail curled about his hind legs like a cat content with what they had received.

“It is quite simple. There exists a place on the continent of Ixalan, on a plane of the same name. The place is known as the Golden City of Orazca. Retrieve the item that is kept there, summon my minion to transport it back to me, and I will give you the means to lead your guild to the glory it deserves. You will have your own Kingdom, Vraska, should your mission prove successful.”

She didn’t trust him, but excitement was welling up inside her like she’d started her revolution all over again. She found herself feeling humble, flattered even. No one had sought her out for anything other than death before. Her work at the Chamber hardly counted, she had taken that on herself. No, when people wanted her, they wanted her to kill someone. Yet this dragon, this Nicol Bolas, wanted her for other talents. Other non-murderous talents. Like there was more to her than a tool that killed people!

He started at her with eyes larger than cart wheels. The barest hint of teeth visible at his jawline. He wanted an answer.

And she wanted to lead.

“I accept your terms,” Vraska replied, with a small bow. Almost immediately, she felt the pressure leave her mind. He was gone, retreating from her consciousness. She tried not to look too relieved.

“You will need these.”

She felt a number of items drop into her bag, one in particular felt rather heavy.

“I have given you the Thaumatic Compass,” the dragon explained, “It will lead you to the Golden City. I will also gift you with information.”

He held out a singular golden claw.

“Knowledge of the world you will enter. Knowledge of the spell you will use when you have reached the Golden City.”

The piercing sensation was back. Her knees buckled at the force of it, driving her down into the waters below as if a lead weight was being compacted against her head. She covered her mouth in an attempt not to scream. She felt the sheer magnitude spell as she learned it. It was complicated, far too complicated for her to pick it apart and study its components. It was a spell intended to pass through worlds – but to whom? She had no way of knowing. She tried to remain upright, dizzy and nauseous, the entire plane swam around her. Yet it seemed the dragon was not finished.
“You will also need to know how to sail.”

Vraska was floored by the pain. The world span and she did all she could not to throw up into the waters. Gritting her teeth, she put her head in her hands. Her brain was throbbing, throbbing as words, hundreds of words with new meanings, coursed through her thoughts like a tidal wave of knowledge. Breathing deeply, she tried to endure the onslaught of nautical terminology. She saw illustrations of boats, meteorological charts, maps, ropes, knots, organisation charts, ports, sails, rotas, names of people, names of places… It seemed endless until suddenly, it stopped, as painfully as it started.

Staggering to her feet, she felt like she’d drunk five Apple Smiters and topped it off with an entire bottle of strawberry fizz.

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

Vraska shook from head to foot as her head throbbed and the world swung about her. Her head was full of boats and what ropes should be pulled when. She felt like an entire library had been implanted into her head and her brain was struggling to compartmentalise it all.

The dragon didn’t seem to care for her dazed and aching state.

“Depart for your voyage as soon as you can walk. You will not be able to return until your task is complete.”

Not able to return? Ugh, that opened up a brand-new kettle of fish for her to deal with. Still, she had her chance. A chance to guarantee the success of her revolution and she had to take it. The people of the Golgari deserved this, they deserved better. They needed a change in government. They needed Jarad gone. They needed him replaced with a Queen.

She shakily put one foot in front of the other and found herself back in her own living room. Tottering, she collapsed onto the sofa, bag landing on the floor with a loud clunk. Gods, what had just happened? She was exhausted from both planeswalking twice in one morning, and from the relentless onslaught of new information still swirling about in her brain. She knew so much, she knew everything she might possibly need to know about sailing, boats, ports, pirates, she felt like she had a map of Ixalan engraved into her skull. Immensely dizzy, she sprawled across the sofa, kicking off her soggy shoes and groaning. Well, she was a bit out of practice. It had been years since she’d travelled that far. However, even if her body felt drained, her mind was awhir with what came next.

She was going to gone for months. She hadn’t even got there but she knew how long this voyage was going to take. Spending months away from Ravnica could ruin everything she’d been working towards. What was the point of having Jarad when she got back if everything else had unravelled. She had preparations to make. So many preparations. Enough people on Ravnica knew her, needed her, to make it inconvenient for her to just vanish off the plane for an extended amount of time. She needed to rest her walk off, but whilst she did so, well, she would do the best she could to make sure nothing fell apart.

She started with letters. She had a letter writing set on the coffee table so she didn’t have to get up off the sofa to reach it. On one piece of paper, she made a checklist of all the people she should get in contact with before she left. First on the list was, of course, Jace. However she was going to deal
with that last. That letter would probably take the longest to write as she grappled with whatever feelings were involved. Better to attend to business first. It made sense therefore to write to Mazirek first. Their roles in the revolution had remained unchanged for quite some time. She was stirring up the public whilst he was silently spreading Erstwhile through the Undercity capital. However, they did send letters to each other, so it was only polite that she let him know she’d be away for a few months. She had to come up with some excuses, but she made sure to note that her trip would only benefit their revolution in the long run. She went as far as mentioning that the revolution would most likely start when she got back. There was no better time to launch their efforts than with the removal of Jarad.

Once she had set that letter aside to dry, she went back to her list. She needed to think of every eventuality, anyone who might possibly need her whilst she was away. She therefore wrote three letters that perhaps weren’t essential, but covered all her bases. One each for Ruby and Javy, letting them know she would be away for a while. In those, she eluded to travelling off to a far away district, on the other side of Ravnica. Whilst this wouldn’t stop communication, it would make it very difficult. Enough so, that they’d understand her absence. The third short letter was for the reception at the Chamber of the Guildpact. This listed a number of instructions under her newfound title of “Chamber Supervisor”. She instructed them to tell anyone who came looking for her that she was currently away and back in a few months. She also mentioned that she may receive visitors – Mia, Eliza and Emile the orphaned gorgons. She hadn’t heard from Mia since their first meeting, however she had promised to be there if the trio needed her. She instructed the reception to point the gorgons at Jace, resolving to give instructions to him as well.

She wrote out a holiday statement for the Ochran, declaring she would take no contracts for the next few months. By the time she got to this letter, some of the feeling had returned to her legs and she was able to wobble over to her communications tube. She also pulled out all the undistributed information she had yet to send to the press, and packaged that up ready to be sent. With the university also sending them gossip, they should be satisfied in her absence, however she made sure to tell them that their ‘informant’ would be away for a while on business. Then, with all these letters in their envelopes, stamped and organised, she was left with the one communication she’d sort of been dreading.

She needed to write to Jace.

Whilst she did know exactly where he was, and could very much talk to him in person, she didn’t want his presence to weaken her resolve. She needed to do this. However, she needed to do it without exposing her revolution to him. She was still certain that he wouldn’t approve. If not on a personal level, then as the Living Guildpact. There was also the matter of leaving him alone, with the Gatewatch, for that length of time. He was a grown man who could take care of himself. Yet he was also a grown man with an extreme lack of self-confidence and a predatory woman in his home. Vraska bit her lip as she contemplated the blank parchment before her. No. The more she thought about this, the less likely she was to leave at all. She’d been over this before. So many times. She couldn’t put her own ambitions on hold just because she was worried about him. She’d do all she could before she left, but, well…

This sounded cruel.

But maybe it could be a learning experience for him.

How many times had he just gone off? Sometimes with no note at all! Not only was she going to leave him a full letter, but she was also going to state how long she’d be gone for and a vague notion of what she’d be doing. That was more than he’d ever given her! Of course, she was also going to reassure him that she would be fine and come back in one piece. She could definitely have
done with reassurance whilst she’d been waiting for him for months on end, wondering if something horrible had happened to him. No, the letter wasn’t the problem. She would be leaving him with enough information to get by, however she would also leave him without the layer of protection she seemed to provide. He’d told her how he felt about the Gatewatch, and especially about Liliana. With her stuck on a far-flung plane, there was nothing she could do to help him. She wouldn’t be there to comfort him. That couldn’t be helped in writing.

Or could it?

Vraska was struck by a rather silly idea. She couldn’t be with Jace to comfort him, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t carry something comforting with him. In multiple histories, and some works of fiction she’d read, the protagonist would carry about a token of affection from their nearest and dearest. By looking at it, or feeling it, they would be reminded of how much they meant to that person. So why didn’t she create something for Jace? Something he could look at to feel slightly better about his day? They had their necklaces but those were cold metal and mostly there for emergencies. If he could carry about her reassurances with him, then maybe things wouldn’t be so bad? But what? Vraska considered another letter before realising that simply wouldn’t do. What if he got caught out in the rain? That would utterly ruin the parchment, making the whole effort null and void. No, she needed to create something most durable and inspiring.

Face first in the cushions on her bed, Vraska stared at the embroidered covers and suddenly had an idea. Fabric was a lot more durable than paper, and could survive a soaking. Wobbling to her feet, she went back downstairs to fetch her sewing kit.

After she’d finished her stitching, and had a small nap, it was time to distribute the large amount of post she’d accumulated. Her feet still ached as she left the apartment, but preparation came before comfort. Besides, she could get an early night before she made her trip. As the Dimir already knew who she was, she didn’t feel it necessary to avoid the post office. She sent all non-Chamber communications via the front desk, before taking a short wagon ride to the Chamber of the Guildpact. She could have definitely walked the distance, but her legs begged her not to. Once there, she gave reception their letter before heading through the building to their private quarters. The audience chamber was oddly quiet, considering how busy it had been this morning. As she entered, she heard no signs of conversation, just the occasional rhythmic thump from somewhere – probably Gideon training with his punching bags.

Jace’s study was similarly deserted. Depositing his letter on the desk, she made a hasty retreat before he came back. As she pulled the parchment envelope out of her bag, she dislodged the note from earlier. Scowling at it, she stuffed it back inside. This was exactly the opportunity that Liliana was waiting for. Vraska would be gone for a few months and she thought Jace would come crawling back. There had to be something Vraska could do about that. She trusted Jace, and the strength of his conviction. Yet, people did act illogically when frightened. Perhaps she should recruit some assistance?

Deciding to head in the direction of the thumping, Vraska was promptly surprised by what she found in their training room. It wasn’t Gideon at all. It was Chandra, and she looked like an utter mess. Her hair was everywhere, her clothes were askew and there was a smoldering wreckage on the ground that had probably once been a punching bag. It was now a heap of warm mud, once burning sand and now a sodden heap. Vraska turned her attention back to the pyromancer and noticed that her whole body was tensed for a fight. She didn’t look ready for a conversation right now, but this was a matter of necessity.

Vraska cleared her throat.
Chandra jumped, flames dancing at her hairline.

“Oh,” she said, lowering her fists, “It’s you. I was expecting Gids, or someone else I guess.”

“Apologise for interrupting,” Vraska said, “Do you have a moment to talk?”

Chandra frowned at her, as if confused by her formality.

“Yeah, sure. Err, mind the mud. It’s probably not good to step in.”

As Vraska entered the room, Chandra chose a low wooden bench and sat down. Vraska joined her just in time for Chandra to ask:

“So what’s up? We haven’t talked much ever.”

That was true.

“I need some help,” Vraska decided to get straight to the point, “And I’m willing to let you choose the price.”

Chandra looked immensely confused now.

“I will be going away for some months,” Vraska continued, “Away as in to another plane. That is fine, however I received this note this morning.”

She showed Chandra the note from Liliana. She curled her nose up in disgust.

“That’s…err, wow,” she commented.

“Jace is terrified of her,” Vraska stated, “He told me himself after we went and busted him out of his room. I’m scared that she’s going to try and bully him again whilst I’m away.”

“Yeah, that seems reasonable,” said Chandra, “But what do you want me to do about it? Liliana and I get along, she’s not like that with me.”

Good to know but not helpful.

“I need someone to help Jace get away from her if needs be,” Vraska explained, “Someone willing to be a distraction if things get too uncomfortable. If it looks like they’re about to have sex, or Liliana is about to drag him off somewhere, I need you to cause some mayhem, light something on fire, knock something over. Just enough of a distraction for Jace to get away.”

Her expression immediately brightened.

“Oh I can do that. I’m great at causing mayhem. I can even make it look like an accident.”

“Thank you.”

Vraska stowed the note away as evidence for later.

“I will of course pay you for the trouble. Feel free to name your price.”

Chandra looked thoughtful for a moment, resting her chin on one fist as she leant against the wall.

“Where’d you get those pastries you brought to the tea party?” she asked after a minute or two of silence, “I’ve been looking for them everywhere but no one seems to know what I’m talking
about.”

Vraska smiled.

“The Undercity, they’re a Golgari delicacy, you won’t find them above ground.”

“Well I want some of those,” said Chandra, “And-and next time I’m in trouble on this plane, you
got to help me out.”

“Of course,” Vraska agreed, “Do you want the pastries now or when I get back?”

She wasn’t sure she was up to such a trek today, but she could mail order some if needs be.

“Oh, it’s not urgent,” said Chandra, “When you come back, or when we’re next both on Ravnica.
Have a good trip!”

“Thank you.” Vraska got to her feet.

“Good luck with your training.”

Chandra merely pulled a face as she left the room.

None of the other Gatewatch members were around, so she had to satisfy herself with merely
setting Chandra on the case. Ideally, she’d liked to have talked to Gideon too before she’d left.
However, the efforts of her travels were catching up to her and she really needed to rest before she
left for a new world. Yawning into her hand, she grabbed a few things from her quarters there,
before making her way back home. Once back, she checked the sprinkler charms, filled up their
water tank, and left out a note for the newspaper delivery goblin to put her subscription on hold for
now. Despite it being in the middle of the afternoon, Vraska decided it was exactly the right time
for a long sleep. She didn’t want to weaken herself entirely when she arrived on a brand new world.
No, she would rest, have a hearty meal of everything left in the fridge, and then depart.

To Ixalan.

And whatever adventure may lay there.
Lovers

Chapter Summary

Jace decides the time is right to express his feelings. The last few months have been agony and he must let Vraska know how he feels. Yet a certain letter lies in wait on his desk. What will Jace do now?

Jace took a moment to try and control his breathing.

This was fine.

Everything was fine.

The trip around the building had gone very well. He’d shaken a lot of hands, heard a lot of names, and was probably going to forget all of them. However, he had made his presence known, and that was the main thing. Lavinia wanted to make sure everyone in the Chamber understood that he was there and he appreciated all the hard work being done. So, she had decided what better way to display that than to parade him around like a mascot. He’d done his best to hold each of many awkward conversations. His mind however, hadn’t been on the parade of people he’d been shown. Over the last few weeks, his thoughts had become rather side-tracked. One topic, and one topic in particular, had been distracting him from even the most basic of tasks. He couldn’t even look at himself in the mirror without wondering.

Could he do it?

Could he try?

Was he even good enough for it to be worth trying?

It was in that moment. That terrifying moment when he wasn’t exactly sure where or who he was, that he’d come to an epiphany. Well, not an epiphany, he’d known this for such a long time, but it was brought back before him so clear and bright that it could no longer be denied. Those sharp hands, so gentle with him, had wrapped a cardigan around his shaking body. Had freed him from the binds he didn’t remember being put there. He was so out of his own head during those occasions, that being brought back to the here and now by such care and kindness – it was a miracle.

She was a miracle.

Vraska was a miracle.

One that he had never deserved. One that he had tiptoed around his feelings for, for so long, but she treated him with nothing but patience and kindness. He had taken her for granted as a teenager. Yet with every year, he understood more and more how vital she was to him. How much her happiness affected his own. How he so badly wanted to be the source of that happiness. Being away from her had been terrible. Yet knowing she was far from the eldrazi and other horrors was a source of comfort. It was returning home however, that made him realise just how much he had missed her. Their newfound closeness, both physical and emotional, was nothing short of amazing.
Holding her, touching her, seeing her smile and blush at his words. He’d once had the phrase ‘touch-starved’ applied to him when he was younger. However, he was certain that it suited Vraska better. She’d never trusted anyone to touch her before, yet she’d allow him to hug her, stroke her cheek, bump noses, and cuddle up to her at night. He knew he was the exception to her fear. She trusted him above all. Knowing that was euphoric and he wanted nothing more than for that to continue. To put things simply, he wanted to be hers. He wanted to turn this decade of friendship into something else, something more. But telling her that? Saying that he loved her? It was more than he could handle. Yet when Ral challenged his ability to be a good boyfriend, he’d felt the need to defend his honour. He wasn’t Vraska’s boyfriend, but he needed to prove to her that he could be a good boyfriend. A good boyfriend for her.

After she saw him, like that, at Liliana’s feet. Well, he’d expected her to lose all respect for him at least. Yet she hadn’t. In fact she’d only comforted him more. However, with Liliana now back at the Chamber, and the rest of the Gatewatch trying his strength, he had more of a point to prove than ever. He didn’t want Vraska to give up on him. He didn’t want her to think that he was choosing to be bullied around rather than seeking out a relationship that made him happy. He wanted her. He would choose Vraska over all of them, over anyone. But would she even want someone who had been so belittled? So used?

He needed to know.

He needed to find out.

Over these last few months, countless nights spent in her arms, he had wanted to tell her. The desire was consuming him. There was no time like the present, especially when filled with such a fervour. Not just today, now. He would find her. He would find her and tell her how he felt! What should he do? Dress nicely? Bring her flowers? Did she like flowers? She used to put them in their room all the time. As soon as he was out of Lavinia’s clutches, Jace found himself racing out the building to find a florist. Today. Today would be the day!

He bought an orange-gold bouquet that reminded him of her eyes. Carefully holding onto the stems and paper wrappings, he raced back to the Chamber, towards their personal courtyard. Once inside, he made a beeline for their room. She wasn’t there. Maybe she’d gone out for the day? She did that a lot. Right, he just had to put the flowers in some water, wait for her return. He’d have plenty of time to prepare in the meanwhile. Steel his nerve. He could do this!

He went to the kitchen and found a tall glass to put the flowers in. Filling it up with water from the tap, he then carried glass and flowers into his study. The windowsill there was nice and low, plenty of sunlight and space. Carefully putting down the flowers, he arranged them in the vase, positioning them directly across from the door in case Vraska entered. Heart hammering, he brushed his hands off on his robes and looked about for something to do. There was of course, paperwork. There was always paperwork. But his nerves were too jittery to concentrate right now. Maybe someone else was around? Maybe someone knew where Vraska had gone for the day! He’d ask them.

Just as he made to leave the room, he noticed an unfamiliar envelope on his desk. Crossing back across the study, he picked it up. It was a very fancy envelope, a pastel green with a leafy design embossed into the parchment. It was sealed with brown wax and the handwriting on the front was distinctly familiar. Vraska’s handwriting was simple in its elegance, the mark of someone who’d learnt to write from example rather than being formally taught. His fingers shook as he opened it, a little too fast, ripping the parchment down a fold. Inside were two pieces of parchment and a small roll of cloth. Jace took the frontmost piece and quickly realised that it was a letter. Why was Vraska writing him a letter? She could just talk to him, right?
Dear Jace,

It pains me to write this, but the time has come for my turn at making a sudden departure to another plane. I wish I could have given you more of a warning. However, the mission briefing made it quite clear that I should leave as soon as I was able. Think of it this way. The sooner I go and complete my mission, the sooner I will be back with you. That’s what I’ll be thinking anyway.

I will miss you every step of the way. This mission will take some months, no longer I hope than the time you spent on Zendikar and Innistrad, but far less dangerous. There certainly won’t be any inter-dimensional horrors where I am going – just the open sea and a prized magical artefact. The plane I am going to is called Ixalan. I have been hired to retrieve a relic from its ruins and due to the nature of the plane, will not be able to return until it is found. I don’t know if you have heard of this plane, but if you have, please do not follow me here. I would dearly like to see your face, however that face is needed much more on Ravnica and with your Gatewatch.

I promise to be back as soon as my mission is complete. This is quite unlike anything I have done with the Ochran, so I relish this chance to improve myself and test what other skills I may possess. I have put all my affairs in order, so you won’t have to clear up after me in my absence. The only unknown in this case, is a trio of teenage gorgons I once met in the Undercity. Please find information on what to do with them, if they show up, on the second piece of parchment. I’ve yet to see them again, however I wish to prepare for every eventuality.

I dread the time we will spend apart, but the reward for this mission may change the face of Ravnica entirely. For the better, I assure you. I will think of you always out on the distant seas, and hope for your happiness and safety along the way. Be strong. Stay safe. And remember to eat lunch and nap when you need to.

With love,

Vraska.

PS: I know that we both emotionally fall apart when we spend long stretches of time away from each other. So I prepared a little something you can look at when you’re feeling emotionally low. It might seem a bit childish or stupid, however I wanted to give you a reminder of how wonderful you are. Just so you won’t forget it whilst I’m gone. I made it out of fabric so the message doesn’t get ruined in the rain.

No.

No no no no no no no no no.

Vraska was gone?

She was gone!

She couldn’t be gone!

He needed to tell her everything! He needed to tell her right now before he melted under the force
of all these nerve-inducing emotions!

His hands shook as he fumbled for the item she’d mentioned in her post script. It was a small scroll of cloth, tied with a thin black ribbon. Jace unfurled it and let out a little gasp when he saw what lay there. As Vraska promised, it was a message. A message he could keep with him no matter the weather. Yet the message wasn’t written. As she’d said, ink would run and be ruined if he got soaked in the rain. No, Vraska had taken the time to sew this into the cloth in brown thread, minute stitches making up the words:

**You are smarter than you know. Braver than you think. Greater than you expect. Stay strong and come home safe. V.**

His heart was fit to burst.

She was the one travelling across the multiverse to unknown shores - but she still worried about him? Gods, he was such an idiot! Why hadn’t he been braver? Why hadn’t he told her sooner? Why had he never expressed how much she truly meant to him? She’d gone away not knowing. Not understanding how much she meant and how scared he now was that she would disappear however. He cradled the fabric to him like it was a priceless treasure. What did he do? What could he do? He didn’t know where Ixalan was! But even if he did, she had asked him not to follow her! But what if he got scared?

He didn’t know what to do. He needed to talk to someone. Someone who might possibly know what to do in such an impossible situation. What were you supposed to do when you were so in love that it hurt? Someone had to have experienced this before. Someone. Anyone. He felt himself tear up as he raced through the Chamber of the Guildpact. There were over a hundred people working in this building! One of them must be able to help him! One of them must know what to do! He swiftly found himself in reception and was suddenly blessed by the sight of a familiar face.

Standing in the queue for the reception desk was Tomik Vrona. He was dressed in a slightly fancier set of robes than usual, which was something considering Orzhov fashion. He had a belt made of coins around his waist and an ornate golden collar that would look perfect in a courtroom. At the sight of him, Tomik looked incredibly startled, looking him up and down. Jace was causing quite the stir with his arrival. It wasn’t often that the Guildpact himself appeared in the lobby, therefore he was attracting a lot of weird looks and gasps as he hastened over to the advokist. He remembered dimly at the back of his mind that he might have had an appointment with the man today, but that wasn’t important. Vraska was important. Feelings were important. Working out what the hell to do with them was his topmost priority.

“Forgive my lack of formality, Lord Guildpact” Tomik stated, “But you look like shit.”

Jace merely nodded.

“I feel like shit, can we talk somewhere, privately?”

Tomik looked a little more taken-aback.

“Yes, of course. I confess my two hour meeting slot with you was mostly a catch-up and an excuse to drag you back to my apartment. Ral wants to speak with you.”

Ral was the last thing Jace needed right now.

“Can we talk first?” he insisted, “Somewhere-somewhere that isn’t here?”
Tomik took a deep breath. He clearly hadn’t anticipated dealing with an emotional Jace today, but it looked like he was stepping up to the task.

“Yes, we can. Have you eaten recently? We can have an early dinner, my treat?”

Jace nodded, very keen on that idea. He hadn’t had lunch yet so any thought of food was good one.

“I’ll ask reception to let Lavinia know I’m out,” he managed. Ignoring the queue entirely, he abandoned Tomik for a moment and skirted around the side of the vast oak desk. Attracting one of the receptionist’s attention, he babbled something about letting Captain Lavinia know that he was at a dinner meeting with the Orzhov. The receptionist nodded and immediately called for a messenger to let her know. Satisfied he’d covered his tracks, Jace returned to Tomik who was now standing by the door.

“Oh, follow me, and try to breathe,” Tomik stated.

Jace did as he was told, wondering if his panic was truly that obvious.

Their destination served quite the distraction from his overwhelming anxiety. He was led across the Transguild Promenade, down a side alley and towards a very familiar set of copper-covered doors. Jace hadn’t seen the place in years but the Copper Ladle still stood exactly where he’d left it. Still tall, still bright with its signature giant ladle hanging from the sign above the door. Once it had become clear that this was where they were headed, Jace was vividly reminded of exactly why he used to frequent this particular side-alley so often. This place had once meant adventure to him. The sort of thrills he couldn’t find safely near Tin Street, the kind of place where he was willing to let his curiosity run wild. Questions, so many questions interrupted his constant thoughts of confession and where Vraska might be. Did Tomik know about the Copper Ladle? Did the advokist know what this place became after the hour of six pm? Somehow, he couldn’t imagine the elegantly-dressed secretary down there in the semi-darkness, sneaking off to rent a room, dancing in the hopes of catching a relevant interested eye. He flushed a little in the shadow of his hood. No. Tomik couldn’t possibly have gone down there. He must just know the Copper Ladle for what it appeared to be on the surface – a modern stylish bar and café. It had always done excellent food, Jace used to get there a bit early to have some dinner before he descended between the trellises. Tomik was recommending this place for dinner so that must be how he knew the place – a restaurant. That was all. He surely wasn’t the type to need to go downstairs!

They entered to find the ground floor mostly empty. A few armoured Boros were sat at the front tables, nursing pints with sour looks beneath their helmets. The Copper Ladle’s interior also hadn’t changed that much. The front area, wood panelled and complete with games tables and dart boards, was the drinks only area. Past the grand semi-circular bar was the oh-so familiar spiral stairs, descending past a pair of trellises and into the large expanse of rooms below. Beyond the trellis was the darkened eating area, somewhere between bar and restaurant, it seemed empty before the after-work rush. A little board by the trellis asked them to wait at the bar to be seated – not something Jace had ever done in here before. He guessed it must be different during the day. Tomik however, seemed to have done this all before. He swept up to the bar, Jace in tow, and waited to be served.

The barman on duty was a familiar face. His name was Grant, a human man as famous for his card-sharking as he was his cocktails. He used to tell Jace stories about the casinos he’d been banned from, but he somehow managed to make his fortunes nevertheless. He sported a golden watch underneath the neat white shirt that made up part of his uniform. He had a solitary diamond-studded earring and a small ruby set into his nose. Life was clearly still treating him well. Jace had asked many a time why he even bothered working as a bartender with all his riches. Grant had
laughed, patted him on the shoulder, and told him that without this job he’d get pretty lonely.

They waited a few moments for Grant to finish rearranging bottles of spirits, before Tomik let out a polite cough. Grant turned round, looking mildly irritable, but as soon as he saw the pair of them, his scowl transformed into a wide grin.

“Well, I’ll be a devil’s uncle!” he exclaimed, “Artie! Gabby! The longlost heroes return!”

Jace stared at him and then at Tomik. Gabby? Who was Gabby? Wait…

“It’s been a while Grant,” said Tomik, offering him a hand to shake. Grant grasped it with both of his shaking firmly before offering Jace the same. Jace hastily returned the handshake, head still reeling at what this must mean.

“It’s been a while,” Grant repeated, “It’s been an age, I’ll tell you! You two broke so many hearts when you went up and vanished! And here you are, turning up together, years later! There better be a story here boys.”

Tomik let out a nervous laugh.

“I’m committed now Grant,” he said, “I’ve found the one for me.”

His smile softened.

“Good on you Gabby,” he replied, “He better be a real dreamboat, after all the handsome guys you got pining after you.”

Tomik looked like he couldn’t help himself. His pleasant smile turned into a small smirk.

“Oh he is, don’t you worry.”

Jace wouldn’t in his right mind ever call Ral a dreamboat, but each to his own, he guessed.

“What’s your story Artie?” Grant rounded on Jace who really wanted to retreat into his hood and stay there.

“New job,” he murmured, “It’s been taking up far too much of my time.”

Grant tutted at him, shaking his head with a look of despair on his chiselled features.

“Artie, Artie, all work and no play wears a man down. You’ve got to live a little. Our other regulars were devastated when you two stopped showing up.”

“It’s complicated,” Jace mumbled, “I-I’ve kind of got someone too now.”

Grant let out a deep sigh as Tomik raised a curious eyebrow.

“I see how it is. What can I get you boys?”

“Well, we came for dinner but I think Artie here needs a stiff drink,” replied Tomik. Grant nodded.

“Two lots of strawberry over ice it is then,” he said, “You want to see the menu?”

“Please,” said Tomik.

“Alright, go find yourself a table, I’ll bring them right over.”
Jace followed Tomik to the back of the bar, head still reeling from what had just happened. There were only two other people in the eating space right now. A pair of women sat on a low couch, holding hands and sharing a tray of breads and dips. As the men approached, they glanced upwards. The two were sporting their guild affiliations very obviously. The woman on the left, with a short black bowl cut and gleaming armour was unmistakably Boros. At least a Captain judging by the ornateness of her kit. Her girlfriend however wasn’t wearing much of anything. An over-bust corset and a pair of leggings that only served to emphasis her incredibly muscular physique. She had two full sleeves of tattoos, bright red roses that covered her from shoulder to wrist. The Rakdos woman nodded at him before going back to her conversation. They chose a table at the opposite end of the seating area, just so both tables could have their privacy.

He and Tomik momentarily came to a stand-off when they both tried to sit on the soft sofa-like booth seat. After a moment’s hesitation they realised they were being stupid and opted to sit side by side rather than across the table from each other.

“So, Artie?” Tomik inquired as they settled down. He was smiling and his eyes shone with amusement.

“Yes Gabby?” Jace replied, responding with a shy smile of his own. As Tomik laughed, he couldn’t help but share in his surprised sense of joy. It was a welcome change from the worry.

“You have to at least buy me a drink before you get to call me Gabby,” Tomik said, “It’s Gabriel to you.”

“My mistake Gabriel.”

They paused for a moment as Grant came over with two glasses of strawberry fizz and the evening menu. Tomik handed him payment for the drinks before returning to their conversation.

“Well, I’ll be,” Tomik said, over the rim of his glass, “I’d never imagine that Ravnica’s Living Guildpact used to visit a Promenade club. This Promenade club in particular.”

“I wasn’t always Guildpact,” Jace reminded him, “And besides, I would hardly expect an Orzhov aristocrat, Ms Karlov’s personal secretary no less, to lower himself to mingle in such a club with us common folk. Even if the drinks are exceptional.”

Tomik laughed.

“Oh please, you should see the Orzhov-owned clubs near my parent’s house.”

He gave a shudder.

“Not safe, sane or consensual in some cases. No, this place is a gods-send for people like me, well, us I suppose. I started coming here when I was what, seventeen, eighteen? I don’t think I would have ever felt secure enough to date, or even know what I liked, if I hadn’t come to this place first.”

Jace knew exactly what he meant. As he picked over the menu, he couldn’t help but remember his visits to the Copper Ladle with fondness. The trip from here to Tin Street was a long one, but it had been so worth it.

“Same here,” he replied, “I started coming here when I was seventeen. Everyone here was really kind, they respected boundaries, the bouncers were nice, it was just a really good community. I was sad to leave it honestly.”
Tomik nodded fervently in agreement.

“This is really funny,” he commented, still smiling, “We could have been here together on countless nights and never known it. We could have walked past each other every time we’d gone to the bar. Imagine if we’d met back then! Well, I guess we weren’t really looking for each other. You did the wristband thing too, right?”

Jace nodded, putting down his glass. The taste of strawberry fizz was just as nostalgic as the rest of this place.

“After the first few months or so, when I got my confidence.”

Tomik’s left hand wrapped around his right arm as if feeling for jewellery there. He blushed a little when he realised what he was doing, but carried on.

“Turquoise, pale blue, red then later orange, deep pink then silver.” As he spoke he lowered his hand, as if remembering where the ribbons had once been. Jace couldn’t help but itch at his right wrist, as if he could feel the ghost of the cloth there.

“Turquoise,” Jace replied, “Then lilac. Red later orange, deep pink and then silver.”

He couldn’t help but flush a little himself, knowing they both understood what those colours meant.

“Seriously?” grinned Tomik, “One colour off? No wonder Grant grouped us together. Also no wonder we never found each other. I never exactly wanted a mirror.”

“Me neither,” Jace admitted, “Though it would have been nice to meet a little earlier on.”

Tomik’s smile turned from amused to kind. Jace toyed with the straw in his drink, wondering if what he’d said would be deemed inappropriate or not. Especially after what they’d been talking about.

“I reckon we could have been friends,” said Tomik, clearly getting what he meant, much to Jace’s relief.

“Sat at the bar and compared conquests, done silly dares, that kind of thing. We still can be you know.”

Jace glanced at him in surprise.

“Friends?” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Tomik with a shrug, “I know we’ve only really met in meetings before, but look us now. We’ve got so much to talk about, even if it’s just our shared roots in this place. And we just kind of mapped out our sexual interests in front of each other via code. It doesn’t really get more personal than that.”

He laughed a little.

“Though on the topic of personal, do you mind if I ask you a question that’s been bothering me?”

Tomik had lowered his tone to a conspiratorial whisper. Jace, who was still reeling at the thought of having another friend, leant in a little closer to hear him better.

“It’s totally fine if you don’t want to answer,” Tomik murmured, “But I have a question about
people like you and Ral. Planeswalkers. I know about that stuff, Ral didn’t like keeping it a secret from me.”

“You can try,” Jace replied, “I can’t say I know everything about how we work.”

Tomik lowered his voice even further, Jace had to shuffle up right next to him to hear.

“So, err, planeswalkers are all incredibly powerful mages? Your magic is an inherent part of you, is that right?”

Jace nodded. It seemed like it.

“So, when you’re in bed with someone, does your magic always go haywire? Is that something planeswalkers always do during sex? I mean we put a lightning rod in our room, and sometimes the static heightens things but—“

Jace had unwisely decided to take a sip of drink in that moment. He choked and spluttered, getting pink stains on the white trim of his cloak. Tomik gave him a concerned look but Jace took a deep breath and managed:

“I—I don’t think it’s a sex thing,” he stammered, “I think it’s an emotion thing. At-at least it is for me. I have a habit of losing control of my magic when I’m emotional and sometimes that might be in bed. If you ask me, Ral’s just really happy he’s with you, or just so in love that he subconsciously expresses it through his magic.”

Tomik looked rather pleased.

“That’s quite flattering, in a weird magic way,” he commented, “But you’re a mind mage right? What happens to you?”

“My telepathy goes a bit wild,” Jace replied. He’d never spoken about this with anyone. No one had ever asked. This was an odd conversation to have but odd in a good way. No one really asked after his personal life these days because Vraska usually didn’t need to. Every day it was Guildpact this or Guildpact that. This admittedly was a bit of a relief.

“I end up linking my mind to theirs. They feel what I feel, my thoughts in their mind and visa versa.”

Tomik took a moment to consider this.

“That must be intense,” he stated.

Jace nodded.

“Useful,” he commented, “If you know what they really want then you can be a more attentive lover. Also, they know how comfortable you are.”

“Wow, I hadn’t thought of that.” Tomik looked rather impressed.

Jace wondered if he dared continue this line of conversation. They’d got this far hadn’t they?

“Do you remember a Boros man who called himself The Captain? Liked to be addressed as ‘Sir’?”

Tomik’s eyes grew wide.

“You didn’t,” he gasped.
Jace nodded.

“Seriously?”

Jace nodded again.

“But he’s—” Tomik seemed to be struggling to come up with another response. Jace couldn’t help but wonder if he’d confessed to the wrong thing and tried to cover himself.

“We met a few times,” he explained, “The telepathy was really useful because well, he appreciated knowing that he wasn’t hurting me at all. We met away from here a few times as well. I was a private investigator back then, I helped him track down his sister when she went missing.”

“He was a particularly muscular man,” Tomik commented, as if he was still trying to get his head around Jace’s previous dalliances.

“He was really nice,” Jace replied, “A proper soldier, honourable and gentlemanly. His sister not so much. Turns out she was in a Rakdos crime gang and he had to arrest her. He got pretty upset about that.”

“Did you help him through it?” Tomik asked.

Jace merely nodded as they were interrupted by Grant, who had come over to take their order. After he was gone, Tomik sat up a little straighter.

“Well, sorry for getting sidetracked there,” he said, his tone a little business-like but he was still blushing pink.

“We—we didn’t really come here to talk about that. I guess I got distracted by learning, well, you know.”

It had indeed been a revelation that they’d both come here in the past.

“That’s understandable,” Jace replied, “And I don’t mind. It’s honestly nice to talk about anything that isn’t government business.”

“I can understand that,” Tomik said, “Hours have been long lately. But what did you want to talk about? Why did you come to reception looking so scared?”

Distraction over, the fear returned so swift he shuddered in his seat. Tomik immediately looked concerned. He put a hand on Jace’s shoulder as Jace’s gaze fixed itself upon the table and his hands shook about his glass.

“What happened?” Tomik asked softly.

Jace didn’t know where to start. He didn’t want to look incompetent in front of his new friend, but he had so many emotions that this wasn’t making a whole lot of sense.

“Vraska’s gone,” he managed, in a low murmur.

Tomik’s brow furrowed as he tried to interpret this statement.

“Gone to another plane?” he asked, “Gone for how long?”

Jace pulled out the letter from his cloak. He’d put it, and the fabric note, into a pocket on the way out, unable to part from them. He showed it to Tomik with a whisper of
“I was going to tell her.”

“Tell her what?” Tomik asked, as he took the parchment. He scanned it quickly, mouthing the occasional word as he discovered a point of interest. He then took the fabric from Jace and read that. He smiled at it.

“This is cute,” he commented, pointing at the fabric note, “And really considerate. She truly does care about you. Not that I doubted that.”

He handed it back to Jace, who grabbed it from him with perhaps a little too much force.

“What were you going to tell her?”

Jace swallowed. If he couldn’t say this to someone else, then how was he ever going to say it to Vraska?

“That I love her,” he mumbled, “That I have for a really long time. I would be her best friend and her boyfriend, if she’d have me.”

Tomik was grinning from ear to ear. At Jace’s confession he’d clapped his hands together in delight.

“I knew it!” he exclaimed, “I mean, I’m not trying to patronise either of you. But ever since I asked Vraska if you were a couple, and she only replied that she didn’t think she was your type… I mean that wasn’t a no. So-“

Jace couldn’t help but interrupt him.

“Vraska thinks she’s not my type?”

Tomik nodded, looking very proud of himself over the rim of his glass.

“But she didn’t have any objections other than that. I’m almost certain she’s in love with you too.”

That didn’t make things better! Well, it kind of did, but aaah!

“But why wouldn’t she-“ Jace cut himself off, the answer was clear as day. He knew Vraska too well. It had to be the answer.

“Gods, this is about her thinking she’s a monster again. She keeps insisting people shouldn’t like her because of that. That’s why she doesn’t think she’s my type. She thinks I want a human, that’s why she wouldn’t tell me!”

“Look at the letter again,” prompted Tomik, waving it Jace, “Look at how she signed it off.”

Jace frantically focused back on the letter again. She’d signed it “With love.” Was it possible? Maybe she just meant it in a platonic way. There was no real means of knowing without asking her in person. Except he couldn’t do that because she’d gone off to another world without any chance for him to explain how he felt!

“Calm down,” Tomik told him, voice slow and steady, “Read the letter, read the note she left you. This isn’t going to get in the way of you two at all. Waiting isn’t great, but I’m sure you can tell her how you feel as soon as she comes back.”

That was so long to wait! He’d spend the whole time second guessing himself on how he should go about doing that.
“How did you do it?” he asked Tomik, “How did you confess to Ral?”

Tomik’s grin turned into a shy smile.

“How did you even meet?” Jace pressed. Tomik was the only person he knew who was in a successful relationship. Well, the only person he felt comfortable enough asking about it anyway. He wasn’t going to ask Ral about his feelings. He’d probably get electrocuted.

“It’s a bit of a story,” Tomik responded. When Jace didn’t object to that, he continued.

“Well, I guess we have you to thank a bit,” he explained, “We met in the lobby at the Chamber of the Guildpact. I was there to pick up some of the new meeting request forms for Ms Teysa, and he was there to, well…”

He let out an awkward laugh.

“He was yelling at the receptionist, wanting to see you so he could be mad at you. However, the receptionist wasn’t letting him in without an appointment and you were booked up for the next few weeks. He was getting angrier and the receptionist didn’t deserve such rage directed at him so… I intervened. I was feeling bold so I stepped right in front, between him and the desk. He shut up immediately, confused as to why I was there. It gave me enough time to drag him aside and tell him he was being unreasonable.”

That didn’t sound like the foundations of a romance, but Jace continued listening hoping he might learn something.

“He was sort of stunned by me. I don’t think anyone had tried to put him in his place like that in a very long time, and especially not someone he found attractive. Well, that’s what he told me later. At that moment though, once I’d finished telling him off, I came realise just how ridiculously gorgeous he was. My tirade had been really eloquent up to that point, but once I got a good look at him… I just stared at him and made a weird sort of squeaking noise.”

Unfortunately, Jace could relate to that, with Ral in particular. That uncomfortable teenage moment when Ral had pressed him up against those metal lockers... He didn’t feel like mentioning that to Tomik right now, or ever.

“My brain kind of went into secretary mode,” Tomik confessed, “I presented him with one of the meeting forms and asked whether he needed help filling it out. I suggested maybe I could help him, and we could get coffee whilst we did. To my immense surprise, he accepted.”

Tomik let out a little laugh and finished off his strawberry fizz.

“So we went for coffee, and he asked me at the end whether I’d like to go for a drink with him later that week. I said yes, and we ended up in having more than just a drink. I could tell from that first night he was a complicated man, with a lot of anger and a lot of issues to work through. He was also phenomenal in bed so I was more than willing to help with that in exchange for some life-changing sex.”

He turned rather red but kept on talking.

“It was like that for a while. Drinks, dinner occasionally, and a lot of time in his bedroom. Yet as time went on, sometimes we would just sit on his bed and chat. Small talk turned into hours and hours of just talking, about ourselves, about each other, about what we liked, didn’t like, about our pasts and how we thought they shaped us. We got very deep surprisingly fast and it was then I realised that this was something else. I trusted him, and more amazingly, he trusted me. There’s
hurt in his past, so much hurt. The last relationship he was in – it ended so badly he thought he would never fall in love again. Yet here he was, opening up to me. It was then I knew. I didn’t want to be another fling, I wanted to be there for him, I wanted to stand between him and anyone that might hurt him again.”

“Did you tell him that?” Jace said, as Tomik paused to fiddle with his sleeves.

Tomik nodded.

“Eventually. There was a nervous few weeks where I was terrified of ruining what we had. It meant so much to me that I didn’t want to push him to a point where he got uncomfortable and wanted to leave. I guess that’s what’s holding you back too?”

Jace nodded. That was exactly it.

“Then, Steam Festival came. All the different departments at Nivix have a competition to see who can produce the best fireworks and Ral was incredibly proud of what his team had made. He smuggled me into Nivix, right up to one of the tallest towers, just so I could get the best view of what he’d made. He was so excited, like a child on All-Tithe, waiting for their gift. And proud, so very proud at what his department had achieved. We had the top of the tower to ourselves, he’d brought champagne to celebrate and we held hands as we watched the first lot of fireworks go off. When we got to his department, we watched in silent awe at the magnificence of it all. When it was over, he was so thrilled it had all worked, he grabbed me and kissed me. It was then, surrounded by smoke and joy, that I knew this was it. I had to say something. I had to tell him. I had to be brave.”

Tomik laughed again, however his gaze was soft and slightly watery.

“And then he got there first, the bastard.”

Jace couldn’t help but smile. That was really romantic. More romantic than he could possibly imagine from someone like Ral. He must have set it all up, the tower, the champagne, the time alone. Part of him wondered how he could ever possibly do such a thing for Vraska, do something better. Another part reminded him that it wasn’t a competition. Still, Vraska deserved champagne and fireworks, all the romance, all the attention. Maybe now he had time to set something up?

“So that was us,” Tomik concluded, wiping his eyes on his sleeves, “You got to tell me about you two. How did you and Vraska meet?”

Jace told him about the meeting in the abandoned building. About some of the heists they’d done, the people they’d tricked into giving them enough money to get by. He told him about moving into their first flat, neglecting to mention the Orzhov pontiff they’d blackmailed and murdered, and how much he’d liked that simple living arrangement. He mentioned a few of the ups and downs, how he’d gone away too much and neglected her happiness. Jace told him of the day they’d made amends, that nervous conversation in their bedroom with Emmara outside. And how everything had been better afterwards right up to him becoming the Guildpact.

“And you still came to this place?” Tomik asked, “You had her at home, and you loved her even then, but you needed to come here?”

Whilst he’d been talking, their food had arrived. Jace stared at it whilst he tried to come up with an explanation that didn’t make him sound heartless.

“I was curious,” he tried, “About men and women. I wanted to try things that, well, Vraska wouldn’t want to. She’s always struggled with being touched. It makes her panic, brings back
memories of being tortured in prison. We’ve known each other for over ten years now, but, we’ve just started hugging in recent months. I’m happy to go at her pace, but in those days… I needed something more than just holding hands. Those sort of urges are natural, I never intended to cheat.”

“I didn’t mean to offend,” Tomik said quickly, “I understand. No need to justify. Some people find relationships at this place. Sorry, that was insensitive.”

They ate in silence for a short while. The food here was still really good, at least that hadn’t changed over the years.

“We sleep in the same bed now,” Jace broke the silence with a small murmur, “She helps me with my nightmares, I help her with hers. She’s right. In that letter. We do emotionally fall apart when we’re not together.”

Tomik dabbed at his face with a napkin, his manners better suited to a banquet table than a pub.

“That’s sweet. The bed thing, not the falling apart. I know whatever I say, you’re still going to worry. I did, constantly. Yet I don’t think you have anything to be anxious about. You love her and I’m certain she loves you. You were both just too worried to tell each other. Think of it this way, you’ve got plenty of time to come up with your own romantic scene and make it perfect. Do your equivalent of fireworks and champagne. Buy yourself a smart set of robes, book a really fancy restaurant, the sort of one that you have to get six months in advance. I bet they’ll do you a deal because you’re the Guildpact. Whatever you think you’d both enjoy.”

Jace nodded. He did have time. Plenty of time to make sure everything was perfect for his confession. He could make up for so many years of missed birthdays by creating the best day ever. The first date, probably Vraska’s first date ever, with so much time to plan, it couldn’t be anything less than perfect.

“Thank you,” he said to Tomik, his voice shaking a little, but his new resolve was beating back the urge to cry.

“No problem,” Tomik replied with a smile, “When you two are back on Ravnica together, promise me we’ll get a double date. I’ve always wanted to double date.”

Jace found himself returning the grin.

“I promise. Thank you, I really mean it.”

Tomik clapped a hand on his shoulder again.

“Hey, we’re a pair remember. Artie and Gabby, the heart throbs of the Copper Ladle. We’ve got to look out for each other.”

Jace laughed, relief coursing through him after so much near-panic.

“I thought I couldn’t call you Gabby unless I bought you a drink.”

Tomik shrugged.

“I’ll make an exception for friends.”

Friends.

Jace had a new friend. A new friend and a new resolve. This had been one hell of a day. He and
Tomik talked as the bar filled up around them, the after work rush beginning and the Copper Ladle flooding with patrons. Yes. As soon as he saw Vraska again he’d have an incredible day lined up for her. He’d even buy himself a new outfit for the occasion. He knew she wished he’d wear something different from time to time. Now he would! For her! There wasn’t much he wouldn’t do for her. So a spectacular day it was, a day for just the two of them.

A day he could never forget.
Captains

Chapter Summary

Vraska arrives on Ixalan and immediately makes her presence known to the locals.

For the first time in many years, Vraska could see the ocean. Ravnica’s seas had been paved over long before she was born and her trips to Theros had ceased as soon as Jace returned to her life. Yet here the vastness was unavoidable. She stood, decked out in her new garb, coat flapping in the ocean winds. The smell of salt was on the air itself, mixed with the stench of rotting fish, spilt ale and a definite whiff of pitch. The businesses facing the port were doing a roaring trade. Three large taverns had spilled out into their front porches, sailors and townsfolk alike swapping tales over large metal tankards. Ships were being unloaded into a large warehouse-looking structure, barrels being rolled along the ground, juddering and thumping as they went. Sacks of what looked like grain or flour were heading in the other direction, loaded onto the waiting merchant vessels, ready to be taken back out to sea. A few people, wearing wooden signs about their necks wandered about with trays of fruits, pouches of nuts and other snacks, trying to sell refreshments to the labourers. Vraska watched as a well-dressed family, sheltered under silk parasols, stepped out of their carriage and up a wobbly gang-plank, onto a waiting ship.

There was nothing quite like arriving on a new world. Vraska wasn’t the most well-travelled planeswalker. She was sure Jace had been to at least thrice as many planes as she had. Yet that didn’t diminish the thrill of discovery. She’d arrived dressed in the plainest clothes she could muster, before stepping into the nearest tailors and getting an outfit befitting of a captain. The dragon had provided her with three items in his Meditation Plane. The Thaumatic Compass – a weird looking device that only ever pointed one direction, supposedly to the golden city. A telescope, which looked very ordinary except for the weird runes carved down the side. And thirdly, a money pouch with no limit. She’d tried reaching the bottom whilst on Ravnica and ended up covering her bed with gold zinos. Once here, the bag produced thick gold coins stamped with a rose sigil on one side and a crown on the other. Vraska got the impression that the purse was enchanted to produce whatever the local currency was and plenty of it. She would need to pay her crew once they set sail, and this pouch would certainly do that. For now however, she needed to blend in with the locals.

Shoes were her first port of call. She was comfortable going about barefoot on Ravnica, but that comfort didn’t extend to other worlds. Besides, this place was excessively muddy and there was more than enough bits of splintered wood and shattered glass to give her thought. After the boots, she attended to the rest of the outfit. Shirt and trousers thick enough to weather the sea winds and a coat worthy of a pirate captain. She’d already seen other sailors decorate their belts and pockets with golden trinkets and was very keen to eventually do the same. She didn’t want to risk her Undermine blade so had got herself a cutlass at the first opportunity. The local style was comfortable, if you didn’t count the scantily-clad barmaids and the occasional topless sailor. People parted for Vraska as she walked by and that was exactly how she liked it. Respect, but no running away in terror, it made a nice change.

As she stood on the sea wall, enjoying the wind in her hair, she noticed a large crowd had gathered at the far side of the port. Nimbly taking the steps down, two at a time, she crossed the large wooden walkway, the crowd growing ever larger as she grew closer. There was shouting from
inside the circle, but she had to wade through a tide of bodies to get there. As she breached the outerwall, she found herself face to face with a fruit seller, trying to peddle oranges to the passersby.

“Orange for your voyage ma’am?” she asked. She was a young woman, perhaps a few years younger than Vraska. Her hair was braided with strips of coloured fabric and finished off with chunky wooden beads. She had a long ragged skirt and a red blouse that had certainly seen better days. She had a wooden plaque about her neck declaring one copper for an orange.

“Sorry miss, new in port,” she said to the woman, “How about a silver for an orange and the run down on whatever the heck is happening ‘round here?”

The woman’s face brightened into a wide grin as she took the proffered silver.

“I can certainly do that ma’am. Come with me, you’ll get a better look up on the crates.”

She led Vraska round the side of the crowd and up a small plank nailed to an immense stack of crates. There were other people sat there, watching the proceedings. She was right, the view from up here was much better.

“That there,” said the orange-seller, pointing to a man who seemed to be taking centre stage, “Is Mad Marv. Captain Marvolo to his face, mind you. Bastard of a man that is. Every time his crew make port they’re battered half to bits, and he’s drowned about half a dozen of them.”

Mad Marv was a wiry looking man in a long black leather coat. He had a large tricorn hat set with bright feathers, green, red and blue, probably from some sort of tropical bird. He was gesticulating angrily with a large cutlass. Sweeping it in unnecessarily large arcs about his person as he berated the crowd. Vraska couldn’t hear exactly what he was saying from this far away, his shouts were lost to the wind and the crowd. However it was evident that he was raving.

“The only reason those poor sods survive,” the woman continued, “Is because their Quartermaster’s as strong as two houses. She takes a beating so the little ones don’t have to. She won’t back down to Mad Marv so Mad Marv has to work about her. She’s over there, see her, arms like two masts.”

She pointed to the far side of the circle, where a large broad-shouldered woman was standing in front of a trio of terrified goblins. She would certainly give Ruby a run for her money when it came to muscle mass. Though Ruby had her beat on sheer amount of tattoos. The Quartermaster had blood dripping down her face, her hair matted into what was evidently quite the wound on her forehead. The goblins were holding onto her by the trouser legs. Despite their distance, it was plain to see that they were petrified of their captain.

“Every time Mad Marv comes into port,” the very knowledgable orange seller continued, “He picks up a fresh batch of fools and wrecks them on the high seas. Then comes back and complains that they all drowned and he needs more. But we know he drowns ’em himself in his temper. Throws ’em overboard when he gets into one of his rages. And he’s always raging Mad Marv is. When he drops anchor here he makes this huge show of it. Everyone hates him and he loves it. Challenges people to duels. Says if you beat him, you can have his ship. No one ever lives through Mad Marv. He’s a devil, but a devil with a blade if you know what I mean.”

Vraska did, but that wasn’t going to dissuade her. She needed a ship and she needed a crew that would be loyal come what may. If she could beat this abusive tyrant, then she’d have the respect of every person here, and perhaps the attention of the beloved Quartermaster to boot. She needed to start making connections if she was going to find herself a crew. Having a Quartermaster who
already had the respect of her peers was a very good start.

“Thanks,” she told the orange-seller, “You’ve been a real help. Good luck with your oranges.”

She made to clamber back down the crates.

“Ma’am wait!”

She turned just in time to catch the orange being thrown at her face.

“You almost left without your fruit,” said the woman. Vraska smiled at her.

“Sorry! Thanks again.”

She grinned as Vraska made her way towards the crowd and began to push her way through.

The closer she got, the easier it was to hear Mad Marv’s foul language, which seemed to be directed at everyone from his crew to passers by. He stalked up and down in front of his audience, explaining in expletive-laden shouts why everyone was worth shit compared to him. He threw a few choice curses at his crew, who were either huddled around the Quartermaster or trying to keep away from the proceedings by edging down the dock and mixing with the crowd. As soon as someone tried to speak to Mad Marv, he directed all his vitriol at them. The closer she got, the easier it was to part the crowd as each was trying to back away from his rage.

“Do any of you maggots think you’d out-smart me?!” Mad Marv bellowed, “Come and have a go! Cowards the lot of ya! Not enough salt on your bones to season a dead fish! Try me you-“

Thwack!

The captain blinked, his mouth agape as he was struck in the side of the head with an orange. The orange promptly hit the floor and rolled along the ground towards the feet of the crowd.

“Who-?!”

“Me.”

Vraska stepped out of the crowd. Free of the throng of bodies, she suddenly had every eye on her. Drawing her cutlass with a flourish, she walked towards him, slow, precise, calm, everything he currently wasn’t

“I may not be from around here,” she told him, “But in my part of the world, we don’t throw toddler tantrums and beat up our honest mates.”

There was a series of ‘ooh’s and murmurs from the crowd.

“A good Captain doesn’t need fear to keep her men in line,” she continued, “Loyalty’s a thing built on trust, protection and nice bag of gold at the end of the day.”

Someone shouted ‘here here’ and she grinned.

“So when I find out some madman’s been thrashing his hardworking crew, just because he’s a petty bastard, I’ve got to draw the line.”

She slashed her cutlass through the air, striking a heroic stance between Marv and the crowd he’d just been terrorising.
“Duel me Marv. Your ship is as good as mine.”

There was a moment of quiet in which the crowd murmured behind her. A gull shrieked overhead as Mad Marv sized her up, from the buckles on her boots to the waving tips of her hair.

Then he started laughing.

It was the maniacal cackle of a man who’d lost his sense years ago. You often found them sitting on the corner of Undercity streets. Laughing at nothing, but angry if you ever tried to offer them any assistance. Now she was closer, he also stank of alcohol. This man was not suited to be in charge of anyone. After today, he wouldn’t be.

“Alright missy,” Marv replied, “Let’s see what you’re made of. I like seeing fresh blood, specially when it’s being licked off my boots!”

With that he charged.

Vraska met him halfway, blades ringing amidst the cheers of the crowd. What he lacked in sheer coordination, he made up for in speed. The orange-seller was right. He was a devil with a blade. Thankfully, so was she. Of course she could quite easily petrify him. However she wasn’t just here to beat him. She was here to put on a show. Everyone in this port needed to know who she was and what skill they could expect from their new Captain. Therefore, she’d give him a chance. She’d toy with her prey before finally giving him what he deserved.

Back and forth they danced. He was fast, but she was faster, dodging and weaving with serpentine grace. She didn’t bother to disarm this time, cleaving a chunk of flesh out of the Captain’s leg, causing him to howl in agony as blood seeped into the wood below. It was clear he’d underestimated her, for he came back with a fury in his eyes unlike any he’d displayed before. Teeth gritted, eyes bloodshot, he swung at her in frenzied strokes. She caught his blade in the hook of hers and wrenched, sending it flying across the woodwork and into the ocean with a small splash. Yet even then, he refused to give in. He pulled a small dagger from inside his coat and ran at her, yelling wildly, no words, just sound. He leapt at her, blade grasped in both hands, as if he intended to stab her in the skull. It was as good a pose as any. Vraska’s eyes flashed gold, the heat passed, and Captain Marvolo crashed to the ground – a solid lump of stone.

The crowd fell silent at this display of magic. Then, off to Vraska’s left, she heard someone start to clap. She turned and there was the Quartermaster, a smile across her face, her large muscular hands coming together in applause. Soon her crewmates joined her, the goblins coming out from behind the Quartermaster’s legs and cheering wildly. Soon the crowd was whipped into a frenzy, cheers and whoops so loud that a flock of sea birds was sent screeching into the air. Vraska gave a bow as a man in a thick blue jacket pushed his way through the crowd. He had a tricorn of his own, but the large badge slapped across his chest left no doubt to who he was. Mr Jay, the Harbourmaster.

“Well, I guess she’s yours now,” he said, “Mad Marv’s got his ship anchored in the southmost bay. Paid his fees up to next week, so if you want to keep it around a bit longer, come see me in my office.”

He handed her a slip of parchment containing directions and a list of fees. With that he doffed his hat.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance Miss—“

“Captain,” Vraska interrupted, “That’s Captain Vraska, thank you. I will come by later to look over the ship. For now, you’ll have to excuse me. There’s someone I need to talk to.”
She looked right over his shoulder and straight to the smiling Quartermaster. She nodded and gestured upwards to one of the taverns overlooking the sea wall. Vraska excused herself one last time before walking through the crowd, who all parted, cheering in her wake.

Ten minutes later, she was at a table in a packed tavern, bumping shoulders with sailors, fishermen and the occasional surly faced guard. The Quartermaster had got a head start, not having had to push her way through an adoring audience. As soon as Vraska got there, she found a large tankard full of ale being pushed into her hands and she was beckoned over to a table, that swiftly cleared as she and the Quartermaster approached. Rumours followed them across the creaking floorboards. Murmurs of Mad Marv’s defeat had already sprung up the sea wall and to the bar. Vraska however was used to being stared at. The novelty of not having to go about hooded had yet to wear off, so she couldn’t bring herself to care.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” said the Quartermaster, once they had both sat down. She offered Vraska one rope-scarred hand. Vraska took it, biting back the urge to wince or grimace. Some physical contact was necessary. She just had to endure.

“I thought I’d be protecting folks from that piece of crap until the day I died. Heavy duty, let me tell you.”

“Well, I’m glad to have lightened the load,” Vraska replied, also glad to let go of her hand.

“Call me Amelia,” the Quartermaster continued, “And I’m the last of the old guard on The Black Dragon. Marv knocked the rest of them off over the years, literally in some cases.”

“Vraska,” she replied, “A pleasure, Amelia. I meant every word I said. I won’t tolerate a Captain who beats up his crew.”

Amelia took a deep swig of ale before wiping her mouth off on the back of her glove.

“Well, you’re a marvel round these parts,” she commented, “What’s your story?”

The words came to Vraska’s mind with speed faster than regular thought. They had almost escaped her before she realised what she was saying.

“I was Captain of a smuggling vessel making runs up and down the Emerald Coast,” she said, somehow knowing exactly what that entailed despite never having seen the place.

“Fine vessel called The Water Serpent. Fastest thing on the waves between Port Vinz and the Whiteback Caverns. Dangerous route, ever more dangerous with the vampires sticking their noses where they don’t belong.”

Amelia gave a sympathetic nod.

“Where’s your ship now?” she asked.

“Somewhere between Squire’s Point and the bottom of the deep,” Vraska sighed. Somehow she felt the loss of a ship she’d never owned, like a whole life had been inserted into her brain. She felt like she’d lived on this world for years, despite being here less than a day.

“Did one of my men a favour by taking on his little brother. Poor kid was getting beaten at home and needed an escape. Turns out the little idiot had already decided to throw in his lot with the bloodsuckers. He was in a bad spot, can’t blame him really, but I lost good mates on that trip, and ended up in a cage to boot. Took me two weeks to get out of that one.”
Amelia’s eyebrows were in danger of disappearing into the choppy waves of her fringe.

“You got out of a bloodsucker’s lockup?” she asked, somewhere between amazement and sounding incredulous. Vraska decided she might as well use what she had and pulled back the collar of her coat, revealing the long gashes – remnants of time spent in prisons on other plane. Amelia let out a low whistle.

“A few,” she replied, “That’s not the worse of it. Problem with looking like me is that people always assume you’re going to kill someone. Been locked up so many times since I was a girl, I’m almost expecting it.”

Amelia made to put a hand on her arm, but she had to shy away from that. Amelia instantly realised her error.

“Sorry Captain,” she said, “Should’ve realised from that mighty uncomfortable handshake of yours. There’s a few folks about here that can’t stand being touched. Believe me, you’re not the only one I know who’s had a rough lot of it. In life, with the vampires, all of it.”

She pulled back part of her shirt to reveal a deep patch of scarring, several gashes crisscrossed over the other. Vraska couldn’t help but notice, as she revealed part of her bra, that the undergarment was heavily padded with what looked like dishcloths and old rags.

“Marv decided he could take on a Dusk Legion dreadnought face on. We sank the bloody thing but not before our entire boat was crawling with bloodsuckers. You’re going to want to see the damage. Ship’s sea worthy but I wouldn’t recommend taking her out without a once over.”

“I’d appreciate it if someone familiar with the ship took me round,” Vraska informed her, “I got an expedition to run, for a new patron. New horizons, big risk but even bigger reward. Can’t do anything without a working ship and crew though.”

“I see how it is,” Amelia stretched, cracking her knuckles with a series of popping sounds, “Well, you got rid of Marv, that’s more than I’ve managed in last few years. People gotta respect you after that, I certainly do. If you want a Quartermaster, and you’ve got the gold, I’m yours.”

She offered Vraska a hand before realising her mistake again. Vraska hesitated for a moment before lightly taking it.

“Thank you Amelia. My patron’s pockets run as deep as open waters. You won’t be disappointed.”

She laughed.

“Well, that’s one crewmember for you. Want to look round the ship first before we go find the rest?”

Vraska nodded, downing a large amount of ale. It was so watery, she could barely taste any alcohol in it.

“Lead the way Quartermaster,” she said, “Let’s go look at my ship.”
With her new quartermaster in tow, Vraska sets out to recruit a crew for her ship. With The Black Dragon low on numbers, it's time to meet all the colourful personalities this port has to offer.

The Black Dragon had clearly seen better days. There was no doubt in Vraska’s mind that it had once been a fine vessel. However, what splendour it once possessed had no doubt been lost to years of sea travel and less than diligent care. The first thing she noticed upon arrival, was the fact that someone had dragged Mad Marv’s statue back to the ship. She and Amelia paused a moment to watch the seagulls sit on it before deciding to leave it where it was for now.

“If it doesn’t get shit on too much,” Vraska commented, “It would certainly make for an intimidating figure head.”

Amelia laughed.

“That it would. Got the right pose for it and everything. I’ll ask the topsmen if they can drag it aboard.”

It turned out that The Black Dragon, in addition to needing some repairs, was also lacking a lot of its crew. Holes could be repaired and ropes could be retied, but the people problem was going to take much longer to fix. Amelia was quick to explain what had happened.

“When I first stepped on board,” she explained, “It was under Captain Leo, or Leonard if you want to be fussy about it. Captain Leo was a generous sort, seasoned sailor, old naval officer gone rogue. Proper gentleman to anyone but his enemies. Stand up chap. Took a weedy fourteen year old girl on when no one else would have her, so I pretty much owed him my life.”

She paused a moment to show Vraska where a metal fixture had come loose.

“Captain Leo’s crew are the lot I call the old guard. There’s six of us left and I’m the only one who stayed on board. If we want the best crew possible, I say we go find the other five.”

“We have plenty of time,” Vraska agreed with her, “I’ll be making sure the ship is as good as it’s maiden voyage before we set off.”

Amelia nodded her approval.

“Age happens to the best of us,” she continued, “And Captain Leo wasn’t exactly a spring chicken when he recruited me. He stayed on board until the end, died in his bed, a nice way to go. Never got to see what sort of monster his son became.”

“So Marv inherited the Captaincy?”

Amelia grimaced.

“Not initially. Leo’s first mate, a strapping lady named Elizabel, got to be Captain for all of a
month. Then Marv killed her in her sleep. That’s when things started going to hell. Everyone who could deserted as soon as we got to land. Marv hunted down who he could, but everyone rich and able enough had long flown. The thing is with pirates though, a lot of us don’t have anywhere to go. I’d worked myself up to the Quartermaster’s mate by that point. I could have fled, but there were so many of us that couldn’t. Stupid maybe, suicidal definitely. I could have gotten myself killed a hundred times over, but I stayed behind to protect them all regardless."

“That’s certainly not stupid at all,” Vraska replied, “You showed compassion in the face of such terrible odds, put yourself before those who could not defend themselves. The people of this port look up to you as a figure of strength and justice. Those are all the marks of a heroine. I for one am proud to have met you, and honoured to work with you going forwards”

Amelia flushed crimson and gave her a silly grin that clearly showed how flattered she was.

“You’re a sweetheart, Captain. If you don’t mind me saying”

“Calling me Vraska is fine for now,” she said, “It’s going to be a while before we set sail.”

“Well, it’s an honour to work with you too Vraska,” Amelia said, still blushing. “Come, I want to introduce you to Terence, he’s the doc on board and a real good laugh at port.”

She finished her tale as they descended below deck. Once Captain, Marv had made a point of picking up new recruits every time they made land. Once out at sea however, they tended to lose most of their recruits to Marv’s rage, or to the waves. Those with experience did their best to keep the newcomers healthy and whole, but working under Marv became a game of survival rather than skill. Right now, they had a full crew of topsmen, or tops-goblins, but nearly every other part of the ship had lost most of its crew as soon as they’d got ashore. Vraska couldn’t blame them for having done a runner, but it was going to mean a lengthy recruitment process. Fortunately, one position they didn’t need to fill, was a doctor. Terence, Amelia informed her as they approached, wasn’t part of the old guard. But he had come during the later days of Captain Leo – to check on the elderly captain’s health. Terence was an ex-navy doctor, had gone to medical school and everything, and was the reason why many of the crew were still in one piece. As they approached the doctor’s quarters, Amelia stopped them in their tracks.

“One thing with Terence,” she stated, “Don’t mention the parrot. Don’t look at the parrot. Let the parrot do its thing.”

Vraska nodded.

“Ignore the parrot, got it.”

Amelia knocked loudly on the door.

“Come in! Come in!” wheezed a man’s voice. Amelia opened the door and stood back for Vraska to enter first. She did, and was immediately greeted with a rather spacious room, absolutely packed with beds and shelves, all laden with various bottles, pouches and other medicinal supplies. A large man sat on a leather-backed armchair, reading a book that was peeling apart at the spine. His hair and moustache were silver grey, both immaculately groomed, giving him an air of authority along with his slightly-faded green tail coat. Pinned to a piece of sail cloth, which had in turn been nailed to the wall, was a series of gleaming medals. More striking even than these however, was the man’s mechanical leg. Wooden with metal joints, it was far more elaborate than any peg-leg she’d seen in the tavern. It clearly operated off a series of levers and springs to give all the movement of a natural limb. However, instead of a human foot, he’d chosen that of a bird. Did the outstretched talons provide great stability? Whatever the case, it was an impressive piece of engineering.
Vraska’s attention was immediately drawn by a loud squawk from the far side of the room.

“'s a pretty lady!” exclaimed a large grey parrot, who sat on a curtain rail at the far side of the room.

“'s a pretty lady doc! ‘s a pretty lady!”

Vraska remembered that she was supposed to be ignoring the parrot and focused on Terence instead. The Doctor sighed.

“I know Phillip,” he groaned, turning in his chair to look at them both. At the sight of Amelia, his harried expression brightened.

“Why look who it is,” he exclaimed, “Back on board already Amy? I thought you’d finally run for the hills with the rest of them.”

“Never, doc,” Amelia replied, “You’ve heard what happened to Marv, I take it?”

“Bastard!” exclaimed the parrot, “E’s a bastard doc!”

“Thank you Phillip,” the doctor said sternly, before turning back to Amelia, “Indeed I have. And this striking young lady you have with you?”

“Our new Captain,” Amelia announced, “Captain Vraska, meet Doctor Terence Higgins. Terence, meet Captain Vraska, new captain of The Black Dragon.”

Terence politely tipped his tricorn as Vraska gave a little bow.

“If you’ll consent to work under me of course,” Vraska added, “If you find me lacking, you’re more than free to seek other employment.”

Terence took a moment to size her up. Vraska waited patiently as the parrot rattled about on its curtain pole at the other side of the room, mumbling curse words as it clattered about.

“You took down Marv in a duel,” Terence reasoned aloud, “So you’ve got to be a lass who takes care of herself. And you’ve won over Amy, which is a star in my books. I know.”

With a groan, he wobbled to his feet.

“Let’s pour one out to the death of Marv and a new Captain,” he wheezed, “If Captain Vraska can take drink her dues, then you’ve got yourself a doctor.”

“I won’t disappoint,” Vraska replied. A drinking competition? She hadn’t engaged in many over the years, but considering how weak the ale was last night, the alcohol didn’t seem to be as strong here as it was on Ravnica. Amelia crossed her arms and grinned.

“You ever had navy rum Vraska?”

Vraska shook her head.

“I tend to be on the wrong side of the navy to get to try it,” she stated, not knowing if that was exactly true. However, it clearly worked as Amelia chuckled.

“Well, Terence somehow ended up with three barrels of the stuff, mixes it with whatever fruit’s going and only rolls it out for special occasions. Hopefully it’ll be the coconut stuff from our last voyage. That stuff burned but seas and skies, it was divine.”
Terence crossed the room and started to rummage about on one of the shelves. He let out a soft ‘aha’ as he pulled out a large brown glass bottle, stoppered with cork about the size of Vraska’s fist. Beverage located, he then retrieved a leather pouch, revealing six small metal cups, each engraved with a different coat of arms.

He lined the cups out on his desk and filled them to the brim with a cream coloured liquid that Vraska couldn’t identify from sight alone.

“Three cups each,” Terrence declared, “Then I’ll call you Captain.”

If Vraska could survive a whole night on Apple Smiters, she could probably survive this too. Amelia wished her luck as she crossed over to the desk, sitting in the chair proffered to her. Terrence handed her the first metal cup. It was cool to the touch. Now she was closer she could see the liquid inside had bits in it. Little white flecks of something. She hoped it was part of whatever a coconut was.

“Alright,” said Terence, easing himself back into his chair, “On three?”

Vraska nodded.

“One, two, three. Drink!”

Vraska downed the whole cupful in one swallow and immediately the back of her throat began to burn. She refused to let herself splutter as she put the cup back on the table. Whatever the hell that was, it was foul. The flavour was definitely medicinal, with an underlying sweetness that did nothing to mask the horrendous burning sensation now clinging to her tongue and throat. She’d eaten things that tasted far worse in her youth, however Amelia had said there’d be fruit. This did not taste like fruit!

Terrence passed her another glass.

“One, two, three. Drink!”

She knocked back the second dose, trying to imagine it was an Apple Smiter. However, Apple Smiters tasted incredibly sweet, this tasted like she was chugging one of Emmara’s foul health supplements. Well, she hoped those supplements weren’t alcoholic, because this certainly was. Somehow this vile concoction was making her even thirstier.

“One, two, three. Drink!”

Best to get it over and done with. The third cupful was like drinking sandpaper. She barely kept it down, trying to wrestle with her gag reflex as subtly as possible. Finally, the deed was done and Terrence was passing her a waterskin, which she drank from gratefully.

“Most impressive!” Terence clapped his hands together as Amelia picked up the bottle and gave it an experimental sniff.

“Want some Amy?” the doctor asked. He tossed her one of the cups. She caught it, poured herself a glass, before downing the contents whole.

“What the fuck is this?!” she exclaimed, as soon as she got her breath back. She took a moment to cough into her sleeve before rounding back on the doctor.

“I thought you were giving her coconut rum! What in the blazes is this shit?”
“Bugger it all!” exclaimed Phillip the parrot.

“You don’t like it?” Terence asked, staring at the bottle, which Amelia had hastily put back on his desk.

“No doc, it tastes like wood varnish. What is it?”

Terence shrugged.

“A little of this, a little of that. There is both rum and coconut in there.”

Amelia stuck her tongue out and tossed the cup back to him.

“I’ll stick to my regular thanks.”

She turned to Vraska.

“You feeling alright Captain? Might I recommend we hop ashore and get something to eat? Soak up some of that bullshit.”

Vraska nodded, willing her stomach to settle down enough for her to get up and address the room properly.

“Good idea,” she managed, “Thank you, Doctor. Just to let you know, I will be paying for some maintenance to be done on the ship. I will let you know when that will take place so you aren’t, well, alarmed.”

He nodded.

“Good speed Captain. Go get something to eat.”

She nodded and followed Amelia out.

The rest of that afternoon was spent at the back of “The Dog and Barrel”, an inn set a little way off the seafront between the large warehouse she’d seen earlier and a butchers shop. The owners clearly knew Amelia for they cleared a table for them upon arrival and food and drink came freely all day long. Once she’d restored sensation to her mouth, Vraska decided this was as good a spot as any to run through what repairs would need to be done to the ship. She pulled out ink and parchment and she and Amelia set out what should be done in order of priority. They also planned to pay the Harbourmaster a visit. With all the repairs that needing doing, plus the time it would take to find a crew, they were going to have to pay to keep the ship in port for a few months. Their discussion swiftly moved onto wages. Amelia detailed how much Marv had promised, and in most cases, neglected to pay out. The wealth of sailing knowledge Vraska had in her head told her point-blank that Marv had been a complete miser. When she rattled off the wages she knew to be reasonable, Amelia looked like she was going to cry.

“Is that really how much they pay up north?” she asked. Vraska nodded.

“And on top of that, you’d get your share of whatever loot,” she added.

“Fuck me. I knew we had it bad, but not this bad,” Amelia sighed into her tankard, “You’re really going to pay us that much?”

Vraska nodded, confident that her infinite money pouch would allow her to. The dragon wouldn’t have put those figures in her head if he didn’t expect her to use them.
“And pay for all the repairs?” Amelia pressed.

“All of them,” Vraska confirmed, “Though, if I may, I’m going to sell off all that trash Marv hoarded in his quarters.”

“Oh please do.”

Amelia had shown her the captain’s quarters. The room was more a junkyard than an adequate living space. Marv seemed to be obsessed with material signs of opulence – paintings, sculptures, jewellery, furniture, however he had heaped his ill-gotten gains in such a way that the room was practically in-navigable. Somewhere under all that misused decadence, was supposed to be a meeting table with all the maps and charts they would need to get to Ixalan. Beyond that, a door to the Captain’s personal bedroom. Yet Vraska couldn’t even see a table amidst the hoard, let alone a door. It was all going up for auction to fund what a mess Marv had made of his boat.

After a trip to see the Harbourmaster, they returned to The Dog and Barrel to get a good night’s sleep. Amelia was loathe to go back to her hammock when there were mattresses available, and Vraska probably couldn’t get into the captain’s quarters if she tried. Vraska wasn’t against the idea of a hammock. After sleeping in alleys and corpse chutes, you could get a night’s rest pretty much anywhere. However, she was more than happy to indulge her new friend and get a room for the pair of them. Twin beds, a sink and a pair of chamber pots. Nothing fancy, but it was more than enough.

The following morning, they went back to the Harbourmaster to check that their first lot of repairs would start that day. First on the list were structural damages, potential cracks, leaks, broken rigging and the like – important factors in keeping the ship afloat and moving. By the time they got there, the goblins from yesterday had returned. They had hauled Marv’s statue up on deck and were now harassing the carpenters who were coming on board. At the sight of Amelia however, they instantly stood to attention.

“No better time than the present,” Amelia commented, before marching forward to address them all.

Vraska met seven goblins total, all of whom seemed to have named themselves after items of clothing. She got the distinct impression that, whilst they were still capable sailors, these goblins might not be as intelligent as their Ravnican cousins. After a speedy set of introductions, and a quick check in on Terence, she was whisked off the ship and back into town.

“This is my reasoning,” Amelia told her as they headed towards a set of stables, “We won’t know about everything we need, until we’ve got our whole journey planned. And I mean everything, crew, supplies, munitions, that’s going to depend where we’re going and how we’re getting there.”

“Of course,” Vraska agreed, letting her go on.

“So, next port of call is finding ourselves a navigator,” Amelia continued, “Someone who knows the route and can advise us on what prep we need to do.”

“That is indeed sensible,” Vraska replied, “You sound like you have someone in mind.”

“I do,” Amelia stated, “One of the old guard who got away. He's exceptional with maps, there's no one else like him. He lives a short stretch away in Peach Bay. We’re going to need horses.”

Vraska had never ridden a horse before. She’d rode on plenty of wagons. She’d also ridden a beetle through the Undercity wilds, which served the same function as a horse down there. However,
neither of those things compared to the four-legged, impatient and foul-smelling beast she was presented with for hire. She did hire it. And she pretended she knew what she was doing as she mounted with the aid of a small block of wood. However, her stomach still hadn’t quite recovered from the ale and whatever it was that the doctor had given her. It gave a truly sickening lurch as the horse set off down the road, following Amelia, who had taken the lead on hers. What commenced there was two of the most uncomfortable hours of Vraska’s existence. She was forced to trust the horse not to lead her off the road as she struggled to keep the contents of her stomach where they were. She almost vomited on the roadside when Amelia insisted they pick up the pace. Riding a horse was nothing like riding a beetle. The beetle was far wider, with a far more elaborate set of straps and handholds on the saddle to keep you on. The horse meanwhile seemed to know she was anxious and sick, and was making the situation a whole lot worse for her.

“Fuck you,” she whispered at the horse as it decided to randomly speed up just to spite her, “Why aren’t you a beetle?”

“Did you say something Captain?!” Amelia called back, sitting astride her horse as if it was the normal thing in the world.

“Nothing!” Vraska bit back a wave of nausea and clung onto the reins a little tighter as her stomach churned.

Their journey couldn’t end soon enough. However, the last leg was significantly improved by the reason Peach Bay had got its name. The road opened up into miles upon miles of orchards, each packed with fruit trees. On one side there were citrus plants, oranges, lemons and limes, whilst on the other were the aforementioned peaches, planted in neat rows parallel with the road. Vraska managed to swipe a peach as she passed by, giving her stomach a distraction as they started to trot down a rocky incline. Soon they reached the outskirts of a small farming village, curious livestock coming to peer at them over low stone walls as they approached. Vraska recognised the goats and the sheep – they weren’t too different to those on Ravnica. Yet there were other woolly animals here, far bigger than the sheep with long necks and curious looking expressions on their faces. Vraska stared at them as she passed them by. She noted a few of them had been sheared, much like sheep, but it didn’t give her any clue as to what they were.

The village was so small its roads were dirt tracks and very few of its buildings extended to a second storey. They hitched their horses up outside a little village shop, Vraska very glad that the trip was finally done. Amelia beckoned for her to follow through the village square – an open patch of space mostly taken up by a large well. They strode past small wooden buildings and down another dirt track, the sounds of waves getting ever louder as they descended. The path got steeper the longer they travelled, explaining why they had neglected to bring their horses this far. Vraska was almost certain she would have fallen down the hill if her horses had attempted this steep passageway.

“What have you ever met a siren?” Amelia asked her as they rounded a corner, following the track further down the hill.

“Briefly.” Vraska said. The sirens she’d glimpsed were on Theros. Beautiful women with wings and crests like birds. They hadn’t shown much interest in her but they were a sight to behold nevertheless.

“Well, you’re about to meet a lot,” Amelia stated, “There’s a bunch of them here at Peach Bay, including the guy we’re heading to meet.”

She paused a moment to catch her balance on a particularly rocky piece of ground.
“You’ll see where we’re going as soon as we get there.”

“How so?” Vraska asked, passing the rocks much more nimbly than her quartermaster.

“Sirens have got bird habits,” Amelia explained, “Malcolm always reckoned there must be a common ancestor somewhere down the line. Whatever it is, they act a lot like birds do when it comes to finding a lover.”

They rounded another corner through a patch of trees. Now they were further down, Vraska could glimpse thatched roofs beyond the treeline. It appeared the village continued on past the decline.

“How so?” Vraska asked as they finally reached the bottom of the hill. The houses down here were far grander than the village above. Many were constructed of brightly painted stone with ornamental balconies and verandas. Some were two storeys high, others three, all windows looking out over the ocean. Lines of laundry were hung between buildings, clothes flapping in the sea breeze as they walked on by. Another corner later and they were on a stone boardwalk, overlooking a beach full of black volcanic sand.

“Men in particular. They get this urge to pretty everything up to impress a mate. So you can guess what happens when two men fall head over heels for each other.”

Vraska didn’t need to imagine it. As soon as they arrived on the boardwalk, she had spotted their destination. A pretty two storey house stood a few yards away, white stone almost lost to the sheer amount of stuff that had been draped, hung, tiled or painted onto its walls. It was a beacon of colour against the more sedate seaside homes, every square inch bearing some sort of tile, fabric or shell upon its surface. The veranda had been transformed into a striped tent of mismatched awnings and silk scarves. Plaited ribbons hung from the beams, alongside wind chimes made of shells and dream-catchers strung with bright feathers and glittering glass beads. There was a cacophony of clanks, rattles and chimes as Vraska and Amelia approached. The front steps had been tiled so eclectically that Vraska had to assume they’d just been thrown on randomly over the years. Nothing about this house’s décor matched at all. Even the pair of rocking chairs out front were at odds. One had been painted metallic gold and heaped with mismatched cushions, whilst the other was naturally wood coloured with the remnants of a beaded curtain strung over the back.

It was a lot. However, as Vraska took it all in, understanding that this was the work of two men who must love each other very much, she thought it was sweet. They had clearly done everything they could to impress each other, and that had resulted in an absolutely unique house they could call their own. Good on them. She appreciated the need for a good hoard, even if this one wasn’t as sparkly as hers. Though she couldn’t help but wonder what the neighbours thought.

“Hello!” called Amelia, over the ring of the windchimes, “Malcolm! Johnson! You guys home?!”

There was a moment’s silence before:

“Over here!” was bellowed from round the side of the house. They followed the veranda around the left side of the building and down another set of tiled steps. There was a large garden out back with a side building taking up about half of it with the sound of ringing metal. Vraska knew a forge when she saw one. The smell of burning coal and molten metal was the same wherever you
smelled it, and the heat radiating from the building was almost unbearable, considering it was already so humid outside. There was the clunk of someone putting down their tools, a few footsteps, and then a tall man emerged from the set of double doors leading into his workspace.

He was undoubtedly a siren. His face was framed with long blue feathers, bright yellow at the tips, as were the long feathers about his arms and back. His eyes reminded Vraska of a hawk’s, but his plumage suggested a far more tropical bird. His wings started blue, turned green and then into the bright yellow of his head-plumage. Yet that wasn’t all that was striking about him. The sirens she’d seen on Theros were slim almost spindly ladies, more feather than flesh. This man wouldn’t look out of place in a Boros regiment. Thick muscular arms, no doubt from working his forge, gleamed with sweat in the noon day sun. He was wearing a leather apron, but it did nothing to hide the thick patch of feathers on his bare chest, replacing perhaps any body hair he could have had there. All he wore below the waist was a pair of shorts, showing off just how muscular he was. His overall shape reminded Vraska distinctively of Gideon, and she briefly wondered if the Therosian was still on Ravnica. Unlike Gideon however, this siren towered over even Vraska and Amelia. Vraska put Amelia about six-three. This siren must be closer to six-seven, maybe more.

“Johnson!” Amelia greeted. She offered the smith a hand to shake and instead he grasped her arm. She grasped it back and shook.

“Pleasure as always,” Johnson replied, his voice was incredibly deep and somehow soothing to hear.

“Johnson, this is Captain Vraska,” Amelia introduced, “Please don’t be offended if she doesn’t grasp arms, she’s got lock-up senses.”

Johnson made an ‘ah’ motion with his mouth and instead opted for a small bow.

“Honoured, Captain Vraska.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Johnson,” Vraska replied, with a bow of her own, “May I say, I love your collection on the veranda. You and your husband must have shared so many happy memories putting it all together.”

“I like her,” said Johnson, “Though I’m surprised you’re travelling with a new captain Amelia. Did you finally ditch Marv?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Amelia, somewhat proudly, “I come bearing news your hubby is definitely going to want to hear.”

Johnson grinned.

“Well, I’d better get him out here then. He’s in the house, don’t know why he didn’t come running.”

He turned to the main building.

“Malcolm!” he called, “Malcolm! You’ve got guests! You clothed?”

A very musical sigh came from inside the building.

“One hundred percent!” came a shout from within, “But can they wait…five minutes? I’m in the middle of something here.”

“No, you get your ass out here Mister,” Johnson replied, “In my house we respect our guests when
they come knocking.”

Another sigh, louder this time.

“All-right,” the voice groaned in a very sing-song sort of tone.

“Excuse me?” Johnson retorted. The sound of laughter came from the veranda. Emerging from round the side of the house was another siren, this one a lot smaller than his husband. Malcolm was a much paler blue, his feathers getting paler still as they reached their white tips. He was certainly dressed like a pirate. He was wearing a waistcoat but no shirt, a red silk sash draped over one shoulder as a confection of small shiny objects dangled from its folds. He wore one hooped gold earring and a stud in his nose that glittered in the sunlight. He too was wearing shorts, but unlike his husband’s, they were almost skin tight.

“Alright, sir,” he corrected himself. He bounded gracefully off the veranda and joined them, sidling up to Johnson with a cheeky smirk on his face. Vraska couldn’t help but notice that Malcolm only came up to his husband’s chest.

“Amelia!” Malcolm greeted, as soon as he caught sight of her, “Long time no see! Or too much sea? Either way, so good to see you!”

They hugged.

“And who’s this then?” he asked, as soon as they had let go. He gave Vraska a once over.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes? What even are you?”

“Malcolm!” Amelia and Johnson spoke in unison. They stared at each other and laughed.

“I’m a gorgon,” Vraska stated. This was the first time she’d met a male siren, so she could hardly judge him for wondering what she was. If her memory was to be believed, all the sirens on Theros were supposed to look like women. Yet here were two male sirens and this didn't seem remotely unusual for this plane. The chances of there being male gorgons in the multiverse suddenly looked a lot more likely.

“More importantly however, Amelia and I have news for you.”

“We do!” Amelia chipped in, “It’s an exciting time to get back on the high seas Malcolm. We have a new Captain.”


“Me,” Vraska replied. Malcolm gawped at her.

“She defeated him in single combat,” Amelia elaborated, “It was a show and a half, you would have loved it.”

A whole array of emotions passed over Malcolm’s face like a picture show. First shock, then awe, then joy, followed by disbelief, yet more joy, and then a sudden overwhelming excitement.

“You’re here to beg me to come back!” he exclaimed, “You need the skills of the brave and dashing Navigator Malcolm!”

“We do,” Vraska replied, “We’re going on an expedition to Ixalan, and Amelia says you are the best of the best when it comes to getting us there.”
“Well she’s not wrong!” said Malcolm, bouncing a little in his excitement, “But I don’t doff my hat for just anyone you know.”

“You don’t wear hats,” Johnson pointed out. Malcolm put a hand on his husband’s arm as if that would silence him.

“You know what I mean,” he said, “You have to earn the loyalty of this expert navigationalist.”

“I’m not sure that’s a word,” Johnson commented. Malcolm ignored him.

Vraska took a deep breath, remembered the foul drink, and said:

“Name your terms. As long as they don’t involve dubious beverages.”

Malcolm laughed.

“I see you’ve met Terence already.”

She nodded.

Malcolm rolled his shoulders, as if prepping himself for exercise or to lift a heavy object. Vraska waited for him to explain what he expected her to do. She hoped every crew member wasn’t like this. She didn’t want to spend the rest of her life here.

“There’s only one thing you can do to prove you’re worthy of my skills,” Malcolm announced, feathers flaring as he struck a heroic pose.

“And believe me, it’s a real challenge. You and I…”

He pointed out to sea.

“We’re racing.”
Vraska has a race to win if she wants to earn the loyalty of a legendary navigator. Thankfully, none of her other crew members prove quite as difficult.

On her trips to Theros, Vraska had dreamed of sailing. The wide blue sea had seemed like something fantastical to a teenager who had spent most of her years on Ravnica. It was truly a crime that the Izzet had seen fit to pave over the oceans, and an even greater crime for all the other guilds to have allowed it to happen. There was no way of knowing if the Ravnican seas would have been as beautiful as those on Theros, or here on Ixalan. However, Vraska though it unjust that Ravnica hadn’t been given the same chance. The ocean was vast and beautiful, and so many, millions in fact, would never get to see it back home. Yes there were merfolk and Simic deep in their zonots. But even they didn’t get to see this, a whole horizon of nothing but sea and sky.

There would be more time to marvel later however. For now, she had a race to win. In a place such as this, she had known at once that it wasn’t going to be a footrace. Also Malcolm could fly, why would he want to run? He led Vraska and Amelia down to a small quay, only a few minutes’ walk from his exuberantly decorated home. There, tied to a quaint wooden pier, were a pair of similarly vibrant boats. The little sail boats had been painted up in bright blue and yellow, with bunting wrapped about their masts and large flowers painted upon their decks. They were slightly less gaudy than the house, but only slightly. Vraska couldn’t help but admire them. This all made sense. If they lived so close to the sea, why wouldn’t Malcolm and Johnson have boats? Peach Bay looked out on an almost circular stretch of ocean, framed by cliff walls and high rocky outcroppings. The gap between the cliffs gave them their privacy – wide enough for small vessels but impractical for larger ships if they wished to make port. Malcolm explained all this as he readied the two boats.

“Here’s the deal,” he stated, “We race from here to the Devil’s Armpit and back. If you beat me, I join you. If you don’t, well come back when you can.”

“And where is the Devil’s Armpit?” Vraska asked. She eyed the rocky pillars in the distance. It could honestly be any of them.

“The arch over yonder,” Malcolm pointed at one of the largest weathered outcroppings. It was large enough to have grass and trees growing atop it – a splash of green against the horizon. The waters were currently calm, only one sailing vessel out on the waves. Her newfound expertise told Vraska the main challenge would be catching enough wind in her sail. It was a very peaceful day weather-wise, perhaps not the fastest racing conditions.

“You ready?” Malcolm asked expectantly.

“Sure,” Vraska stepped forwards, looking at the two brightly coloured vessels.

“Which do I get?”

It was confirmed. Vraska adored the ocean. She knew far too much about boats for someone who’d never gone out on the waves. However, with the ease at which sailing came to her, she
could pay all the more attention to the waters about her. They sparkled delightfully under the afternoon sun, a myriad of greens, blues and silvers. The further out she went, the more the wind picked up, filling her sails and rushing past her scales in a way that only served to give her an sense of freedom like no other. She laughed as she picked up a particularly large gust of wind, catapulted far ahead of Malcolm who yelled something like ‘no fair’ from behind her. For now, she shouldn’t care about what he was going. She could focus on keeping and lengthening her lead and that meant going as fast as this boat would allow.

As she sped towards the Devil’s Armpit, she swiftly realised there was more to this rock than Malcolm had let her in on. The first thing she spotted was the rope bridge attaching the Devil’s Armpit to the shoreline. It was small, rickety, but certainly in use by whoever lived in the small wooden cabins atop the rocks. The next thing Vraska noticed were the catapults. That rock was manned and armed. The only reason why Malcolm hadn’t mentioned that, had to be because he wanted to use it for his advantage. Fine, if he expected her to come under fire than she had to defy all those expectations.

She’d had this idea when Amelia was showing off her talents as a helmsmage – magically controlling the ropes aboard the Black Dragon. The robes were made with a treated fibre known as ‘spellweave’, which enabled helmsmages to channel their magic throughout the entire ship. It didn’t have to be telekinetic magic either. Vraska had pushed a few spells of her own through the weave much to Amelia’s amazement. She used old assassin’s enchantments, plus a little innate gorgon magic, to cloak the ship in shadow and render it utterly silent. It was this she now applied to the little sailing boat. The ropes were spellwoven and more than enough to obscure her from someone high atop the Armpit. Invisible to any potential assailants, she easily looped through the archway, reveling in the sea spray across her face. She dropped the magic as soon as she was out of catapult range, free to focus entirely on the race at hand. She couldn’t even see Malcolm as she docked. Amelia however came running towards her, grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re a bloody natural!” she cheered, “How did you get through the Armpit without getting a faceful of fruit?”

“Smuggler,” Vraska replied, tying the boat back up and stepping onto the pier.

“We’re a sneaky bunch.”

Amelia had only confirmed her suspicions that the real challenge hadn’t been the sailing but the surviving. That made sense. Malcolm wasn’t a helmsmage after all, he was a navigator. He wanted to know how well she could navigate her terrain and how, as a Captain, she would cope under pressure. Well, she’d avoided said pressure entirely. That probably counted. Malcolm turned up a few minutes later looking soggy and unimpressed.

“Those damn goblins have one job,” he huffed, “One job! I bet they’re just sitting on their arses up there!”

“They didn’t hear, or see, me coming,” Vraska commented, “I wouldn’t blame them if I were you.”

Malcolm clambered out of his boat with a sigh.

“Yeah, you got me Captain. Nice to know we can’t pull the down over your eyes.”

His put-upon expression flattered before turning into a huge grin.

“All right! You got yourself a navigator! Now, where are we going?”
Vraska smiled.


Malcolm’s mouth fell open.

“You’re coming back with me,” he declared, “This sort of explanation needs drinks.”

Recruiting the rest of her crew was far less of a chore. It wasn’t without its challenges, especially from Amelia’s old guard. Gavven, Captain Leo’s old boatswain challenged Vraska to a drinking game called “Old Jack’s Pot”. It involved adding seasalt to ale until one combatant surrendered. Vraska had eaten so many questionable things over the course of her life that her stomach didn’t mind a bit of salt. What it did mind was the dish served to them by the ship’s cook Kerrigan. Amelia, who had volunteered to join in as many challenges as she could, really didn’t want to touch the plate of spiced baby octopi he put before them. The octopi were still mostly whole, retaining their shape and bizarre appearance. Kerrigan promised them that the octopi each contained a surprise. Amelia had no interest in finding out what that surprise was. Vraska meanwhile was not one to turn down free food, especially not when it had been specially prepared for her. She picked up an octopus on a skewer and put it straight in her mouth.

The surprise was an egg.

A small egg that definitely wasn’t from a chicken. It was delicious, as was the octopus, but the whole dish was so phenomenally spicy she almost gagged. Amelia watched her reaction like someone might view a bad idea unfolding before her. Vraska let out a few choice curses, some of which she’d recently picked up from Amelia.

“Vampire tits, that’s spicy!” she gasped, “Delicious, really really good, but fuck.”

Kerrigan laughed.

“Try another one and you can have some yoghurt to cool you off.”

Vraska did. Then ate a lot of yoghurt.

Eventually, they managed to get Amelia to try one. Even if she did have to keep her eyes closed all the while.

“Whip me blue, what the shit?” she spluttered. Vraska passed her the yoghurt.

“What do you think?” asked Kerrigan. The orc chef looked rather proud of himself for getting the same reaction twice.

“Really,” Amelia spluttered, “Really one of your best K, but damn… ease up on the spice next time.”

Vraska got her another ale for being brave, which she accepted with relish.

Once they had the old guard on board, crew members flocked to the ship, eager to see who Captain Leo’s old faithfules had decided to rally around. Also, who had finally slain Mad Marv. They filled up the Dog and Barrel with potential recruits. The inn grateful for the roaring trade they brought with them. Vraska kept Amelia at her side for the entire process and together they gave the same message to interested parties. Before even setting aboard, recruits had to swear upon three key principles
One. They must accept the dangers of a life on the high seas. Piracy ran its own risk and their mission was high risk high reward, as they’d stated from the outset.

Two. Crew members must respect the chain of command, no matter who had held what position prior. Amelia had shuffled around the existing crew and titles had changed hands. They didn’t need this creating any friction.

Thirdly and finally, Captain Vraska was running a fair and equal ship. Even if they were pirates, there was no place for discrimination aboard. Anyone who had a problem with another’s race, gender, background, religion or disability. Anyone who wanted to make an issue out of their own bigoted beliefs. Those sort of people were not welcome. When she ran this rule by Amelia, as they got ready for bed one night, she looked like she was about to cry.

“We’re going to be the best damn crew on the seven seas,” Amelia commented, smiling broadly, “You’re going to get all the best sorts, you know that? You’ll get the hardworkers, the little guys, all those with talent who hide it so they don’t draw attention to themselves. You’re gona give new hope to old mates. You’re going to let them shine.”

“I certainly hope so,” Vraska replied, pouring them both out glasses of water from the pitcher and passing her one to place beside her bed.

“What’s the point in being a leader if you can’t help people be their best selves?”

Amelia raised her glass as if it were a flagon, ready for a toast.

“How, hear,” she said, knocking the glasses together.

“Here’s one for the guys, gals and mates that don’t like to quit.”

Vraska drank to that.

The renovations on The Black Dragon were the talk of the port. Other Captains and their crews watched on in awe and envy as the ship was restored to a gleaming splendour. Vraska’s infinite pouch afforded them the finest craftspeople the city had to offer and all the materials they desired. Inside and outside, the ship was transformed. Vraska watched a train of new hammocks being taken below decks as Amelia oohed and aahed at new coils of spellweave rope as they went up. A crew of goblins on wooden swings were painting up the sides of the ship, giving it a fresh coat of black paint.

“What are you going to call her?” asked Amelia. Vraska raised an eyebrow at her.

“The ship,” Amelia elaborated, “You’ve given her a new lease of life. I reckon she should have a new name, for a new chapter of sorts. Take it all away from the pain of the past and onto a better time.”

She had a good point.

“I’ll come up with something,” Vraska promised, “Something that fits.”

Two months after Vraska had arrived on Ixalan, she had a ship, she had a crew and she was ready to depart. Crowds massed into the port to view the sparkling ship, looking as good as its maiden voyage however many moons ago. The crew waved and cheered as supplies were brought on board. Once everything was assembled and counted, Vraska gathered her crew upon the deck, taking the helm to view the sea of upturned faces. Gone were the nerves she once felt addressing thirty people in a dark night club. Now it was time for a proper speech, to the people who’d sworn
their lives to her command. At her order, Malcolm rang the ship’s bell to draw everyone’s attention. Vraska cleared her throat. The ship was vast. Time to truly project.

“Friends! Pirates! And all you good for nothing Scoundrels down there!”

There was a cheer from her crew.

“Today we sail towards a bounty so glorious, some have consigned it to a legend! They call it a myth! A story! But we are not wet-eared children hoodwinked by fish-wives’ tales and busy-bodied naysayers. We have the key! The key to the Golden City, the key that made of all of this—”

She swept one hand before her, gesturing to indicate the restored ship.

“Possible. We do not chase riches like fable-led fools, we chase riches with the accuracy of science and the wonders of navigational magic on our side. And most of all, we have all of you. All of you were chosen because you are, far and wide, the best. Look around you. Do I look like Captain who would accept anything but the best?!”

There was another loud cheer and a chorus of ‘no’s and ‘we’re the best’s.

“I have high expectations for every last one of you. But never fear, my rewards to you will be just as high. You will see every piece you’ve earned! You will see battle. And most of all, you will see towers upon towers of gold!”

That got her the loudest cheer of them all. She knew what they wanted. She knew what they liked. She had spoken to every last one of them after all.

“We are the ones polite society would rather forget about,” she continued, “We are the ones that the common folk would rather not exist, would rather beat us down than appreciate what talents we hold, what fire burns in our hearts. To them we are degenerates among degenerates, thieves among thieves, but we defy their expectations! Challenge their roles! Fight to make ourselves heard through the passion of our voices and the clash of our blades!”

She drew her cutlass, thrusting it into the air with dramatic flare.

“We are here! We are the survivors! And we are not to denied! They will rue the day they ever looked down upon us. They will regret every moment they tried to bend us to their wills! Fit us into their moulds. We are our own people! We are free! We are The Belligerent!”

She flourished her blade and Amelia let loose the weights, sending their flag soaring into the rigging. It unfurled in the sea breeze – a black flag bearing a snake coiled about a cutlass, its fangs bared in utmost aggression. The crew roared their approval as another set of ropes unravelled away to reveal a beautiful name plate painted across the side of the ship. THE BELLIGERENT was painted in ornate gold lettering that gleamed in the noon day sun. Beside it, their figurehead, the painted up statue of Mad Marv, loomed above the waters. Now serving as a warning to all who dared threaten others with unjust malice. Vraska had commissioned a small addition to his form. A serpent had been painted coiling about his arms and throat.

“It’s beautiful,” Amelia commented, as the crew clapped each other on the backs and whooped in excitement at this new beginning. Malcolm was leaning over the side of the ship and blowing kisses to Johnson, who stood on the docks waving a bright blue cloth and catching his kisses with his other hand. Vraska watched the exchange before turning back to Amelia. She had to agree. To have the ship fully crewed and restored to such glory, it was a magnificent sight to behold.

“I guess I have to call you Captain now,” Amelia commented, “Going to be a bit weird doing that
“Only when you’re in front of the crew,” Vraska replied, “I promise, I can be a Captain and a friend.”

Vraska smiled and a little colour rose to Amelia’s cheeks.

“I really couldn’t have done any of this without you,” Vraska continued, “A short while ago, I was just a washed-up traveller with no home, no ship, no crew. No one to call friend in this land. Just scars and memories. Now look at me. Look at us. We did this together. No part of this could have been accomplished if not your support, your friendship, over these last few months.”

After only a few seconds of hesitation, she offered Amelia her hand. Amelia’s mouth opened in surprised, at once realising the gravity of what she was offering. She immediately took it, grasping it with a strength that summed her up as a whole. Strong, kind, reliable, the sort of friend Vraska had never thought she truly deserved. Yet here she was. A now friendly face in a strange land and there was no one else Vraska would rather sail beside. It didn’t hurt to touch her at all. Over the last few months, she had come to trust Amelia so much that even this had become simple. Vraska felt herself blush a little at the realisation.

She had a new friend.

How about that?
Pirates

Chapter Summary

Vraska contemplates life on the open waves as The Belligerent sets off to the continent of Ixalan. Just as things settle into a regular routine, Amelia approaches her Captain with a proposition that might just change everything.

Even before they’d set off, Vraska had known that life at sea would present its own set of challenges. Put a large amount of people in a confined space for long enough, and you were bound to have problems. That was one reason why they had vetted the crew so thoroughly, but you never really knew how people coped until they were out in the middle of nowhere for weeks at a time. Though she wasn’t one to shy away from confrontation, it wasn’t the Captain’s place to get involved in every little squabble that happened on board her ship. Thankfully, she was blessed with the overwhelming force for good that was Amelia. She trusted her quartermaster to be able to deal with any complaints escalated to her, and was more than happy to step in and look stern on the rare occasion it needed to go further than that. There had only been one major incident in their month at sea. It turns out a trio of humans had decided to keep their bigoted views hidden until they were too far from shore to have anything done anything about them. Or so the idiots had thought. One of them was now a statue at the bottom of the deep. The other two, the two that hadn’t drawn their swords against Vraska, were now sat in the brig claiming what they had done ‘wasn’t that bad.’ Vraska, and the rest of the crew, disagreed. They had been stripped of their wages, their gear and their weapons. The plan was to release them at the next port and let them fend for themselves. With no money and no means to defend themselves… well, they would have plenty of time for think about what they’d done.

Being a Captain certainly came with its highs and lows. On the one hand, Vraska loved the respect she got from her crew. Especially when it seemed to be just that, respect, rather than fear. Many in her crew had been down on their luck – unable to find work because of their perceived differences. However, she’d given them a chance to prove themselves and they had certainly taken it with arms wide open. It had taken a little while for everyone to get into the flow of having a new ship and new crewmates, and a little longer for them to get used to their extraordinary captain. However, after a few flag-signal lessons and plenty of time to mingle, The Belligerent was running as efficiently as any vessel out on the vast blue. They had weathered their way through all the challenges nature had thrown at them – and a few unnatural dangers too. Their first vampire attack had come out of nowhere, an opportunistic raid by fast-crazed envoys. They had lost two men before they even realised the vampires had snuck on board. However, as Amelia often stated, they were fortunate the causalities had been so few.

The second pirate attack had been a lot scarier. A Legion dreadnought had approached them at considerable speed, especially for a vessel of such size. It had resulted in a chase. Many of the crew had wanted to stop and fire back but there was no way their canons would sink the floating cathedral before they were boarded. Vraska shouted herself hoarse as she directed everyone to put aside their murderous urges and do whatever they could to gain speed. They had no choice but to sprint towards the first light of dawn, knowing that would slow the vampires down once they got there. It worked, much to the relief of many. Not to deny them their frustrations however, Vraska
let her crew express all their murderous rage at the next vessel of vampires they found. The plunder from that ship wasn’t to be sniffed at. Considering the fiends mostly drank blood, they had a fine haul of provisions. From bottles of wine to candied fruits, The Belligerent had feasted well that night and felt a bit sore the morning after.

It was in that wine-addled night, that Vraska discovered some of the more personal downsides to being Captain. Despite clearly being respected, she still cut a fearsome figure on deck. So fearsome in fact, that no one really wanted to sit with her and exchange idle conversation. It was if she’d been put on a podium above everyone else, and despite her desire to step down, no one was willing to lend her a hand. She was no stranger to loneliness, but it felt uniquely strange to be so surrounded by people all day and night, yet none of them even wanted to comment on the weather. Amelia and Malcolm were often too busy to chat, leaving her sat alone in the Captain’s quarters, wondering what else she should be doing with her time. There were only so many routine inspections and meetings you could have. Her quarters were large and empty – most of Mad Marv’s possessions having been sold at auction. At night, she often sought for a source of noise that wasn’t there. Perhaps she’d become too used to having someone with her, snoring peacefully nearby. At home, it would be Jace in her bed. Here on Ixalan, she’d shared a room with Amelia for many months. Now they were away however... it was just her. Just her and the sound of the waves.

How was Jace doing? Was there any point in wondering? She couldn’t get off this plane to check on him. She’d swiftly learned how stuck she was. What the dragon meant when he said she wouldn’t return until her job was done. She had done her best not to worry about Jace. This wasn’t their first separation and it wouldn’t be their last no doubt. Due to her complete inability to find answers, she often cast him from her mind – only for him to return in the quiet lonely moments. Was he on Ravnica right now? Was he doing his job? Or had he escaped off somewhere with the Gatewatch? Would Chandra and Gideon stop him being abused by Liliana again? Would he learn to stand up for himself? She truly had no way of knowing and thinking about it only frightened her.

“You alright Captain?”

A month and a half into their journey, on a particularly stormy morning, Vraska found her silence disturbed by a familiar voice. Amelia was the only one who got away without knocking before she entered. Vraska wondered if she’d guessed whether it was because Vraska was so eager for her company that she instantly forgot her own rules. As she closed the door behind her, Vraska got up from her chair to pour two fresh cups of tea.

“I’m fine,” Vraska replied, “How are you?”

“Doing great,” Amelia replied, “Just wanted to let you know that we’ll be at the High and Dry by sun down. Malcolm reckons the skies will sort themselves out by noon and it’ll be plain sailing after that.”

“Wonderful.” Vraska passed her a cup of tea, “You’ll introduce me to the Harbourmaster once we get there?”

Amelia took the cup and the proffered seat. They sat beside the table full of charts as the rain continued to hammer on the windows.

“Of course,” the quartermaster replied, “Old Shaun and I go way back. Liked to deal with me rather than Marv. Who didn’t.”

She took a sip of her tea before laying it on the table.
“Still can’t believe you haven’t been to the High and Dry,” Amelia commented, “They haven’t got anything like it up North?”

“Not from what you’ve described,” Vraska replied, “Smugglers like me are more used to hugging the coast line, we don’t get the chance to build floating cities. I am very much looking forward to seeing it.”

She smiled a little into her cup. From Amelia and Malcolm’s descriptions, the High and Dry sounded like a wonder. An entire city built on the crashed remnants of old ships, all bound together in eternal collision, so strong that people could build homes atop it. It was the most Golgari sounding thing she’d encountered on this plane. New lives, new businesses, a whole new civilisation built atop the wreckage of old. It reminded her distinctly of the Undercity. Apparently, you could find whatever you wanted at the High and Dry, as long as you had the gold to pay for it and were prepared to risk getting stabbed. Sounded much like any night market Vraska had visited over the years. She looked forward to what one might find in an illegal market on this plane.

“Well,” Amelia said, her voice slowing a little as if she had been distracted by a thought, “I could always show you, well, I can point out the best spots for hanging about town.”

Vraska glanced at her curiously. Nothing she had said was unusual, just the cautious way in which she said them.

“I’d like that,” Vraska replied, wondering what was bothering her. Amelia picked up her tea again, wrapping her hands about the cup before glancing at her knees. She looked uncharacteristically nervous.

“Is something troubling you?” Vraska asked, knowing the answer was plainly ‘yes.’ Amelia flushed slightly at being caught out, taking a sip of her tea and swallowing hard. After taking a moment to compose herself, Amelia met Vraska’s gaze with an air of determination about her.

“Permission to speak freely Captain?”

“Of course,” Vraska replied, “We’re friends Amelia, you don’t need to ask.”

Amelia nodded, setting her tea down again.

“I was thinking,” she began, “As we’ll be heading onto the High and Dry, I might show you some of my favourite places there. You know, just the two of us.”

Vraska still didn’t see why she was so nervous.

“It’s not very professional,” Amelia continued, “Or exactly how things work. But… hey, we’re pirates we don’t need to be professional all the time. Especially not on shore. So, I was thinking, maybe… We could make it a-a date.”

A Date?

Like a date between two people who wished to enter in romantic relations?

Ok, well that explained the nervousness but…

“No-No one has ever asked me on a date before.” It slipped out before Vraska could help herself. The idea had thrown her completely. The idea that someone would purposefully seek time with her, time spent alone with her, because they liked her in a romantic way… that was almost beyond belief. But it had just happened. Right now. Amelia had just asked her on a date.
Now it was Amelia’s turn to look shocked. They sat, both wide-eyed and taken aback at what the other had told them.

“What?” Amelia replied, “You’ve never been on a date?!”

Vraska nodded. This was just like being a teenager again. There was so much she felt like she should have done that she hadn’t.

“That’s—that’s bullshit,” Amelia proclaimed, “A striking lass like you should have been taken round town every weekend!”

Vraska had no idea how to reply to that. All she managed was:

“You’ve—you’ve been on lots of dates then?” she replied, “I mean, you’re very striking, much more than I am, and you’re human so—“

Amelia was blushing and Vraska couldn’t help but feel the heat rise to her face. Amelia dragged her chair so she was sat directly in front of Vraska. She offered her one large muscular hand, which Vraska took without a moment’s hesitation.

“Captain, Vraska I mean,” Amelia stated, her gaze fixed on Vraska’s. Her ability to do that never failed to amaze the gorgon. So many people were afraid of her eyes, knowing what power lay there, but Amelia didn’t recoil, didn’t hate her for it.

“Even if nothing comes of it. Even if we go about still as friends tomorrow morning. Let me treat you right. I’ll give you the best night the High and Dry has to offer gals like us. Let me make you feel special. Nothing would make me happier.”

Vraska was slightly speechless at the sincerity in her tone.

“You don’t care that… I’m not human?”

Amelia grinned.

“Not one bit. You’re a looker Captain, and one of the strongest kindest people I’ve ever had the joy of meeting. Give me one night. I promise you won’t regret it.”

Her smile was infectious. Vraska found her lips curling, even as her head still spun with disbelief. A date? She could go on an actual date… with someone as wonderful as Amelia? The last time she’d even thought about dating, or being a couple, it had been with Jace at the Great City Fayre. Back then she’d imagined the only person who’d ever ask her was him. Yet he never had. He’d never said anything about even wanting to. And now, now, she’d met a wonderful woman who was actually interested in her. Someone she trusted enough to call her friend. Someone she trusted enough to hold her hand. Someone who had actually asked.

“Yes,” Vraska managed, “Yes, I would love to go on a date with you.”

Amelia looked like she’d made her day.

“Find me as soon as we’ve made port,” she said, her words coming out in an excited babble, “After we’ve dealt the Harbourmaster. After we’ve made sure the ship’s safe. I’ll give you a night you won’t forget, I promise!”

They had to part as soon as they finished their tea. However, Vraska couldn’t help but feel a mounting anticipation with every mile they got closer to the High and Dry. She was on deck when
Malcolm called out their approach. Amelia and Edgar immediately made preparations to dock whilst Vraska watched the shadow on the horizon get ever closer.

The High and Dry looked like the wreckage of a town had been left bobbing in the ocean. She could make out all the pieces of a settlement – a clocktower, a town hall, even a stable, sticking out high above the waves, often at odd angles or with no real method to their placement. Masts pierced the horizon like errant needles, woven through the patchwork of pinks and purples that surrounded the setting sun. The closer they got, the more precarious the whole structure seemed. Each property was made out of salvaged material, everything from stacked barrels to old boards, fixed together with protruding nails that could easily a spear a man through. Old rusted chains disappeared beneath the waves, perhaps anchoring the whole thing in place, or maybe just a vestige of anchors past. One thing was undeniable though. Despite the rough nature of this bobbing city, life thrived here. As they made port, Vraska couldn’t help but note how packed the streets ahead were. Pirates of every size and stature, some more battle-scarred than others, meandered up and down the boardwalks. Traders with coats full of glittering wares tried to sell their trinkets to passers-by as yet more sailors unloaded crates of fresh produce off their ships and into waiting inns and taverns. A pair of goblins were busking on the next pier along. One was juggling cannon balls whilst the other was playing a make-shift horn, blasting noise at passers-by until they surrendered their coin. The walls of the inns were painted up with flags and murals of scantily clad figures. The inns had brightly coloured signs, no doubt made of old paintings, leaving the venues with names like The Headless Jack and The Dog and Herring after the bits of art they’d obtained.

The Belligerent crew was overjoyed to be there. Vraska saw no harm in giving them the night to themselves and released them on the town with instruction to be back by noon the next day. Those who weren’t feeling up to such revelry, gladly stayed behind to guard the ship. Whilst they arranged themselves, she and Amelia tracked down Old Shaun – a one-eyed man in a garish velvet suit, paid their fare, before setting off into the town.

“We got to start things off right,” Amelia proclaimed as she led Vraska up a rickety rope bridge to another layer of buildings.

“And the right place to get dinner on the High and Dry has to be Cicero’s.”

Vraska followed her up two more rope bridges before finally they arrived at a wall made entirely of stained glass. Judging by the shape of the immense window frames, Vraska had to guess this had once been the back wall of a Captain’s quarters. The image was however far more detailed than on any ship she’d seen. An entire landscape made out of small pieces of coloured glass – more like a mosaic than a window. The picture showed a ship sailing proudly into the setting sun, the sky not much different to that currently overhead. The only piece that certainly wasn’t original was a large brassy plaque, on which had been engraved, in swirly letters, the name Cicero’s.

The door was round the side, a rough porch had been made out planks, painted with the bright colours of the glass. A pair of women smoking pipes nodded at Amelia as they passed by and into the dark interior of the bar. Vraska had admittedly been expecting a tavern much like that at port. Instead, she discovered the closest thing to a restaurant she’d seen during all her time on Ixalan. Amelia led her up to a small sign that asked them to wait to be seated. Only a moment later, a very slender person bounced up to greet them. They were human, with chiselled features, tightly curled black hair and a matching moustache. However, their long eyelashes, corseted hourglass figure and bold make-up only served to give them a rather enigmatic appearance.

“Cicero!” Amelia greeted, “Got a table for two?”

Cicero clapped their hands together in delight as they surveyed Amelia and Vraska waiting there.
“Oh my dear Quartermaster, you’ve returned!” they exclaimed, “And with a beautiful lady friend no less. Right this way, right this way!”

They were led across the dimly lit the room, the centre of which was taken up with a small stage bearing a battered old piano. The walls were lined with framed paintings, mostly of young men and women reclining on chaise longue, mostly nude, whilst their servants attended to them. There was a sculpture of a cat sat on the stage beneath the piano, made of old nails, bent to form the shape of the lounging animal. Their table had a good view of the empty stage but was tucked back far enough to give them a little privacy beside a moth-eaten velvet curtain. The table itself was covered in a fine white tablecloth, a slim glass of flowers placed in the centre to inject some colour into the dim surroundings. It was certainly artistic, and the last thing she’d expect to find in a collection of shipwrecks.

“Menu,” said Cicero, thrusting a clipboard at Vraska,

“Menu,” they passed one to Amelia.

“Wave at any of the staff and they’ll take your order!”

With that they wandered back off, stopping briefly to check on a table as they went. As Vraska watched them go, she couldn’t help but notice that nearly every table was occupied by a couple, no families or groups.

“So, what do you think?” asked Amelia. Vraska focussed her attention back on her.

“It’s certainly impressive,” she replied, “Classy too, in it’s own way.”

Amelia chuckled.

“I get what you mean. Cicero’s from the Jewel Isles. They like to feel they’ve injected a bit of culture into this place.”

“I’m guessing they’re a bit of a collector?” Vraska gestured at the paintings and the sculpture.

Amelia nodded with a grin.

“Yeah, don’t get them started on fine art. You’ll never hear the end of it.”

As they turned to their menus, a merfolk in a gauzy green gown took the stage, bowing to the audience before taking a seat behind the piano. Another merfolk, this one in a tattered tailcoat over their shirt and breeches, also clambered up, leaning on the piano as their partner warmed up. Vraska glanced back at the menu to discover that this place prided itself on its steak and seafood. There was meat she recognised, like pork, beef and various types of shellfish. However, there was also steaks made of Brontodon, Ceratops, and Crestback. Vraska’s new knowledge was telling her those were types of dinosaur, but she had no idea what a dinosaur tasted like. Then again, she’d never eaten a crab either.

“The menu’s changed since last time I was here,” Amelia muttered, “I don’t know what half this stuff is.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” Vraska replied, “Have you ever eaten dinosaur before?”

Amelia shook her head.

“No, Cicero must have a new supplier making runs from the mainland. Kind of interested though,
if they’ve gone to that much trouble, must be worth the effort. But what if it tastes like leather?”

Vraska frowned a little. Trying dinosaur sounded like something she should do whilst on Ixalan. However, the seafood here also sounded quite exciting. She was reminded of the first time she and Jace had ordered takeout. Neither knew what most of the menu entailed so they’d ended up splitting what they ordered with each other.

“Why don’t we each get something different, then we can try each others?” she suggested, “One of us could get dinosaur, the other something we know we’ll like. If in doubt we’ll have one meal to share.”

“Good plan.”

They debated about which dinosaur seemed the most edible by name alone, making each other laugh as they tried to make the names sound edible just by saying them. Crestback kind of sounded crispy, well it had all the sounds of ‘crispy’, whilst brontodon…well beef also began with a B so maybe it tasted like that? They chuckled at their own silliness before being interrupted by a waiter wanting their drinks order. It turned out Cicero’s wasn’t an ale sort of place, so they got a bottle of wine between them as the merfolk began to sing. Between them, they ordered the brontodon steak, which came with fresh bread and roasted vegetables, as well as the seafood medley – an array of shellfish from prawns to crab to mussels that came on a bed of fresh greens. Fresh vegetables were something a luxury after so long at sea. By the time their meals came, they were fantasising about what fruits and vegetables they wanted to eat as soon as they got ashore. Amelia tried to explain what a coconut was and why it floated as they went deep into their second glasses of wine.

When food arrived, Vraska was telling Amelia a reimagined version of one of her more ludicrous jobs, reskinning the Undercity as a port town and stating this was before she’d got her smuggling crew. Dinosaur, it turned out, wasn’t too bad. It had the texture of beef but didn’t taste like anything Vraska had tried before. Amelia took a good few minutes to come up with a verdict, and by the time she’d chewed her way through a mouthful, her verdict was simply:


They were both more than happy to share their dishes, picking at seafood whilst the merfolk in front of them put on a show. It was, overall, extremely pleasant. A far cry from what she’d expected this dangerous adventure to entail. When she’d understood what she had to do, she’d been expecting betrayal, danger, and even vampires at every turn. However here she was, in a floating city with good food, good wine and great company. Amelia seemed to have picked up on the fact Vraska liked to listen more than she liked to chatter. She treated her with stories of voyages past, of the glory days when she’d first set sail. She lent credence to Vraska’s theory that all the best people ended up being raised by the streets. Amelia had been kicked out of her home aged eight, and had run odd errands to survive, until she stowed away on Leo’s ship at fourteen. Her experiences rang true with Vraska’s own. They compared hiding places and foolish merchants, scraps with authority and the best places to catch a night’s rest. All the while, they got progressively tipsier on their second bottle of wine. A little too tipsy, for when they finally got to paying their bill, they ran into a bit of a dilemma of their own making.

“I invited you out, I’m paying,” Amelia insisted. Vraska didn’t want to tell her that she had an infinite money pouch, but it still seemed a shame for her to pay when they could just use that.

“You showed me this place,” Vraska replied, “Let me thank you by paying.”

Amelia shook her head.
“That’s not how it works, trust me. I don’t mind, I’ve got more than enough from that last raid.”

“It’s still a lot for one meal,” Vraska said, “And I’m not hurting for gold either. We could split?”

Amelia was smiling as if she was being adorable. It was not a reaction that Vraska got often, if ever.

“I’m treating you remember? Got to make you feel like royalty.”

“You don’t need to,” Vraska found herself growing a little bashful, “I mean, I’m your Captain… can’t I treat you?”

There was a loud tutting noise as Cicero waited for their decision.

“As charming as this is ladies,” they commented, their painted lips curled in a smirk. Amelia spluttered a little before focusing her attention back on Vraska.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said, “I pay for the food, you get drinks for the rest of the night.”

Vraska was about to mention that the food was a lot more expensive than drink, but then realised she might seem ungrateful. Also, Cicero seemed to have had enough of their dawdling.

“Sure,” she agreed, “Though you’ll have to show me where’s the best place to get them.”

‘The best’ turned out to be a spacious tavern by the name of The Wit’s End. It was already packed when they entered, the entrance way almost blocked by a group of men gambling on knucklebones at the windowsill. The surprisingly large space was filled with pipe smoke and the sound of raucous laughter. Somewhere in the throng of bodies, musicians were playing, the back and forth of two duelling fiddles filling the tavern with a merry air. There was a crowd about the bar, thick with jostling customers. Beyond the rows of barrels and kegs stood three large tables covered in red felt. Here groups were engaged in heated rounds of dice or cards, slapping their hats into the centre of the table when they had no more coins to wager. There was the sporadic thump of knives on wooden boards from across the bar. Half a dozen people in matching colours were hitting targets cut out to look like silhouettes – one clearly a vampire, the next a naval officer, and the other some kind of wicked caricature of a Captain.

“Looks like Beckett-Brass’ lot are in here tonight,” Amelia commented, pointing out a number of brightly-clad pirates around the gambling tables. Vraska pushed her way towards the bar, Amelia in close pursuit. People would take one look at her and shift aside, whether it be her inhuman appearance or her Captain’s garb, she didn’t care to speculate.

“Amelia, they’ve got rum and coconut,” she informed her date. Amelia’s eyes lit up as they surveyed the drinks board.

“Well, that sounds like a plan.”

Two tankards of rum and coconut later, they shoved their way back through the crowd around the bar. One of the throwing alleys had cleared whilst they’d waited. Vraska was tipsy enough to ignore how unsafe it was to throw knives in a busy pub, and sober enough that she felt her aim was still pretty good. She pointed the vampire target out to Amelia, who grinned at the prospect of an honest contest. Vraska could definitely feel the effect of all the wine on her senses. However, that didn’t stop her enjoying her next drink as she graciously let Amelia have first shot at the target. By the time they’d each taken a few turns at throwing knives, they were a little wobbly on their feet. At first, Vraska was hitting vitals with undeniably accuracy, however as her vision swam and her head spun, it was getting harder to concentrate on the vampire-shaped board.
“Fuck yes!” Amelia exclaimed, when finally she scored higher than Vraska, “I got one!”

Vraska opened her mouth to congratulate her when suddenly they were interrupted by long slow series of claps from behind them.

They turned to see a man in a long leather overcoat, flanked by a pair of scrawny looking teens. He stood before them, fingers in his beltloops, legs wide apart, as if trying to pry his breeches away from his bare chest and stomach. His hair was slicked back, visibly greasy under the glow of the oil lamps. A long scar roped across one cheek, from the bridge of his nose to the golden hoop in his right ear. He and his cronies surveyed Vraska and Amelia, attempting to look down their noses, however the women were far too tall. The leader exuded arrogance like sweat.

“You want something?” Amelia demanded.

The man shrugged, as if he wasn’t the one to interrupt them.

“Nothin’ from the likes of you,” he said, it sounded like he was trying to be suave and failing miserably.

“Everyone knows your face round these parts. Surprised anyone remembers it though, considering there’s prettier fish heads.”

Vraska scowled at him even as Amelia just rolled her eyes and sighed.

“If you’re just here to bully, piss off,” Vraska told him, "We’ve got no time for whiny little boys trying to play pirate."

Amelia made a noise somewhere between a gasp and a chuckle. The man however didn’t seem impressed with her response.

“You don’t know who I am,” he stated, swaggering forwards. The way he walked with his crotch forward made for a very attractive knife target.

“I could say the same about you,” Vraska retorted, taking a step towards him, knife still in hand.

“Then why don’t we get to know each other?” Somehow his tone of voice made that sound lewd. Vraska’s scowl intensified, her eyes began to glow gold.

“Why would I want to know the imbecile who interrupted my date?” she replied, “Hurry along now. The adults are playing here.”

She gestured at him as if to shoo him away. One of his companions smirked before the other slapped him. Yet the man wasn’t done.

“You’re dating that?” he said, his eyebrows raising as he glanced between Vraska and Amelia, “But why though? You’re the most mysterious, exotic, gorgeous beast to be set loose in these parts in a while. And I happen to be an expert at handling the wild ones. So why don’t I show you some parts you’d en—”

Vraska didn’t care to hear anymore. In a whirl of black and gold, she span towards him, slamming her knife through the thin material of the man’s breeches – taking the target presented to her. The man howled as she withdrew her blade, blood swiftly soaking the brown material as he dropped to the ground like a bag of bricks. At his scream of pain, the inn fell deadly silent. For a moment, Vraska considered whether they should bolt when suddenly –
“BAR FIGHT!”

There was a chorus of shattered glass as suddenly everyone picked up their bottles and drew their swords. Vraska glanced at Amelia, who downed the last of her rum and coconut before gesturing her to the door. They dodged and weaved through flailing bodies, ducked under flying chairs and narrowly missed a few more knives as they made a beeline for the exit. Heart hammering in her chest, Vraska couldn’t help but kick the fallen man on the way out.

“Next time you hit on anyone, think of my knife,” she instructed him. He merely groaned as Amelia took hold of her hand and pulled her back through the door and out into the open air. As soon as they were two streets down and panting for breath, Amelia burst out laughing, Vraska not soon behind.

“I can’t believe,” Amelia panted, “You went straight for the dick.”

Vraska’s laughter was broken by a loud hiccup.

“He was literally standing…as if…as if to say ‘stab here’,” she replied, massaging her chest as another hiccup burst forth unbidden. Amelia burst out laughing again, tears rolling down her face.

“Slap me silly and call me wet, that was one way to deal with that creep,” she managed, “Going to call that move the…the…” she struggled for a moment.

“Captain’s Orders?” Vraska suggested.

“Yeah!” Amelia squeezed her hand a little tighter as Vraska realised that she’d never let go. She tried to repress her hiccups as Amelia gathered herself the best she could. They wobbled hand in hand back to The Belligerent, h careful to lead the other away from falling in the water. Vraska couldn’t help but hiccup all the while. Once up the gangplank and back on board, Amelia turned to her, leaning against a barrel to keep herself steady. Vraska made a small squeaky noise as she tried, and failed to fight what her breathing was doing.

“You know what they say is a good cure for hiccups?” Amelia suggested. Vraska frowned at her as she took a step closer.

“What’s that?” she squeaked. Amelia smiled as she drew closer.

“A surprise.”

Before Vraska could so much as blink, Amelia had brushed their lips together. Once, twice, fleeting and gentle so not to startle her too badly. Vraska stared at her. Eyes wide, lips slightly parted, tingling from even those brief moments of contact.

And then she hiccuped again.

“Ah well,” Amelia shrugged, “It was worth a shot.”

Vraska felt the heat rise to her face once more. She touched her lips with one taloned finger as Amelia blushed and smiled.

“Anyone ever kiss you before Captain?”

Vraska didn’t know why the sudden formality, but that didn’t stop her shaking her head. Between the alcohol and this surprise, she wasn’t entirely sure what to think. Her brain was in a haze. A haze, and a single thought:
“D-Do you want to do it again?”

Amelia’s smile widened, though it was still kind. She could surely have mocked her for being so inexperienced in the way of relationships. But Vraska knew Amelia wouldn’t do that. Not after all they’d been through together. Not after tonight. She mustered her nerves and leaned forward, placing a chaste kiss against the quartermaster’s lips. So this was kissing? It wasn’t bad at all. She would be quite happy to do this more.

The noise of the port almost seemed to fade as they exchanged gentle kisses, and even gentler touches. Vraska found herself mesmerised as they both grew bolder, straying away from lips as Amelia gently ran her fingertips over the tendrils of Vraska’s hair. Not even Jace touched her hair, as if he didn’t want to acknowledge that part of her – the part that made her monstrous. Yet Amelia didn’t mind it. She looked at her as if she was something beautiful. Touched her as if she was something precious. It was all very slow, very calming, very sweet... No matter how unfamiliar it was, Vraska never once felt scared. The memories never resurfaced. The panic never came. She chanced a few firmer kisses, brushing an errant plait out of her way as the space between them closed, leaving them cheek to cheek.

“Hey,” Amelia whispered over the sounds of revelry issues from the town below. Vraska met her gaze, feeling strangely shy in front of a friend - perhaps more.

“You’ve stopped hiccups,” Amelia commented. Vraska smiled and kissed her again.

Oh, well look at that.

She had.
A man wakes up on an island, with no idea who he is or where he's been.
crab. After that, he became less enthusiastic about touching things. He turned this way and that, to find any sign of life that wasn’t lizard, bird or crab.

“Hello?” he called.

No response. He took a step closer to the waves, as if that would help. The sea lapped at his boots and foamed about his heels.

“HELLO?”

Nothing.

Fear set in as he noticed the sun was beginning to set. Soon he would be alone in a strange place with no idea who he was or how he had got there. He didn’t know about this place, not this jungle, not this beach, he had no idea what lay beyond the sea. Why was he here? And why was he alone? Where had all this pain come from? Why did his head hurt? Why was he so battered and bruised?

How did he get home?

What even was home?

Suddenly, he was surrounded by light. It was cool compared to the humid air about him, running through his limbs like ice water through his veins. Something welled up in his chest, a bubble of cool energy that grew and grew before finally bursting. It was as if he burst too. He felt his body attempt to break apart into little pieces, into particles, and scatter...somewhere. He was dimly aware that this should be frightening. Yet this felt natural, this felt right, better than being wherever he was. He clung to the feeling, pushed at the energy, willed himself to follow wherever it may lead. Yet, as he felt the cold overtake his body, he felt himself being physically yanked towards the ground. He let out a cry and stumbled, landing flat on his back in the sand. The cold energy vanished. He was no longer particles. Everywhere was hot, sandy and wet.

He let out a wail, opening his eyes just in time to catch the glimmering gold triangle hovering in the air above him. Sweat trickled down his face and neck as he felt his chest seize with panic. His chest hurt with the quickness of his breaths and the hammering of his heart. Fisting handfuls of sand, he struggled to gather himself, letting out a few more screams of frustration as he forced himself to breathe.

Eventually he sat up. Night was closing in, painting reds and purples across the distant horizon. The temperature was dropping, but not enough to make him any less sweaty. With nothing else to do, he was forced to take stock of what he had.

Bruises. He had a lot of bruises, but he didn’t think he could do anything about those right now. They would hopefully fade with time.

Pain. So much pain. However, he didn’t seem to be physically injured anywhere. He checked himself up and down, but there were no visible cuts or scrapes. The pain was more like an ache, an ache that had taken over every muscle he had. Perhaps that would get better with rest?

Clothes. He had clothes. They were heavy and thick, not designed for beaches or oceans. There wasn’t anyone around, so it was probably fine for him to take them off.

He took off his cloak and lay it on the sand beside him. On top of that he deposited his gloves, his boots his breastplate and his shirt. He had a pendant, a blue crystal encased in silver wire, unmarked and a little battered too. He was about to remove it as well when something else sparkly caught his eye. Amidst the folds of his shirt, tied into a seam, was a small black ribbon. He
fumbled for it, trying the best he could not to cover his cloak in sand. With shaky fingers he found the ribbon and followed its short length to the end. There, rolled up like a little scroll, was a piece of cloth. Frowning slightly, he detached and unfurled it. There were words stitched into the fabric. A tiny note.

**You are smarter than you know. Braver than you think. Greater than you expect. Stay strong and come home safe. V.**

That only gave him more questions. And he had so many already. Who was V? Why did they believe in him? The note, a little damp and sweaty, gave him that impression. This was a note of moral support, but why? What had he been doing? Why did V need to support him? Why did V need to tell him to come home safe? Where had he gone where V wasn’t? Was V waiting for him now?

There was no way of knowing. He rolled up the little scroll and reattached it to his shirt. Feeling tired, he glanced over the pile of blue fabric he’d accumulated. Who were those for? Someone who lived in a colder place, that was sure. Someone who didn’t feel the need to carry a knife, or any sort of useful supply. Someone who didn’t spend a lot of time outdoors. He picked up one of his boots, looking for a name, a label, any sort of clue. What he found instead were a few grains of sand, trapped inside the sole, but an entirely different sort of sand than that which surrounded him. It was far more yellow, golden compared to the white powder of this beach. He rubbed it between two fingers. Thicker, courser, this was sand from somewhere else. But where? And why? He let out a groan of despair.

He was none the wiser and his aches were getting worse. The moon had long taken its place over the horizon – silvery bright and clear. Perhaps he just needed rest. Maybe everything would be that much clearer in the morning.

He desperately hoped so.

The first light of a new day came hot against the back of his neck. With it came no revelation, no dawning truths, nothing to aid him in working out who or where he was. With no further evidence, he was left to consider the here and now instead. Primarily, how he was going to keep himself alive on this foreign shore. He started by exploring the island. It took most of the day to walk a complete circle about the shore. Whilst on his trip, he found an outcropping of rock that would shelter him from the elements and filled it with soft leaves and began to assemble an outer wall from sticks and peeled bark. He discovered, through his labour, that his previous self hadn’t been very active in the past. Yet he pushed through every struggle construction presented him with, and soon he had a place to sleep. Food came in the form of oysters and long climbs up trees. He felt himself grow stronger with every excursion and soon had a decent meal to call his own.

And then came fire.

Or at least what he thought was a fire.

“Useless! Useless! Useless Island!” He stamped at the sand as his third attempt at a fire dissipated into wisps of blue energy. He’d been so ecstatic at the thought of finally having a fire that, when it all turned out to be a trick, it was like being lost all over again. He ranted and raved at the untouched pile of sticks, jabbing at the sand as his sanity seemed to break with the tide before him. Tears ran down his face as he backed towards the treeline.

First, he was lost. Memoryless. Nameless. Hopeless. With nothing and no one but himself.

Now, he was hallucinating.
He was going mad. He was going to die here. No, he was already insane. What was reality when it was just you and your head, trapped in a place like this? Reality was him and this island, and whatever he could make of it. Normal, he had no idea what normal was! What did it matter what was normal, what was sane? Who was here to judge?! There was nothing and no one behind him. Nothing he could learn from. Nothing he should consider going forwards. He was living in the present with no preset rules to follow. Life was what he made of it now! And if he didn’t want to die, well, he just had to make the most of it - sane or not.

He resolved to achieve as much as possible with the time he had. He decided to make something new every day, be it a sharp rock to open oysters with, or a basket made from woven sticks. He made new tools to make his life easier, delighting in finding solutions to common problems, making his existence that little bit more comfortable.

And he wasn’t always alone either.

As he scampered about his island, questing for new rocks or bamboo stalks, he saw more visions along the way. That was what the fire had been – a vision born of his own desperation. And his desire for company was doing exactly that, giving him visions. Most of them were people. A pale woman who would make note of his discoveries in a large book. A stern armoured woman who would merely watch him, unmoving, unblinking. A heroic statue of a man in shining armour. A cat-man, a leonin, who was missing one of his eyes. And then there was the purple woman, who skirted the edge of his vision just before he went to sleep at night and gave him horrible dreams.

“She can’t hurt you, you know?”

He jumped and looked up from his much better take at a fire. It had taken some time, but he’d got the knack of it after some very wet and unpleasant nights.

Sitting across from him, the fire between them, was a young girl. She was human-like except for her hair, which coiled about her face in snake-like tendrils. He thought she looked no older than fourteen, skinny and pre-pubescent, but somehow, he knew she was tall for her age. She was dressed in ragged leggings and a torn tunic, held together by rough stitches. Her sandals were held together with frayed rope and she had mud on her greyish features. He’d had seen her before, sitting on his rocky ledge, looking out over the sea. However, she’d never spoken to him before.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

She tilted her head to one side.

“She’s all in your head,” the girl explained, “Though, sometimes nothing is as mean as your own thoughts.”

Yeah, that seemed to be the truth of it. But that didn’t explain why she was here right now.

“I’m the one who looks out for you,” she stated, replying to his thoughts, “Always have. Always will. So here I am.”

He frowned. A fourteen year old girl looked out for him? Or had she been looking out for him since she was fourteen? They didn’t look related. So, were they friends?

“I don’t know,” she replied, “You tell me.”

He unconsciously toyed with the remnants of his shirt, tracing the ridge where the little scroll of fabric lay. Someone who had always looked out for him? He suddenly sat bolt upright.
“Are you V?” he asked the illusion.

She merely blinked at him. He pulled out the scroll and showed it to her, as if that might jog her memory.

“You’re V, aren’t you?”

She shrugged.

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

He bit back a groan of frustration.

“I only know what you know,” said the girl, “I’m in your head remember?”

He sighed. V or not V, this girl wasn’t actually real. She was another one of his visions. Still, the company was nice. He decided then and there that she was the mysterious V – just to erase one question from his thoughts and connect the name to a face. By the time the sun went down, she had scampered back towards the rockface. He was left alone to consider what was truly real and what he had constructed out of his weary thoughts. The sand beneath him felt real. The sound of the waves, the smell of the bonfire, the sea-breeze against his face, that was all real. Maybe he wasn’t completely insane yet.

However the people weren’t real. V and the others were products of his own mind. He considered them hallucinations, but combined with his traumatic experience with that fire, he couldn’t help but wonder. What if they were something more? What if they weren’t just hallucinations, but magic? He knew magic existed. There were people out there who could produce flame, or summon creatures or produce lightning. He couldn’t remember who they were, but they definitely existed. So what could he do? Could he do anything?

He reached out one hand towards the sea, closing his eyes and willing him to find something, anything, that felt like magic. He remembered the cold particle feeling from before – the sensation of being taken apart and reforming in an instant. He focused on that and found a sensation within him, icy cold, a tiny bead of power that threatened to chill him to the bone. He poked at it and suddenly the cold passed over him like a wave washing past.

When he opened his eyes, he saw himself.

A perfect replica, right down to his scars and his beard. However, this new version of him was standing on the surface of the water as if it was as solid as rock. His mouth fell open as he waded out to get a better look at the replica. So this was him? Somehow he couldn’t remember his own name but he knew what he looked like down to the last deep scar across his bare arms. He reached out to touch his double’s shoulder and his hand passed straight through. It felt cold, like his magic.

His magic.

He was a mage!

“Well not mad!” he exclaimed, as the replica flickered and disappeared, “I’m not hallucinating! I’m- I’m creating illusions, I’m making my own memories appear before me. These people! They’re real!”

He made a horse, then an elephant, then a sea monster, then a flock of birds, then he cast unfamiliar stars into the sky. Grinning from ear to ear, he ran about the beach in a frenzy of magic and light. He watched the horse canter about the beach and began to laugh so hard, he cried. The
horse disappeared out over the waves as he summoned yet more stars. They glittered about him, as tears dripped off his cheeks, the beach turning dark and empty – turned into a void full of stars.

The animals, the people, they were all real out there somewhere. He stared at his own display, now surrounded by endless darkness. Yes, they were real. They were out there. But here… here and now…

He was incredibly alone.

He dispelled the darkness, the stars, and was met with yet more emptiness. This time over endless sands. His joy died. The tears turned to those of overwhelming misery.

He didn’t bother getting up the next day. The day after that he returned to the place he had first woken up in – the soft bamboo grove where he’d seen the lizard. He lay in the exact spot he’d woken up in, wearing all the clothes he’d worn that day. Perhaps if he took his steps in reverse, he’d find himself remembering what had happened before? How he’d got there, so he could leave by the same means? No such luck. He covered his eyes and willed the ground beneath him to understand. He wanted to leave. He needed to leave. He had to leave. Why couldn’t he leave?!

“Let me go!” he begged the open sky.

The bamboo merely rustled. Somewhere nearby, a bird called.

He whimpered, holding his face in his hands. He might not be insane yet but he was going to end up that way. If he didn’t die before then. If he couldn’t leave this place, then at least give him some company. Someone, anyone, he could talk to.

“My, my, you look terrible.”

He jumped, opening his eyes and removing his hands from his face.

The illusion of a woman stood over him. Not any woman, the purple woman, the one that gave him terrible dreams. Now she was closer, he could see she had dark hair, shadows under her eyes and a contemptuous expression. She was standing with her arms folded, as if surveying something she’d rather not.

“The muscles are an improvement, but the facial hair disgusts me.” Her lips curled in a sneer. He couldn’t help but tremble before her, tears returning to the corners of his eyes.

“I-I don’t know who you are,” he managed.

“Oh course you don’t,” she replied, “You never really did.”

He didn’t care that this illusion seemed to hate him. He had wanted someone, anyone, to talk to and now he had someone.

”Who was I, before here?” he asked her.

“You weren’t who you imagined yourself to be,” she replied, “No one else saw through your lies, your little illusions. But I did. You weren’t a leader, a detective, a scholar, you were just a frightened little boy pretending he was big and brave.”

He swallowed as if that would repress his sobs, but she wasn’t done.

“You could fool the rest of the world with your magic and your tricks. But never me.”
No, no, he didn’t like this conversation at all. He didn’t like this company one bit. Different company please, or maybe he could sleep. Anything to get away from this cruel woman…

“Don’t lie to yourself,” she said, kneeling down beside him with a cold crocodilian smile.

“You know it. I’m the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Yeah, right.”

He jumped. The woman turned. His mouth fell open as he saw the little girl step out from between the bamboo stalks. V was fixing the woman with a glare full of hatred, her eyes glowing gold in sheer contempt for the adult. He scrambled backwards as he realised that he must have manifested her as he begged for new company. But why her?

“Oh, it’s you,” said the woman. She knew who V was?

V scowled at her.

“Fuck off lady. He doesn’t like you. So leave him alone.”

The woman glared at V before disappearing in a swirl of blue magic. He was left staring as the child approached him, sitting cross-legged in the blanket of leaves.

“This island isn’t good for you,” she told him.

He nodded. How could he disagree? She was literally a manifestation of his thoughts. Albeit the thoughts he wasn’t brave enough to express.

“I need to leave,” he informed her, “Before all these illusions make me mad.”

She nodded.

“You don’t have to stay here,” she agreed, “Surrounded by embers of the past. You can start anew.”

He knew perfectly well he was having a conversation with himself, tinged with memories of whoever this girl was. That, whoever she was, he’d put his best advice in V’s mouth, he was willing to listen to her, moreso than himself.

“Who I was,” he murmured, “Who I was, that doesn’t really matter. I-I get to learn who I am now.”

She smiled at him, revealing slightly pointed teeth.

“Whoever I was, he’s irrelevant. I get to become whoever I want to be.”

He glanced up at her.

“Are you out there V?” he asked, “If I left the island, could we find each other?”

The child shrugged.

“Maybe,” she said, “There’s really only one way to find out.”

There was.

He knew what he had to do.
The next five days were spent purely on preparation. From sun up to sun down, he toiled, foraging for supplies, creating himself a raft, making sure he was fit for a trip across the ocean. He knew full well that he might be sailing to his death. However, he had to know, he had to try to find someone at the other side of the sea. He had enough fruit and fresh water to last him weeks, plenty of spare material for fixing his raft, a spear and a net for fishing with. He was prepared as he could ever be and he was ready to leave the only place he’d ever known – excited for a new horizon.

“Cheers to you, Useless Island,” he said, having on last meal upon its shore.

The following morning, he set off, feeling anxious but with more hope that he’d had in weeks.
Crushes

Chapter Summary

Vraska makes an alarming discovery that throws into doubt her relationship with Amelia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By all accounts, it didn’t make sense. The compass had been pointing towards the continent of Ixalan for months now. According to their charts, it was keeping them perfectly on track to meet Ixalan’s coast and its largest river. Yet, seemingly overnight, it had switched position. Its beam now projected in an entirely different direction with no signs of changing its mind. The Thaumatic Compass was their guide – their sole lead towards the Golden City. If it had somehow become broken, or had never truly worked to begin with... No, they had to keep their faith in what they were doing. Vraska, Amelia, Edgar and Malcolm had decided to keep this confusion amongst themselves, so not to sow disorder amongst the ranks. They each took a side of the meeting table, trying to work out what to do with their change in orders.

“Do we know how this thing works?” asked Malcolm. Vraska shook her head with a sigh.

“My instructions from our sponsor was to follow its direction. He did not deign to explain how he had made the thing.”

Malcolm held the compass up to eye level. His gaze flashed blue as he inspected the device. It did nothing, merely pointing its bright orange beam into the nearest bookcase.

“From what I’ve gathered,” Vraska added, “It detects the magical signature of the Golden City and points towards it.”

“There’s shreds of navigational magic in here,” said Malcolm, “It’s definitely fixed on something. But a whole city can’t move.”

Amelia crossed her arms.

“Either the city moved, or something as magical as a golden city appeared out of thin air,” she interjected.

“Isn’t that worth looking at?” Edgar chipped in, “I mean, even if it isn’t the golden city we want, something that magical has to be crazy valuable.”

Malcolm tipped his head as if he was eager to hear more of the helmsmage’s point.

“I’m all for gold, but there’s literally nothing in the way it’s pointing.” He placed one feathered hand on the map, covering a vast expanse of blue ocean. He was of course correct. There no land masses pictured, just a clear patch of ocean, no islands, no warnings for reefs, just open waves for miles around.

“So either we’ll find something as magical as the Golden City,” Vraska continued, “Or we’ll find
nothing at all. And we can’t know which until we get there.”

She crossed her arms in frustration. A little warning would have been appreciated. The dragon had given her so much information but nothing that would indicate his magic compass might just simply change its mind one day.

“Seems so,” Amelia replied, “If we made an exploration of it, how long would it take to get us back to the Ixalan coast?”

She directed the question at Malcolm.

“A week or two,” Malcolm shrugged, “Providing you want to scout to the midpoint and come back. The currents will carry us back towards the High and Dry, if we need to take stock.”

“Then we explore,” Vraska decided, “The sole purpose of this compass is to find the Golden City. It can’t track anything else. Even if it isn’t the city itself, this could very well be a lead. And if not, then as Edgar said, magic holds great value and we can take it straight back to the High and Dry.”

It wasn’t the ideal solution; but it was the best they had. In an ideal world, the compass would never have changed directions in the first place and caused such confusion. However, Vraska’s instructions were to follow the compass, and follow the compass she would. She was grateful for Edgar’s insistence that they could be pursuing something valuable. Otherwise, she would likely have had a hard time convincing Malcolm. The navigator knew his way to Ixalan, having made the journey before, and had been certain of their route up to this point. The sudden change in plans had clearly irked him, but they weren’t going too far out of their way. Besides, if this meant another trip back to the High and Dry to restock on supplies, absolutely no one would object. Any excuse to drink and carouse would be well received by the crew. Amelia seemed mostly indifferent to their direction. Vraska couldn’t help but feel that she was enjoying the journey without the looming threat of Mad Marv hanging over her.

As they sailed out, further from land into the open blue, Vraska couldn’t help but note it truly was as barren as the map portrayed. It was blue in all directions. The noon day sun beat warmth down upon her scales as she took her position at the helm. Not a cloud dotted the horizon, the sky seemed as endless as the sea, meeting at the horizon in a sparkle of foam. The sea was choppy, but tossed their vessel no more than you’d expect so far out. Vraska could see for miles around, just from the deck, and as the map portrayed – there was nothing. An hour passed and a number of the crew came on deck and started to amuse themselves with a motley selection of musical instruments. A battered accordion wheezed out a tune, accompanied by a pipe, two cow bells and a rousing array of sea shanties. Vraska smiled as she watched a stack of goblins attempt a vertical jig around the mast.

“Man overboard!”

She jumped, turning swiftly to see another of their sirens – Jill Sharpeye, pointing starboard. Vraska hastened over, retrieving her spyglass from her coat to get a better look. A clatter of metal later, she surveyed a distant outcropping of rock, too small to be called an island, a dark patch in the distance. There did indeed seem to be a figure sprawled across it, a splash of colour against the horizon. Almost on instinct, she pulled out the compass, releasing it from its bag and spinning it into motion. The orange beam shone a little weaker in the sunlight, but it’s direction was undeniable. It wanted them to go towards the rocks.

“Get closer!” she ordered, “Ready an away boat!”

They approached the outcropping, which revealed itself to be more of a haven for seabirds than
anything safe to set foot on. What Vraska had taken to be a second colour of stone was merely a thick layer of excrement, coated no doubt from many years’ migrations. Dozens of the gulls still perched on the jagged rocks, squawking at sea spray and ruffling their feathers in the breeze. The figure however, did not consist of birds. Vraska kept her spyglass fixed on the hazy shape of a man as they approached, until finally they were too close to the rocks for the ship to turn safely. Preparations for the away boat occupied the deck, and Vraska’s attention, for some time, before she turned back. As close as they could manage, her view of the figure was much clearer. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, before leaning over the rail as if that would help the spyglass view any further. She couldn't believe what the glass was showing her but...

Her breath caught in her throat as the figure stirred.

She felt like her heart had stopped.

No.

Jace.

Jace?

How was he here? This was impossible! Had he followed her? No, he couldn’t have. Then why was he here, in the middle of nowhere with no land mass, or fresh water, to be found for miles? She could hardly believe it but she’d recognised those clothes anywhere.

“Get the boat in the water now!”

Crew members scattered in her wake as she marched over and hauled herself over the starboard side and into the awaiting rowboat. She was joined by three of her crew, confused, but ready to start rowing.

“As fast as you can,” Vraska barked, “To the rocks, now!”

They couldn’t arrive fast enough. Fear gripping her chest, Vraska’s breathing grew ragged as she took in the sight before her. He looked like a wreck. His clothes were in tatters, encrusted in salt and filth. His hair was long and slightly matted, half of his face obscured in thick brown stubble. He was more than a little sunburnt, patches of colour vivid against his once-pale skin. What remained of his cloak was bundled up underneath his head like a pillow. Part of his shirt was entirely missing, exposing one surprisingly muscular arm and bare shoulder. He was so skinny that Vraska could see his ribs. What the hell had happened to him?

“Jace,” she called, surprising her crew as she leaned almost entirely out of the row boat, “Jace, what are you doing here?”

“Jace?” she called again. She beckoned her crew to get as close as possible and assist her in pulling him into the lifeboat. Jace’s lips moved but no sound came out. He wasn’t wholly conscious.

“We’re taking him back to the ship,” Vraska informed the crew she’d brought with her, “I know who this is. We need to bring him round.”

They merely nodded and started rowing just as determinately back the way they’d come. As soon as they’d carried him on board, Vraska set a runner ahead to let Terence know what he’d soon be dealing with. Despite her crew’s insistence, she took Jace into her arms, carrying him by herself down through the bowels of the ship and towards the doctor’s quarters. She kept her face expressionless, so not to concern anyone she passed. Yet panic was swiftly rising in her chest as Jace neither moved or made a sound. She kept glancing at his chest, his lips, just to make sure he
was still breathing. Vraska’s hands shook as the feeling of fear became painful, a searing sensation that threatened to make her stumble and choke. Yet, she managed to get to Terence without incident, lay Jace on the bed and forced herself to stand back as the doctor checked him from head to toe.

His condition was exactly what you’d expect from someone who’d been shipwrecked – according to the naval doctor. He was malnourished and dehydrated, with too much time spent outside with no form of shelter. His bruises and small injuries were indicative of collision with the rocks, as well as a period of hard labour beforehand. He had wood splinters in his arms and grazes down his back. Terence assured Vraska that he was in capable hands. The doctor claimed to have dealt with many in the same state in the past, yet Vraska couldn’t stop herself worrying. Not with Jace lying battered and unconscious in the bed, looking like she’d pulled him off death’s door. Terence allowed her to sit in his desk chair as he cleaned Jace up, but it took a visit from Amelia to steer Vraska out of the room and take her back upstairs.

Even the change in the compass was doing little to keep her focused on the task at hand. She gathered the helmsmages and Malcolm back into her office, and paced all the while whilst they joined her at the table. The compass had turned again, straight back to where they’d previously been heading. Which could only really mean one thing.

“It was pointing at that man?” Malcolm asked, “Doesn’t look like a golden city to me.”

“Or any gold,” Edgar added. He sounded slightly disappointed.

“But he is very magical,” said Vraska, “Jace is a mind mage of considerable talent. His presence could have attracted the attention of the compass, and now it has located its target, it has gone back to its original goal.”

“So the Golden City has mind magic too?” Amelia mused, “Is that what the compass tracks?”

No one answered this. No one could be sure what the compass tracked. However, it was taking them back towards Ixalan, and that was what mattered most.

Well, what mattered most to everyone except Vraska. She knew she didn’t have any medical expertise. She knew she would be a hindrance more than any help. But the fact that Jace was on her ship, unwell, injured, so far from home… She needed to know he would be alright. She needed to know he would get better. She sent runners to Terrence on the hour every hour and showed great restraint in not sending them more frequently. She wanted to go down there herself each time, but the preparations for reaching Ixalan kept her woefully busy. If the others could tell how worried she was, they weren’t saying anything about it. Vraska found herself getting snappier and more irritable the longer she waited for news. She had all the power on this ship and none of it was speeding up Jace’s recovery. It was frustrating. Unbearable even. Distracting herself proved pointless, and even when she did her mind wandered in directions she wished it didn’t.

Jace was here.

Jace was here. They would get to spend time together again once he’d recovered. Perhaps Jace would join her on her missions, help her find the Golden City. She would certainly welcome his assistance in all things magical, in addition to his company. Having him here could be a comfort, once she was sure he was in good health. However, having him here also came with a daunting set of realisations that Vraska was not ready to face – not by a mile.

It had been two weeks since they had left the High and Dry. Since then, she and Amelia had enjoyed some precious moments together. Sitting together, holding hands, exchanging kisses,
enjoying the sunset as it sank below the horizon, just talking... It had been wonderful. So wonderful to have someone who cared. Seeing Amelia during a hectic day made all the hard work worth it. Amelia had told her, only a few days ago, that she’d had a bit of a crush on Vraska ever since she’d slain Mad Marv. It was from that conversation that Vraska had finally been able to give a label to her own feelings. But not just for Amelia. If what she felt for Amelia was a crush, well it seemed likely considering Amelia’s description of her own feelings. Being flustered? Check. Wanting to impress that specific person above all? Check. Loving the time you spent with them? Check. Feeling over the moon every time they smiled? Check. But that wasn’t just how she felt around Amelia.

Jace.

She had always felt like that about Jace. Being with him was the best thing of all. Her mood, her outlook on life, her ability to function, it all changed when she was in his company. She felt like a better, more complete, person when they worked side by side. He was her strength, her desire to be a better person. They had achieved so much together and it was difficult to imagine a life apart, even after all their struggles and time spent alone. No matter how many people told her otherwise, to drop him, to move on, it made no difference. As soon as Jace was back in her life, he became the centre of her world.

So, if she was crushing on Amelia, what was she feeling for Jace? There was only one logical explanation in her mind and it opened up so many more questions. Horrible questions, that she didn’t want to answer, for Amelia’s sake more than her own. There was no denying that her feelings for Jace were stronger, more powerful, born of a decade of friendship and living together, even through their ups and downs. Had she been too hopeful at the fair? When Jace had wanted to prove to Ral that he was a good boyfriend. Had he tried to prove it for her sake? She wanted that. She wanted to know what it would be like to date your best friend. Yet the fact remained that not once had Jace said anything about that. He’d never even hinted at wanting to date her. Never shown her the same adoration he’d shown Emmara or even Liliana... not that she wanted to be like the latter. He liked woman he found attractive. Vraska was, however, a monster and that, well...

That wasn’t important right now. She couldn’t just drop what she was doing with Amelia because Jace was back in her life. It wouldn’t be fair! She cared about Amelia, deeply, truly. They just didn’t have the history, or the intense connection, she shared with Jace. She couldn’t pine after him forever. He’d had a decade to be remotely interested in her and said nothing. So maybe Amelia was her only option. She was an exceptionally wonderful option. She was an exceptionally wonderful woman. Vraska didn’t want to think of her as option number two. She didn’t deserve that! Amelia was truly brilliant. Amelia didn’t deserve to be left for a man who’d never reciprocated.

A knock at the Captain’s door shocked Vraska out of her thoughts. She ordered the visitor in and found that it was Terence’s assistant – a young man known only as Bee. Expecting news, Vraska immediately got to her feet. However, Bee merely informed her that Jace was now sleeping peacefully and she could come check on him in the morning.

Dawn couldn’t come soon enough. Vraska barely slept, tossing and turning until she finally saw first light creep beneath the curtains. She got up to do her regular rounds, crossing the ship as the crew roused themselves and bid the night watch a good rest. Kerrigan was dishing out breakfast by the time she passed the mess. He offered her a tray with four bowls of porridge on – one for herself, Terence, Bee and their new arrival. She thanked Kerrigan, grateful for the excuse to finally go to the doctor’s quarters. By the time she’d arrived, there were already voices talking in the room. The door was ajar so she came straight through, depositing the tray on the nearest bench.

Terence and Bee were sat to one side, sharing a cup of tea over a large book filled with handwritten
notes. As Vraska arrived, Bee jumped to his feet and Terence gave a weary chuckle.

“Ah, morning,” he groaned, “Here to see the new arrival Captain?”

“Indeed.” There was a curtain around Jace’s bed, she could see a figure shifting around inside. It looked like he’d been propped up on a number of pillows and was drinking, hopefully water, out of a large tankard.

“Well, I think he’s just about there,” said Terence, “Go on easy on him. He’s been through a frightful lot.”

Vraska nodded in understanding as Bee went to pick up two bowls of porridge for himself and the doctor. Vraska took the other two through the curtain.

Relief coursed through Vraska as she saw Jace awake and moving. He was indeed drinking water out of a large pewter tankard, sipping at it as if he had never tasted anything sweeter. He had been stripped of his regular garb and was dressed in a white shirt so large it would better serve him as another robe. He was far cleaner, all trace of the sea washed away along with all the grime, salt and bird excrement. His hair had been snipped short and most of his facial hair shaved back to treat the cuts on his face and scalp. Altogether he looked like a completely different man to yesterday. Colour had returned to his cheeks, his eyes were bright and alert as he shifted in bed to face her.

Vraska offered him a bowl of porridge which he took with a wide smile. He polished off the contents in a matter of seconds, not minutes, scarfing down the food like a man who hadn’t seen a hot meal in months. Vraska couldn’t help herself. She gave him her breakfast too. He polished that off just as fast before returning to his water.

Fed and rested, Vraska waited for him to say something, anything, about how he’d ended up in such a predicament. However, the first thing to come out of his mouth was:

“You’re the Captain, right?”

His tone was wrong. She was expecting one of amazement – that he’d find it amazing she’d become Captain of a pirate ship of all things. Instead she received eager curiosity, reminiscent of when they’d first met so many years ago. He was rosy faced and curious, reminding her more of his teenage years than she was comfortable.

“Yes I am,” she replied, “You’re on The Belligerent, heading to Ixalan.”

She decided just to go for the most pressing matter at hand.

“Jace, how did you end up in the middle of the ocean?”

He merely stared at her, mouth slightly ajar. She frowned as she watched him mouth his own name, once, twice, three times.

“Jace,” he murmured aloud, “Jace… is that me? Am I Jace?”

What? Vraska couldn’t help but take a step back in her shock.

“I think I am Jace,” Jace continued, “It feels…right. How did you know that?”

Vraska stared at him. What did he mean, how did she know that? What did he mean, he thought he was Jace.
“Because it’s your name,” she said, “You’re Jace Beleren you’re…”

She took a moment to inspect his expression. Whilst he seemed happy, joyous even, to know his own name. Curious too, to know how she had got it. There was no recognition in his eyes. No sign that he knew who she was, or why she might know who he was. Vraska couldn’t believe it. She didn’t want to believe it. He couldn’t…

“Jace,” she said, taking a deep breath. She could feel the panic rising again and fast.

“Yes?” he replied brightly.

“Do-do you remember who I am?” Vraska tried. He stared at her, narrowing her eyes as if he was staring at something very far away. Then he sat up a little straighter and asked:

“Should I?”

Vraska took another step back.

No.

No. No. No.

He hadn’t.

He couldn’t have.

“N-No, well, yes, but it’s not important. Just…just rest.”

She backed out through the curtain, feeling like someone had stabbed her in the chest. She clutched at the lapels of her coat, biting her lip as she felt her throat burn and her head ache.

He can’t.

She walked back to her quarters as in a daze.

No.

She sat down behind her desk and put her head in her hands.

He’s…

He’s…

He’s actually forgotten me.

It had finally happened. All of Vraska’s adolescent fears reared their ugly heads, painful and twice as vile. Finally, after so many years of worrying that she’d lose her best friend. After all those tears and nightmares. After being with him, through thick and thin, through life and death situations, after helping him save Ravnica… This was it. He had done it. Vraska felt like she was sixteen again and waiting for him to come home soaked in his own blood. Wondering if she’d ever see him again, whether he’d ever want to see her again, whether they were still a thing – whatever that thing may be. And yes, she had other friends now. She was a fully-grown adult who had made her own way in the world. But Javy and Ruby, though she trusted them and cherished their friendship, they weren’t Jace. Tomik Vrona wasn’t Jace. Captain Lavinia and Florence weren’t Jace. Not even Amelia, as much as Vraska admired her, loved her perhaps, couldn’t hold a candle next to what she and Jace had been through together. And now it was over. Just like that. She
hadn’t even been there to see it end.

Was this her fault? Had this happened because she’d gone off on this mission? If she hadn’t been stuck on this plane, could she have prevented whatever had done this to him? Where were the Gatewatch? Why hadn’t they looked after one of their own? How they could leave him alone in such a state on a island in the middle of nowhere? They were supposed to be Jace’s friends! Or had they left him too. Had all of Jace’s friends just abandoned him, making this all their faults?

A few tears fell onto the desk before her. Vraska stared at them before realising that she must be crying. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her coat, but it did no good. The tears just kept on coming. She missed him. Even though he was right here, in her ship, she missed him. She missed the man she had been in love with and now he was gone – replaced by someone in his image. Could she ever get him back? Or was it finally time to let go? Why now. Why after she had just understood what her feelings were? She would murder whoever had done this to him, Gatewatch or no. Yet how was she supposed to avenge a man who didn’t even remember who had hurt him?

There was a soft knock on the door to the Captain’s quarters. It opened without invitation, allowing Amelia to approach on loud footfalls. She paused as soon as she reached the desk.

“Captain, I mean, Vraska, you’re…”

Vraska looked up at her, hand over her mouth to repress the need to sob. Amelia immediately hastened to her side, offering her own hand which Vraska took as she shuddered back the need to weep.

“Vraska, what’s happened?” Amelia asked, “Is it him? The man we found? Who is he?”

Vraska nodded as she struggled to compose herself. Amelia offered her a hip flask which she took and drank from deeply. The burn of the alcohol at the back of her throat steadied her somehow. Enough that she could look up and at their entwined fingers. Could she be truthful with Amelia? Was this going to come between them? How could you tell someone that you are in love with another person too? And with Jace… whatever she had with Amelia was wonderful, but she couldn’t lie to herself. If she had to choose, the choice was clear. It was horrible just to think about it.

“He’s,” she managed, “He’s a-a childhood friend of mine. We grew up together. On the streets. And then in our first home. We’ve known each other for so long.”

Amelia pursed her lips but said nothing.

“I was so sure he would forget about me,” Vraska continued, “Find some great adventure that was preferable to my company. And-and he kept on disappearing, returning home months later expecting me to patch up his injuries and make everything cosy before he vanished off again. And then finally, I left. I gave him a note, I explained what I was going to do, my work. I didn’t expect to see him again for so long, if ever and now he’s here… like this. And he doesn’t even remember
He’s forgotten, it’s finally happened. Everything that meant so much to me growing up, everything that happened between us, it’s gone. He’s gone.”

There was a moment of silence as Amelia seemed to take in everything she’d said. The grip on Vraska’s hand was comforting but it was also making her squirm under the guilt of loving two people at once.

“Vraska I,” Amelia took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, her gaze met Vraska’s.

“I want to tell you that he shouldn’t matter,” Amelia continued, “That you deserve better. That it would be better to move on. But he clearly means a lot to you and I’m guessing that’s impossible.”

Vraska nodded.

“But even if you can’t,” Amelia said, “That doesn’t take anything away from what you’ve achieved so far. He didn’t help you get this ship, recruit this crew, save everyone who needed saving. He didn’t organise this voyage, inspire such hope in people, lead us to such great victories. You, even without him, are a woman worth respecting, loving, befriending, all of that. You, even without him, are amazing.”

Vraska made a noise somewhere between a sob and a hiccup. It was an embarrassing squeaky noise that made Amelia smile.

“I don’t deserve you,” Vraska murmured, “Or any of this. I’m so monstrous, I still don’t know why everyone didn’t run away frightened.”

Amelia kissed her hand and Vraska found herself blushing.

“You need to kick whoever told you that in the bollocks,” Amelia chuckled, “Or better stab them. I’m sure you’re a terrifying sight to your foes but hey, you’re a pretty damn special sight to me.”

Amelia didn’t know she was making this even more difficult. Then again, if Jace didn’t know who she was, then he couldn’t be hurt or even bothered by the fact she was interested in someone else. One day, she’d have to go back to Ravnica. One day, their expedition would be over and she’d have to leave Amelia behind. That day would hurt. That day would be so awful for them both. But who knew how many weeks, how many months she had left here? Was this selfish? Was it cruel of her to make this amazing woman fall in love with someone who’d vanish off to another world? She didn’t know. She didn’t know anything about love and relationships and what to do with either of those things. She could really do with visiting Ruby right now but, here she was, stuck on this plane.

Perhaps this was a question for another time. Vraska felt like she was putting off the inevitable, but she just wanted to be happy, just for this short while. Jace had never wanted to date her. Jace couldn’t even remember who she was. Amelia had dated her and Amelia cared who she was.

The choice right now was only logical.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Just a quick reminder that this fic will not be following the plot of either War of
the Spark novels. I will be creating my own version of everything after the Ixalan and Dominaria storylines. I hope you like it! Thank you for sticking with my creation so far, and I hope you enjoy the arcs to come!
Vraska was forced to adapt to having a memoryless Jace aboard her vessel. Jace won’t sit still.

Vraska didn’t know exactly when Jace had been released from the doctor’s room. However, it surely didn’t take him long to find his way towards the Captain’s quarters. She wondered if someone had pointed him in her direction, or he’d simply worked his way through the ship’s interior, poking his head through doors as he went. Regardless, he was here now and she’d done the gracious thing and invited him to sit down and take tea. He’d donned what was left of his usual outfit, cloak abandoned but he still wore the same trousers and breastplate. One sleeve of his shirt had been torn off but he wore the glove regardless. It was an odd look, but if he was happy, Vraska wasn’t going to comment on it. She was too relieved to see him alive and well, after fishing him out the ocean and away from death’s door. Whatever had happened to him, it must have occurred for a decent length of time. Vraska thought Terence’s description mostly accurate – it looked like Jace had gone through a period of hard labour. His more muscular physique was certainly new and would have taken some time to develop. He wasn’t exactly unfit beforehand, but most of his work required sitting behind a desk – he wasn’t exactly athletic. He didn’t need to be. Now however, he looked like he could pull his weight along the rest of her crew. It was possibly better for his health, but Vraska had no idea what had required him to become physically fitter. Perhaps, once they had tea and started a conversation, she’d find out.

“Do you want sugar?” she asked. How much sugar Jace wanted in his tea usually depended on his mood – more when he was stressed.

“I don’t know,” Jace replied brightly. He was smiling where he sat, looking around the study as if nothing could delight him more. Vraska decided to give him one sugar and bring the bowl with her just in case. She set the tea tray on her desk and passed him a cup and saucer. He accepted it eagerly and immediately raised it to his lips.

“Be careful it’s –“

“Hot!” Jace exclaimed. He hastily put the tea down and nursed his burnt lip. Vraska passed him a waterskin and a handkerchief so he could dab the sensation away. He didn’t seem to have burnt himself, the sensation had mostly shocked rather than harmed him.

Once he had recovered from the surprise, he let his tea cool slightly before taking a sip. Apparently it was to his liking, for he took another sip, his smile widening. Vraska watched him as she took her seat.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Jace considered this for a moment, before replying:

“Better,” he said, “Like there’s no sand or rocks in my skin. That’s an improvement. And I’m not bleeding so that’s good too.”
“Indeed,” Vraska said, “You seem to have made an excellent recovery.”

He nodded eagerly.

“I have a few questions,” Vraska continued, “If I may?”

“Sure,” Jace gave a little shrug, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to remember any answers though.”

He sounded surprisingly chipper about that. They would have time to unpick that reaction later. It was best to start at the beginning.

“What is the first thing you remember?” she asked.

Jace didn’t hesitate or even stop to consider her question.

“Waking up on the first island,” he stated, “Surrounded by bamboo, and the sounds of the sea. There was a lizard I think.”

The first island? He didn’t remember anything before arriving on Ixalan? It sounded like he didn’t even remember travelling here. For all he knew, he might as well be as planebound as the rest of the crew. Was she supposed to tell him he was a planeswalker? Well, he couldn’t leave anyway. Telling him about other worlds might be a bit too much to take in right now.

“Did you know I can make illusions?” he asked her. He sounded like he was trying to impress her with an elaborate show and tell.

“I do,” she replied. This didn’t seem to deter his need to share.

“And your name is Vraska? Captain Vraska? Your name sounds like it has a different linguistic root from mine. Where are you from?”

Vraska let out a sigh. She couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t believe she was making introductions with him all over again, after so many years. It felt like they’d gone back to square one – like she was going to have to convince him to like her all over again. She wasn’t sure her heart could take that. What if he decided to dislike her this time round? She could try distancing herself from him, to avoid the inevitable heartbreak. Yet, even now, she knew she couldn’t. He reminded her too much of his fourteen-year-old self. The boy she’d met memoryless and huddled in a Gruul wreckage. The boy she’d saved from near certain death multiple times. Over a decade ago, she’d sworn to be his protector and she couldn’t stop now.

“North,” she managed, “Very far north.” She felt bad for lying to him but there were more important things for him to know, before he tried to wrap his head around the concept of a multiverse.

“I’m not from the north?” he continued, “How do we know each other then?”

“We met in the north,” Vraska managed, “We were friends, for a while. You moved on.”

Was this the right way to go about it? If she made him feel like she wasn’t that important, he would no longer be around to remind her of how she felt.

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“Oh, well...” she thought, “Why did I move on?” Jace inquired.

“To be with people less monstrous than I.” She thought, but held her tongue. His mouth however fell open.
“You don’t look like a monster!” he exclaimed, “You saved my life, that’s not something a monster would do!”

Dear gods, she couldn’t distance herself from him. Though, the fact he had just read her thoughts was a little perturbing. Did he know he had done that, or did he think she had spoken aloud? She tried to focus her thoughts on him.

“You deserved better.”

“But you cared about me,” Jace replied, “Otherwise you wouldn’t believe that. You do care about me, that’s why you were so anxious to find out whether I was getting better.”

There really was no pretending was there?

“Did Terence tell you that?” Vraska commented. Jace nodded. His every action was eager and sprightly – a far cry from the exhausted man she’d left behind. It was as if he’d acquired a new source of energy, a source of joy or hope. Even the shadows under his eyes had gone. He was a man revitalised, free of his past pain, his past fears… This was a Jace who had never been hurt. Not by his mentor, not by Ravnica, not by Liliana. A trauma-free Jace. A happier Jace. Vraska couldn’t help but feel a little jealous. What she wouldn’t give to forget all that had happened to her. Yet now wasn’t the time for jealousy. She needed to help him find his feet and perhaps… well, it would be selfish to want the old Jace back if the new Jace had found such joy. If he was happy, then so was she. That’s how it had always been. So she should take comfort in the fact he was living free and painless. Even if she didn’t have the man she loved.

“I don’t think the old me moved on,” Jace commented after a moment’s silence, “Or at least, that’s what the evidence points at.”

“The evidence?” Vraska repeated.

Jace fumbled with his breastplate for a moment before retrieving a small roll of fabric. Vraska’s heart leapt when she saw it. A little tattered, but still very much intact. How had that managed to survive being shipwrecked? Out of everything Jace could have had on him, out of everything that could have been lost at sea, her stupid scroll had made it?

“You’re V, aren’t you?” Jace said, unfurling the fabric, “You stitched this message out for me. To encourage me?”

She was supposed to be distancing herself. She was failing miserably.

“I can’t be the only person you knew who had a name beginning with-“

He cut her off.

“But it’s you!” he objected, “I know it’s you, because I saw you on that island!”

She frowned at him. She ought to reprimand him for interrupting the captain, but his words swiftly distracted her from that thought.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“I-I…” Jace faltered for a moment before his bubbly excitement returned with a vengeance.

“Before I got control over my illusion magic,” he explained, “Well, I was lonely, so I kept accidentally creating myself some company. And the company depended on how I was feeling at
the time. If I was feeling accomplished, I would project one person, if I was sad, a different one. And when I was feeling brave, or strong, or needed to strengthen my resolve well…”

He closed his eyes and when they opened, they glowed a bright blue – paler than it used to be but still distinctly him. Vraska watched as a figure stepped into the room as if through the wall. Her hands shook as she saw a perfect image of herself – fourteen years old and dressed in rags. Her younger self stared defiantly up at her; golden eyes filled with determination as her short tendrils curled upon her forehead like a fringe.

“I’m V, and I don’t know why you’re hiding it,” said the illusion.

Vraska glared at it. Jace mumbled something like an apology and dispelled the figure with a wave of his hand.

“That can only be you,” he said quietly.

Vraska sighed again.

“Yes, that’s me. I made that message. We were going to be apart for some time and…I wished to support you.”

“Well you did,” Jace said, “When everything got really tough, working out how to live on the island, I knew there was someone out there who believed in me. And now I get to meet you! Again, I guess, but it feels like the first time and that’s exciting!”

He was acting like an eager puppy, so happy to be adopted from the pound. Vraska sat back and watched as he proceeded to show her what had happened over the last few months. From where he woke up amongst the bamboo, to his explorations along the endless sand. She saw him breakdown over an illusionary fire and a dead fish. The island was beautiful, but Vraska found herself transfixed by Jace’s ability to adapt and overcome every obstacle he came across. He built tools out of debris, shelter out of fauna, learned how to hunt, scavenge, build and survive. He beamed at her as he showed off everything he had built – presenting illusionary versions of his fish hooks, his sleeping platform, his raft. He was so eager to learn new skills, to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. Yes, he reminded her too much of the teenager she had once known. Yet instead of a desk full of scrap metal and second hand tools, he was using rocks and bamboo.

Of course, Jace of all people would enjoy being on a deserted island with no memory of how he got there. It was plain from his illusions that nothing he’d seen even hinted at how he’d got there. There was nothing she could glean from the sight, and nothing he could’ve gleaned by being there.

“You don’t remember anything before then, do you?” she asked.

He shook his head, eyes back on her and free of their magical glow.

“No, but… my past is part of who I am, but it isn’t who I am today. I get to decide who I am now.”

What a luxury. Vraska sighed and got to her feet.

“Well, for now you’re part of this crew. So, let’s find you a hammock. We’ve got a long way to go before land.”

A spare hammock was located, complete with a little patch of space for Jace to call his own. It had worked out for the best that they’d abandoned those two bigots at the High and Dry. One of their hammocks still contained a few personal effects – an unwrapped bar of soap, a small book and a shaving razor in a wooden box. No one wanted to be caught stealing from another crew member,
even if they were gone, so the items had gone unpilfered. Now they were Jace’s. Re-learning how
to shave with a straight razor brought him some joy, enough so that he was completely clean
shaven the next time Vraska saw him.

It did, however, turn out that Terence had ordered him to stay below deck for the following week,
for the sake of resting his battered body. This resulted in a new duty aboard ship that Vraska
swiftly dubbed ‘Jace Wrangling’. If any of the assigned members of crew – herself, Amelia,
Malcolm, Kerrigan and Jill, saw Jace wandering about above deck, they would escort him back
downstairs to his bunk where he belonged. Jace unfortunately had other plans, often going missing
for hours at a time, only to found sat in a supply room dismantling a spyglass, laying out its
innards, before putting it all back together again. Vraska discovered this was occurring when she
glimpsed a small crowd forming in the doorway to said provisions store. She crossed over to see
Amelia standing at the edge of the crowd, looking over at the cluster of heads at Jace, who was
carefully inserting a lens back into place with a small pair of tweezers. It was indeed impressive,
but they did have preparations to make before they got to Ixalan.

Vraska tapped on Amelia’s shoulder.

The quartermaster jumped. She turned to face Vraska, looked momentarily guilty, before calling:

“Alright everyone! Back to your stations! Ship’s not going to run itself!”

The last one to file out the room was an awkward and shame-faced Jace. He fidgeted a little with
the newly-reassembled telescope, handing it to Amelia as the last of the crowd dispersed. He
looked up at Vraska, who merely raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’m sorry Captain, I didn’t mean to cause such a-“ He was cut off as Vraska tossed him her own
spyglass. He caught it with surprisingly dexterity and looked at her, shocked but hopeful.

“Take a look at that, will you?” Vraska commented, “I trust your expertise.”

He beamed.

“Thank you! I won’t let you-“

Jace had reached forward to clap her on the arm. Vraska could tell from the motion and the way he
held himself – it was a familiar gesture and perhaps one held in his muscle memory. Yet as soon as
his hand got close, Amelia grabbed his wrist with a shout of.

“Don’t touch the Captain!”

Jace jumped, suddenly frightened.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know! I-!”

“It’s fine,” Vraska interrupted, “Amelia, let him go. He didn’t know…and he won’t do it again.”

“I won’t I promise!” Jace added, “I’m really sorry Captain!”

“It’s fine,” Vraska repeated, a little firmer this time. Part of her knew she would have been perfectly
fine with him touching her. Jace and Amelia were the only ones she allowed, not that either of them
knew about the other. She appreciated Amelia’s reaction immensely and let her know that as soon
as Jace had hurried off. To have her boundaries respected like that. It was novel and more than
welcome.
A day away from the High and Dry, it appeared that they’d hit a patch of storm. However, as the crew collected their dinners from the mess, not a single peal of thunder sounded overhead. The sky was prematurely dark, with rolling clouds so gloomy that they blocked out the sun. Vraska was about to track down Jace for the evening meal when suddenly the ship’s bell rang loud and clear over the sounds of sea and sky. The bell kept on going, one loud clang after another. That could only mean one thing – they were under attack.

“Battle Stations!” she shouted as the crew shovelled mouthfuls of dinner down their throats, all scrambling for the nearest exits. Vraska joined them, racing up onto the deck just in time to see Malcolm land by the wheel and point towards something port-side.

“The Legion of Dusk!” he cried out as Vraska approached.

That explained the darkness. No sooner had Vraska realised her folly, than the enemy ship crested the horizon. It was a tower of a vessel, made of dark wood that supported a structure as large and grandiose as a cathedral. Ixalan vampires had a brand of religious zealotry quite unlike their Ravnican cousins. They created their condition in pursuit of eternal life and had started having regrets almost immediately after. According to Amelia, they now pursued the Immortal Sun – the treasure buried at the heart of the Golden City, in the hopes it would give them immortality without blood drinking. Even though they were trying to mop up one great big mistake, they still believed themselves to be holy superior beings, who were allowed to prey on those they deemed lesser or criminal. All in all the sort of people Vraska detested – and exactly the sort of people she’d like to pay for their resupply at the High and Dry.

“All hands on deck!” she exclaimed, “Battle stations! Bear away and raise colours!”

Her crew swiftly took their positions, echoing her commands throughout the ship. Malcolm took his position at the tiller as Amelia and Edgar stood back to raise both main and mizzenmast with a burst of helmsmagic. Vraska noticed that Jace was peeking out from the ladder and gestured him to join her. She had an idea – now to see how much power he could still use.

“We’re going to board that ship for supplies,” she informed him, “Can you camouflage the ship’s approach so we can sneak up on them?”

Jace beamed then quickly changed his expression to one of serious determination.

“Yes, Captain!”

“Then, proceed.”

Jace cast his gaze about at the ship. Tendrils of blue energy sparked at the ends of each rope, filling the ship with miniscule lights, each no bigger than a firefly. Jace took a deep breath and suddenly the tiny lights vanished, absorbed seeming into the rope and following the lines of spellweave all the way up the rigging. Vraska could feel his magic wash over her like ice cold sea spray. Jace nodded at her to let her know it was done.

“Crew!” Vraska called out, “We will approach the Dusk vessel silently until we are positioned for immediate boarding. Once we’re in range, Jace with drop the camouflage, we surround the ship and we board. Retrieve supplies and food only.”

There was an audible groan from the deck.

“I’m kidding,” Vraska smiled, “Drain their coffers dry!”

There was an almighty cheer as the crew set to work, adjusting the rigging to speed up their
approach. Vraska crossed over to the ship’s bell and retrieved her signal flags. Let’s hope all the practice would be worth it. The crew should have got the hang of it by now. They’d successfully pulled out a few raids using Vraska’s assassin magic in the spellweave – Amelia was quite enamoured with the practice. Using an old enchantment – taught to her by Simona so many years ago – she used the ropes of The Belligerent to absorb all sound and silence the ship entirely. Not a single shout or creak would come from the Belligerent as it crept up to its target. The largest and most unwieldy assassin on the open water. Using the flags, she would silently direct her crew into position, before launching their attack.

And what an attack it was. The Belligerent closed to a ship’s length’s away as Vraska held up a hand, indicating that Jace should keep up his illusion until her hand fell. The silencing spell dropped at the same time as their cover. Their reveal was accompanied by a chorus of yells as a third of the crew took flight – swinging from deck to deck, boarding the enemy ship blades in hand. Vraska swiftly joined the fray, calling to Jace to stay back where it was safe.

He did not stay back.

In fact, there were a lot more Jaces than there had been previously. Several illusionary Jaces darted ahead of her, distracting and disorientating the vampires as the pirates sliced them down. Vraska carved her own way through the conquistadors, leaving the scattered survivors to be subdued by her crew. She reached the centre of the deck, calling out for their Captain, hair coiling in excitement as her challenge was met by a pasty man in unnecessarily ornate golden plate. He charged at her, fangs first. Dodging and parrying, she summoned the power to stun a being of magic – a little more arduous than a common mook. She dodged a frenzied swing of the man’s sword as two Jaces appeared to flank her. The vampire captain was disorientated enough for one illusion to land a solid punch to his face.

Except it wasn’t an illusion.

Illusions weren’t solid.

Jace was fighting physically alongside her. As a mindmage, he preferred to manipulate a battle from the sidelines. Yet here he was, brandishing his fists as if nothing could be more natural. The vampire’s eyes darted between each Jace, struggling to discern between real and fake. He started to mutter some sort of prayer as he wove his way through the assault. Vraska lunged forward, knocking the vampire’s blade from his hands as one of the Jaces darted in for another blow. Weaponless, the enemy captain made a desperate grasp for the nearest Jace. Vraska’s heart hammered in her throat as the vampire’s hand connected with the real Jace. He let out a small scream as long claw-like nails dug into his throat. Jace was scrabbling to get free, but it was clear the vampire’s grip was too strong.

Vraska didn’t hesitate.

It took a little more time to charge up a distanced petrification, but eye contact made the process much faster. She barged between Jace and the vampire, grabbing the aggressor by the chin and locking gazes. The calcification took a matter of seconds. The vampire had just enough time to gasp, his eyes half-lidded but too late to protect himself. Forever would he remain like that – one arm out-stretched, pointed teeth bared half-snarling half-shocked. As Jace scrambled out of his grip, Vraska turned away, sheathing her sword as she realised something else Jace must have forgotten. Turning a man to stone was surely a great way to make a terrible impression. Would he fear her now? Would he change his mind about her being monstrous? He surely would.

“Oh my stars,” said Jace. Vraska glanced over her shoulder. He was prodding the statue with the tip of the vampire’s blade.
“Vrask- I mean Captain,” he exclaimed, “You can turn people into stone? That’s so cool!”

Vraska whipped round. That was the complete opposite of what he should be saying. He was supposed to run, to hide after seeing what she could do. Somehow, she didn’t expect this for a second time, even now it was a shock.

“You’re supposed to be scared of me,” she stated.

Jace frowned and shook his head.


She didn’t really want to disappoint him so told him it was a racial thing and left it at that. He did however want to see it again. She couldn’t make him any promises but she would likely petrify someone else before their journey was through.

“Why did you think I’d run away?” Jace asked as they helped pile up their plunder and escort it back to the Belligerent.

Vraska sighed

“Because most people think I’m a monster who’s come to murder them,” she replied, lifting a large pile of golden armour off the deck.

“Well, I think you’re talented,” Jace replied. Vraska felt her face heat up a little and she inwardly chastised herself for being stupid. Instead she focused on how useful Jace had been in that fight. Yes, he’d almost died, but his illusions had been absurdly good at confusing their enemies. She had no intention of ditching him, but perhaps his place was not just in his hammock. His insight would be welcome around the meeting table.

“Jace?”

“Yes?” he replied.

“Would you like to help my crew and I with our mission? We will be conducting an expedition through Ixalan.”

His eyes lit up and he clapped his hands together in delight.

“I’d love to!”
New

Chapter Summary

The Belligerent return to the High and Dry to discuss the mission ahead. Vraska and Jace re-bond after a long time apart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“DEBT AND ALE AND CARDS!”

Needless to say, the crew were thrilled to be back at the High and Dry. Their little diversion to go and collect Jace, followed by the battle with the vampires, had left them a little low on supplies. They were certainly not as well stocked as Vraska would like for their trip into the jungles of Ixalan. They also had a considerable amount of plunder to sell off. There were only so many gold idols, gem-incrusted lecterns and black rose jewellery you could carry in the hold until they got in the way of much needed storage space. The crew had each received their share of the loot, as well as their hard-earned wages, and were now eagerly scattering left right and centre, off into the floating city. Jace, who was now clutching a leather pouch containing all the money he owned, stood behind Vraska as she watched her crew disperse. Amelia and Malcolm also hung back as Breeches went whooping into the nearest pub, surrounded by crewmates and a few hangers on, excited by the new arrivals. Four days ago, Jace had been deemed fit to leave his hammock – not that he spent much time in there anyway. However, since holding his own in the vampire battle, it seemed the crew now regarded him as one of their own. He’d been taught all manner of things – many useful, many not so much. He’d taken to watching the helmsmages, trying to pick up how they manipulated the ropes through the spellweave. And when Amelia got fed up his constant observation, he went to help Kerrigan in the kitchens.

In the moments they’d spent together, usually when they took meals or in meetings, Vraska couldn’t help but notice that Jace seemed a bit distracted. He would watch people, as if listening to what they had to say, when they weren’t even speaking. He was being quiet about it, but Vraska had the distinct feeling Jace was hearing more than the rest of them were. His illusion magic was back, perhaps even stronger than when she’d seen him use it before. However, Jace seemed blissfully unaware that he was a telepath, giving Vraska very mixed feelings about telling him. On one hand, it was an integral part of him that he deserved to know about, and more importantly, learn how to control. On the other hand, once he got the hang of it, would he use his gifts to invade her, or others’ privacy? The old Jace had learned restraint, but the new Jace was constantly running around, sating his curiosity. What would stop him just going into her head and extracting everything she knew about the old him? Not only would she not appreciate having her mind probed, but it would ruin his current happiness – ignorance was bliss some might say. Jace was determined to decide who he was as a person and Vraska didn’t want to ruin that. On purpose, or from having the knowledge taken from her mind. She had yet to come up with a satisfactory answer to this problem, but knew she would need one soon.

For now, though, they had to introduce Jace to the mission at hand. Both Vraska and Amelia glanced up at the bridge towards Cicero’s, but Malcolm led them straight past it. The siren’s favoured tavern was a far cry from the stained glass and attempt at decadence they’d found in the
restaurant. Tucked down the back of an alley that smelt like fish and spilled rum, was a door made out of an old galley table, with a butchers’ knife for a handle. On the door, painted on in peeling blue letters, was the name THE BOATSWAIN’S REAR.

“It’s a gem,” Malcolm assured them as he pushed the door open, avoiding the knife.

The Boatswain’s Rear was a dark and dingy place, full of low tables, shuttered lamps and a lot of hulking figures that looked like they didn’t want to be bothered. One wall was pasted with wanted posters, layers upon layers of faded parchment where they’d accumulated over the years. Some of the faces in the bar looked distinctly similar, but no one seemed to want to cause a fuss by bringing them in. This truly did seem the place to go if you wanted to be left alone. Though Vraska couldn’t help but think that Malcolm stuck out here like a sore thumb. The décor, the people, the ratty old curtains, everything here was decidedly tatty and dull. Malcolm was a riot of colour from his bright plumage to his striped trousers. Yet as soon as he met a stranger’s eye, they instantly looked away. There had to be a story here, but Vraska knew she’d have to buy Malcolm far too many drinks before she got it out of him. Instead, she opted to check on Jace.

“Are you fine with this place?” she asked.

He nodded, eyeing the wall pasted in bounties and mug shots.

“It’s…fascinating.”

Malcolm cleared a table for them, casting away a group of surly looking humans with a mere shrug of his shoulders. Vraska, Amelia and Jace sat whilst Malcolm went to get them drinks. Once they were catered for and settled, their meeting began in hushed tones, almost lost below the ambient chatter.

“Right,” Vraska murmured, “For Jace’s sake, here’s a recap.”

She pulled the Thaumatic Compass out of her coat and placed it on the table. Jace sat up a little in excitement, his hands on the magical device before he could help himself. Vraska let him inspect it as she continued:

“Five months ago, I was contacted by an absurdly wealthy patron – notably not a vampire and nothing to do with the League of Dusk. His name is Lord Nicholas, and he hired me to find a crew and make an expedition into the heart of Ixalan. Primarily, to find a powerful artifact, hidden in the Golden City of Orazca.”

Jace suddenly turned in his seat to look at another table. Vraska followed his gaze just long enough to see a merfolk standing up at their table. What had he just heard? Did he accidentally pick up on someone’s thoughts?

“Sorry,” he mumbled, turning back, “Just thought I heard something.”

“It’s alright,” said Malcolm, “Anyway, the object in question has to be the Immortal Sun. It’s the biggest legend around these parts. It used to be kept in the monasteries in Torrezon, where the Legion of Dusk now rule. For generations, it was kept safe as a holy relic in the mountains, giving the old rulers incredible power.”

He took a swig from his tankard.

“But as they say, artificial power really buggers you over when people find out about it. People got jealous, and Pedron the Wicked sent his army to go steal the Sun, to use it to conquer all. But as they left the sanctuary, a great winged being swooped in from west and bore it away. It took the
Immortal Sun, to Ixalan they say, and hid it in the Golden City. That compass, it’s tracking its magic for us.”

He pointed at the compass in Jace’s hand.

“We don’t know exactly how,” Vraska added, “A short while ago, it changed its mind and directed us straight to you.”

Jace frowned a little.

“I’m not a Sun, or a Golden City.”

Vraska smiled.

“We know,” she said, “But maybe you can help us figure out how it works. So we don’t get distracted again.”

“I’d like to think I’m not a distraction either,” Jace commented, eyeing the elaborate contraption, bringing it up closer to his face so he could squint at the tiny markings.

“No,” Vraska agreed, “No, you’re something else entirely.”

As the smile lingered on her face, Malcolm drained his tankard and put it back on the table with a clank. He gave a deliberate cough as Amelia looked between Jace and Vraska, before getting to his feet.

“Well, I’ve got some business to attend to,” said the siren, “Meet you all back at the ship?”

His departure was rather hasty, leaving Amelia, Jace and Vraska sat round the table in an increasingly awkward silence. Amelia opened her mouth to say something, closed it again, and frowned. Vraska couldn’t help but recall the last time she’d been to the High and Dry. Her first date. Her first kiss. How magical it had all seemed. She felt like she should want that all over again. Relive it, go on another date perhaps. Yet with Jace here… Oh what had she let herself in for?

“Do you,” Amelia said finally, sounding more than a little hesitant, “Do you want to visit the Wit’s End?”

“I,” Vraska fixed her gaze on the table. Why did she feel like she was being made to choose? She felt awful and somehow that didn’t change her answer. They were going to have to talk about this sooner or later. But not now, not in front of Jace.

“I’ll take Jace back to the ship,” she said, “Maybe, maybe I’ll take a trip out later.”

Amelia merely nodded, her face impassive as she too drained her drink and left.

They didn’t linger in that bar. Though the sun had long fallen, the pathways of the High and Dry were still packed with merchants, carousing pirates and people carrying bits of ship to and fro. The air was ripe with the smell of fried fish and honeyed nuts, as street food vendors peddled their wares to passers-by. Lanterns dangled from rusty old hooks, casting spots of light on corners, the streets beyond swiftly swallowed by darkness. Vraska led Jace along gang-planks and rope bridges, creaking ladders and wobbly boards. She couldn’t help but check on him every few moments, to make sure he hadn’t hurt himself, fallen off a ledge or got distracted and wandered off. She was reminded of their first trip into the Undercity. Jace kept stopping to look at things – shattered glass, shop windows, sword-jugglers and tattered banners of pirate ships long absorbed into the
collective. They passed a cart on wheels, stacked to the brim with tiny jars. Some filled with spices, others gunpowder, others chalk. Vraska couldn’t help but wonder what less-reputable substances lay hidden in the tinkling vessel. The one eyed man pushing the cart nudged Jace aside as he continued his steady progress up the street. Above them, a pair of parrots were fighting a goblin over a biscuit. The parrots appeared to be winning.

“This place is extraordinary,” Jace commented as the parrots flew off with their prize.

“It truly is,” Vraska commented, “Not quite like anywhere I’ve been before.”

Jace made an interested noise somewhere between a ‘hm’ and an ‘oh’.

“There’s nowhere like this up north?” he asked.

Vraska shrugged.

“Not exactly.”

They walked in silence for a little while longer. Finally reaching port-level, they could see The Belligerent lit up in distant, the night watch taking patrol.

“Vraska?” Jace asked, suddenly breaking their moment of silence.

“Yes?”

“Can I read minds?”

Vraska stopped in her tracks, letting out a small sigh. Yes, maybe it was time to have this conversation. It was bound to happen eventually, so why not now?

“Yes you can,” she thought in reply.

Jace’s jaw dropped, his hands clenched in his remaining glove.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because having power over other people’s minds is the greatest invasion of someone’s privacy you can commit” she replied out loud, “I didn’t want you reading my mind, reading the crew’s minds, without their permissions.”

He paused in his tracks, looking suddenly melancholy.

“Minds,” he murmured, “They’re so fragile. They’re like crystal chimes, they ring loud, clear but… they could shatter so easily.”

“What’s it like?” Vraska asked, “Hearing other people’s minds?”

Of course, she’d had plenty of telepathic conversations with him. Yet, in those instances, she’d only heard what he wanted her to hear. She didn’t know what it was like to explore another’s thoughts, to read a person’s head like the pages in a tome.

Jace frowned a little, as if trying to focus. His expression then brightened.

“Like being in a crowd,” he said, “Even when you’re alone. I…think I just worked out how to shut them out, but they’re still there. I can feel them.”
“Well,” Vraska concluded, “Please don’t read my mind or the minds of my crew, unless they give you explicit permission. Anyone else is fair game though. Except Lord Nicholas…he’s probably a better telepath than you.”

It was a scary thought but the dragon was undoubtedly more powerful than Jace. A better mind mage than the man who’d spent his whole life with the craft. It was frightening in a way.

“Have I met him?” Jace asked, “Lord Nicholas? The old me I guess.”

They started walking again as Vraska shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?” Jace repeated. Vraska had no way of knowing for sure. She’d like to think Jace would have told her if he’d met a giant gold dragon, but there were months and months they had spent apart. Perhaps the Gatewatch had met him and they’d never got round to telling her.

“We come from a very large city,” she explained for now, “You may have walked past him, I wouldn’t know.”

Finally they were back at the ship. As they nodded to the night guard, Jace asked:

“What was the name of the city?”

There was no harm in telling him that.

“Ravnica,” she said.

“And what did I do there?” he pressed as they went below deck.

“You were a politician,” she said. As long as she kept things vague, well, this wasn’t really dictating who he was as a person.

Jace looked rather surprised at her statement.

“A politician?” he said, “I…I don’t think I would be a very good politician.”

She smiled.

“You did your best. You were kind of forced into the position, and understandably didn’t like that much. However, you certainly helped a lot of people.”

Jace smiled at that.

“So I worked for the city itself?” he asked. When she nodded, he continued:

“What was the city like?”

Vraska gave a small sigh.

“Massive, much larger than this,” she gestured to the nearest window to indicate the High and Dry, “Layers upon layers, from deep underground to soaring towers and bridges that criss-cross the horizon. In the summer it’s warm, but not as warm as here. In Winter, well, the water freezes and we get snow.”

Jace was looking at her with an expression of great contemplation.
“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He closed his eyes. Vraska frowned and put a hand on her hip. What was he doing? She couldn’t feel him prying into her mind, but then again, he could read surface thoughts without so much as a twinge. When Jace opened his eyes again, they were glowing faintly blue. Once again, a much paler shade of blue than Vraska remembered.

Suddenly the wooden walls around them shifted. They were no longer in a narrow corridor, surrounded by wooden beams and tiny portholes. The floor, scuffed from many boots, turned into dark stone beneath their feet. The panels of wood in the walls stretched above their heads, reaching up and up into a cloud-strewn sky, dotted with stars. Spires, towers, the arches of cathedrals, took their place, looming impossibly tall, past the deck which had long disappeared from sight. Lights, tiny coloured lights through elaborate stained glass, flickered into view. The skyline now illuminated, Vraska could see a pair of griffins swooping about a spire overhead. A trio of flags, one for each Azorius tower waved over an office building nearby. The sounds of carts rumbled on from an adjacent road, accompanied by the snorts of their beasts of burden.

“Sorry,” Jace said softly, “You were thinking about it a lot.”

“No need, it’s…” Vraska couldn’t help but look up in awe. Soft snowflakes caught the lights of the cathedral, cascading downwards to coat the rooftops, dusting the scene in a fine white fuzz as delicate as icing sugar. It was beautiful. Like the mildest days of winter, the days she would wrap up tight and go shopping down Tin Street. Pick Jace up a dozen pairs of socks because he kept wearing through his. Afterwards, she’d get a cup of coffee and a pastry, wondering how bad the snow would get over the next few days.

Gods.

Not since she’d arrived on Ixalan, not even for a moment, had she felt this homesick. She missed grey stone and looming arches. Shadowy gargoyles and reckless cart drivers. The secrets only district natives knew. The babble of chatter in the streets. The turf wars. The petty politics. The silent descent into the Undercity. It had been so long since she’d been home.

“This is Ravnica?” Jace asked, his voice as soft as the snow.

“Yes,” Vraska replied, “This is Ravnica.”

“I wish I could remember it,” Jace said, looking round at his own creation with wide eyes, “It looks like the greatest place in the world.”

“Oh, it is,” Vraska’s voice cracked, “The greatest place in all the worlds.”

Jace stared at her as the illusion slowly faded around them. The griffins vanished; the banners fluttered out of sight. The towers receded into planks, the cobblestones into boot prints on battered wood. The dusting of snow was the last element to fade, glittering around them like distant constellations. Vraska reached out to touch the last glimmer of light. As soon as her fingers made contact, the illusion faded entirely.

“Will,” Jace stammered, “Will you teach me about Ravnica?”

She smiled, though a little sadly.

“Maybe,” she replied, “Probably.”

He nodded, as if he didn’t mind waiting until she was ready.
They went to the Captain’s quarters, Vraska unlocking the door with an almost archaic-looking brass key. She was far too used to unlocking wards, muddling her way through his protective enchantments every time she wanted to lock up their rooms at the Guildpact’s Office. Using a key seemed too easy, yet here they were. If only everything else could be so simple. They considered for a moment whether they wanted to go and find the rest of the crew. Indulge in some ‘debt and ale and cards’ but that all sounded far too exhausting. Besides, they were warm and indoors now. The night would only get colder. Instead, they drew up chairs next to the large window that overlooked both desk and meeting table. Vraska slid one side open, allowing a clear view of sea and sky, undisturbed by the lights of the High and Dry.

Vraska settled into her chair as Jace curled up in his. Out of everything that had changed, his inability to sit normally had not.

“So, you’re a telepath,” she commented, “How does the realisation feel?”

Her gaze was fixed on the stars but she could catch his reflection in the other window pane. He looked a little pensive.

“I like being an illusionist,” he replied, “But telepathy, being in people’s minds… that’s trickier.”

“How so?”

Jace folded his arms and joined her in staring at the night sky.

“Minds are so fragile,” he explained, “Like cobwebs…I feel like I could blow them away with a light breeze. Yet, even though they’re so slight, every part of a person, everything they are, is contained within them. A mind is just so delicate…and well, they’re so easily broken. I could do that, by mistake, if I wasn’t careful.”

“A sledgehammer amidst cobwebs,” Vraska agreed, “It’s a lot of power to have over people.”

“Yeah,” Jace mused, running a hand through his hair, “That’s so much power. Maybe too much.”

He froze where he sat, one hand still in his shaven hair. There was a moment of quiet disturbed only by a low-flying gull.

“Vraska?” he said tentatively, still stuck in that pose.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Have...have I broken minds before?” he asked, sounding breathless, “I’ve... Have I done that?”

Vraska didn’t know what to say. The honest answer was ‘probably’. He’d never done it with her around, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t. She took a deep breath. This wasn’t about feeling guilty for past wrongs. Jace was supposed to be feeling better, happier. He had the fortune to reinvent himself, so what mattered what the future.

“Could you redeem yourself if you had?” she responded.

Jace looked a little taken aback.

“Ruining a mind... stripping someone of their personhood, that must be a fate worth than death,” he said, “You’re asking if there’s redemption for those who kill.”

“I suppose.” Not everyone got the chance to turn their lives around as drastically as he had. Vraska
couldn’t deny her jealousy at the opportunity presented to him. The chance to become a better
person. If she’d ever had a chance, it was long past. She was a monster with too much blood on her
hands, a natural born killer. She liked being Captain Vraska. She liked being admired rather than
feared. To inspire hope in so many others. But deep down, she would never get away from her
past.

Jace bit his lip as he looked out over the waves.

“Existence, or who we are,” he mused, “Or what we consider ourselves to be… That’s all reliant
on how we adapt to changing circumstances. Who we are is an accumulation of what we’ve
learned as our lives change, as the situation around us changes. We are the sum of our experiences.
Yet, we have agency, we have the ability to choose. We can alter our own path. So, we are who we
decide to be. And who you become, well, that depends on how you choose to adapt going
forwards.”

Now it was her turn to stare. Krokt, despite all that time memoryless on an island, he was still
ridiculously clever. Jace flushed under her gaze.

“Is your past truly that unimportant?” she asked.

“Doesn’t it have to be?” he replied, “If I can do what I think I can… I’ve hurt people with my
magic. However, future me can say no. He won’t do that again. Future me will make me who I am,
and make the choices that will shape my life. It’s therefore the me of now, the me of the future,
who will decide what I become. Not whoever I was before.”

*I was there before*, Vraska couldn’t help but think, *but I guess you’re happier now.* Jace’s
happiness mattered more than her comfort. She would never remind him of his trauma just so he
remembered her too. Gods, to forget everything and create a new version of herself…

“I wish I could forget like you have,” she said, almost in a whisper.

“What do you wish you could forget?” asked Jace.

“Prisons.”

Her gaze narrowed to the horizon. Jace’s mouth opened as he scrambled for something to say. He
looked like a kicked puppy, trying to make up for what he’d done wrong, but not knowing how. He
seemed to be struggling, his gaze distracted, cogs clearly working behind that bright blue gaze.

“D-Do you want some tea?”

That…wasn’t what she expected. However, it was a pleasant surprise.

“He made her tea. It was clumsy, but he remembered the correct steps and exactly how much milk
she liked, no sugar. He passed it to her with slightly trembling hands and she took it, still rather
shocked, with a careful grasp. Jace poured himself a cup before re-taking his seat. He watched her
take a sip. She made sure to smile her approval. As they sat and drank, he was clearly waiting on
her word. He wanted her story. The story she’d told him over ten years ago… Well. It was clear
that she couldn’t give him up. The idea seemed ludicrous. Whatever had happened to him, he was
still the man she cared about. At core, he was the Jace she’d protected for so many years and here
she was protecting him again. So, if she couldn’t have the old Jace. Maybe, maybe it truly was time
to rebuild their bond. Restore not some mockery of what they had, but try a new friendship. A new
friendship with a new Jace. Pave over old feelings with those similar, but new.
“We come from a faraway city,” she began, fingers wrapped round her teacup, hair coiling round the back of her chair.

“Very far away. So far away that the crew haven’t heard of it. It’s very north.”

Jace nodded in understanding.

“The city runs like most do, and there are powerful guilds that look after different functions of everyday life. The Orzhov run the banks. The Azorius make the laws. The Simic are the doctors, and so on. There are ten total, all with different functions. The Golgari, who became my guild, they live in the Undercity – an underground part of Ravnica. Not everyone who lives in the Undercity is Golgari, but people just assume they are.”

“What do the Golgari do?” Jace asked.

“Agriculture, and refuse disposal,” Vraska stated, “But really it’s a catch-all for everyone society doesn’t want – the outcasts, the people with nowhere else to go. The Golgari feed them. There’s work in the Undercity.”

She took a deep breath to steady herself. Being here on Ixalan had been such an escape. A chance to be someone else, a chance to pretend she wasn’t defined by her trauma. A bit like Jace was now, but…she could still remember hers. It would never truly leave.

“When I was much younger, a child, the Azorius issued a series of purges in the Undercity. The Azorius’ reasoning was that all Golgari were criminals, that they needed to be rounded up and exterminated for the betterment of Ravnica. The Golgari had done nothing wrong. They simply existed. Tried to live normal lives, raise their families in some of Ravnica’s worst living conditions. But once the Azorius order something, their armies fight to see it done. They killed my mother, decided that because we’re gorgons, we must be Golgari too. We weren’t, I wasn’t, not at that time. However, they arrested me, marched me off to one of their prisons with the rest. Packed us in cages so small that it was hard to breath at times, especially over the death and rot.”

It had been a long time since she’d spoken about this. Saying it aloud… It made everything she was doing seem worth it. Once she found the Immortal Sun, once she had Jarad in her grasp, she would make a better Golgari. A Golgari where no child was ripped from their parents. A Golgari that would never give in to Azorius tyrants. A powerful Golgari. A just Golgari. A Golgari where all races were treated with the respect they deserved.

“There were no beds, no blankets to ward off the cold. Very little food, people would trample each other for scraps. I was a child, small and nimble, so much of my energy was spent getting out of the way every time there was a riot. The prisoners would rise up, they would beat us, move us, beat us some more. Again and again, move us, hurt us, move us, sometimes hurt us just for the fun of it. Whip us to make us bleed. Kill a few here or there to make the cages less packed. It was hell and it seemed endless.”

Jace looked appalled. He seemed to have forgotten about his tea entirely and instead stared at her with horror and pity in his eyes.

“Once, I tried to petrify the man beating me,” Vraska continued, “After that they put a blindfold on me. A solid metal band. When I tried to pull it off, they tied me up. Bound my arms, my legs, I had no choice about being moved then, no autonomy over my own body… I screamed whenever someone touched me and so they gagged me too. Put me in solitary, water up to my waist, no furniture, just stone walls and hard fists. You lose track of time in a state like that. I have no idea how long I was in there. Weeks, months… I wanted to die. By the time we moved again, when I
was thrown back in with the other prisoners… I was sure I’d die. My wounds were infected. If I could have only taken the blindfold off, I would surely have petrified myself.”

Jace made a small gagging noise. He seemed ill but he waved a hand as if to indicate he’d be fine.

“The night I nearly died, there was another riot. I was broken. I knew one more blow to the head would kill me. And it would come, the guard was slamming me against the concrete but… my body had other ideas. I used a magic I’d never used before. It took me far, far away but… even that place was a prison. All stone pillars and endless corridors. I was trapped there, alone, for so long. Just, me, the memories, and the pain.”

She had finished her tea.

“Later, I would decide that a person should die the death they deserve. I lived by those words for quite some time, made them my business. They were a comfort.”

“Are they still?” Jace asked, his voice soft, tentative.

“Yes,” Vraska replied, without hesitation, “Though…understand. Even though my magic lies in death, I take no joy in killing. Before now, it was a job, a way to make amends, a way to do right by others. Now I have to do right in another way.”

“By leading an expedition?” Jace suggested.

She shook her head.

“By leading the Golgari,” she corrected, “Our patron will give me the means to take over the guild when I get home”

Smiling, Jace shifted a little closer to her, right to the edge of his seat.

“Well,” he said brightly, “You’ll be a great leader, I just know it. You’ve already proven you have what it takes. The best leaders understand the people they are representing, those they need to protect. You certainly have that, perhaps you were always meant to be their leader! I reckon you’ll do great.”

Vraska felt heat rise to her face. However, to her great surprise, she felt tears well up as swiftly as she started to blush. Wiping at her eyes, she stared at how damp her fingertips had become.

“Vraska?”

She laughed at her own stupidity.

“You were the only one,” she chuckled, feeling tears cascade down her cheeks. She felt like something inside her had snapped. The floodgates had broken, her sadness, her affection, all her confused feelings for him had suddenly been let loose.

“You believed in me when no one else did,” she continued, repressing a sob, “You always saw the best in me, looked at me and saw a friend and not a monster. You made me believe in myself when I had no faith. Strive to be better when my expectations were so low. Once upon a time, you were the strength I needed to push myself, to chase my dreams, to create a better Ravnica for us to enjoy. And…and even though you don’t remember any of that. Even if you’re a new you… You’re still Jace. You still see me as someone worth knowing. You still believe in me. It’s—it’s…”

She couldn’t prevent herself from sobbing.
“I never really understood what you saw. But…you did. You saw something in me that made you want to stick by me, for so many years. And now…the past you is gone. The past you that held so much faith in me. That liked me. That cared for me. Who saved me and I saved you. And yet here you are, new, deciding your own way… and you’re still encouraging me! Why? You’re the same man I lov-liked but you’re also completely different. I-I don’t know what to do with that. I want to keep you by my side and keep protecting you. But I want you to grow into your best self. I want to see what you saw in me. Whatever the hell that was!”

She laughed, feeling absolutely foolish. She watched through bleary eyes as Jace got up off his chair and knelt by her feet. Tentatively, ever so slowly, he offered her his hand. Vraska stared at it.

How did he know?
Did he remember?

“What are you-?” she began. He looked as confused as she did.

“It feels right,” he said, “Like…my body knows what to do, even if my mind doesn’t.”

She reached forward and held it. Their fingers entwined as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“I can’t remember what old me thought,” Jace confessed, “But I know he must have thought the world of you. You must have been his strength too. Whenever I saw you on Useless Island, you were there to represent my inner strength, my determination, everything that drove me on, everything that inspired me to do better. And, I understand. I understand where he got those thoughts from. Even if what I know of you is from these past few weeks, well… you get to decide how I see you. How anyone sees you. And what I see is a survivor, an excellent captain, an amazing woman…”

He blushed.

“By the nature of you surviving what you did… you have changed into someone wiser, stronger than before. Now you’re commanding this ship, and doing so well, you’re the leader you’ve always known you could be!”

However he flustered he was, he still managed to beam at her. He was far too cute.

“What makes you you isn’t your past, but the choices you make in the future. Your ability to learn, adapt, survive is what makes you who you are, and what you will become. You’ve already achieved so much! Your greatest vengeance is the fact that not only have you survived, but the fact you’ve reinvented yourself to be stronger than your captors could ever believe! There’s a new Vraska as much as there’s a new Jace. You’re becoming the person you want to be! Do you realise how incredible that is?!!”

She must be glowing green with how much she was blushing.

“Thank you, you’re being sweet,” she managed.

“Let’s get to know the new versions of us,” Jace insisted, “New Vraska can meet New Jace, let’s be friends all over again.”

His enthusiasm was infectious. She reached forward and ruffled his hair. He leaned into the gesture before seemingly surprising himself with his own reaction.
“Sure, why not,” Vraska replied, “Let’s be friends all over again.”

They stayed there for a moment, flushed-faced and smiling like idiots. Somewhere on the ship, someone had got out the battered accordion. Discordant wheezes echoed over the waters as they stared into each other’s eyes.

“Thank you for sharing your story with me,” Jace murmured, his expression growing a little more serious, “I’m proud to know you Vraska.”

She almost burst into tears again but reigned it in with all her might.

“I’m proud to know you too Jace. Always have. Always will.”

Chapter End Notes

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Saboteurs

Chapter Summary

Jace gets his hands on the Thaumatic Compass and discovers a little more than he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jace might be in trouble.

He didn’t know if he was definitely in trouble, but there was a very good chance he was. Maybe he’d be fine. However, there was something about taking apart the very tool this expedition relied upon, that made him think he was in the wrong. Correct or not, he had managed to put the Thaumatic Compass back together again. It had been slow fiddly work, requiring smaller tools than they possessed on the ship. Jace had improvised using a fork, a piece of wire and a vampire’s hair pin, to take some of the finer pieces apart and put them back together again. The compass was, overall, a lot more robust than he’d given it credit for. Despite the delicate mechanisms and spindly prongs, the device was made of a hardy material, quite unlike anything he found on the ship. Parts of the internal mechanism, especially those supporting the magical conducting crystals, were made of a metal with an orange hue he’d never encountered before. It wasn’t copper. It also wasn’t magnetic, so it didn’t contain any form of iron. Too light for bronze. Too tough for silver or gold. The identity of the metal eluded Jace to the point where he began to wonder whether he’d discovered something extremely rare and valuable. Whatever it was, it was perfect for its intended use. Light enough to be carried around with ease, durable enough for the constant workings of the mechanism. Jace thought someone should try making a spyglass out of this metal, if there was enough of it around.

The compass was so well made that it then made no sense when he found a problem. In total, Jace found three loose nuts. It wasn’t a substantial failing. It wasn’t even a structural issue. It was just a few fixings that hadn’t been tightened enough. And that meant the whole device swung a little too loosely, and calculated its angles a little too wide. It was baffling. Why would someone would make such a beautiful and meticulously well-designed device, and then not tighten the last few nuts and bolts? Why would someone sacrifice accuracy by doing something so careless?

Everything else had been so well done, so purposefully well made, that Jace couldn’t believe this was an accident. There was no way of knowing for sure, but if asked, Jace would say someone had intentionally left this device unfinished. Made Lord Nicholas think it was done, but sabotaged his expedition by giving him an inaccurate tool. But why? He’d never met Lord Nicholas. But rich people had enemies, money did that. If Lord Nicholas had commissioned this device, just like he was paying Vraska to use it, well… What relationship did the artificer have with Lord Nicholas that meant, they couldn’t refuse the request to make the thing, they would then sabotage the end result? Lord Nicholas would undoubtedly have power over the inventor, so had said inventor resented this? Such a subtle means of betrayal would let the engineer keep their head and Lord Nicholas would be none the wiser. It was fascinating to speculate on and Jace couldn’t wait to tell Vraska about it.

Of course, he put the compass back together, and tightened all the fixtures, before going to find
her. The compass was now in perfect working order, and operating at its intended un-sabotaged accuracy. Jace had discovered he liked taking devices apart and putting them back together. Hopefully he’d get to do more before they finished their expedition. For now, though, just the compass mattered and he took it to the Captain’s quarters with all due haste. Vraska was generally in there at this time of night. Dinner was long gone and the watches had just changed. If she wasn’t having a meeting, Vraska was likely spending some time alone in her quarters or be asleep. Sometimes Jace would visit her, other times Amelia would and Jace would go back to his hammock. On this occasion however, his news was rather exciting, so it shouldn’t matter who was already in there.

Except it did matter. No sooner had Jace reached the door to the Captain’s quarters, then he realised how much in trouble he really could be in. He was perhaps doubly so, and by doubly he meant with the two most important people on the entire ship. First, he’d taken the compass (without permission), and now…. He really wasn’t supposed to be listening in on this conversation.

“Look,” Amelia was saying. She sounded a little sad, but mostly exasperated.

“I know I can’t change your mind,” she continued, “And I know I’m not exactly an unbiased say in all this.”

She sighed.

“But, I feel like I owe you one. Not ‘cause of that evening, or any evening after. You changed my life before this crush-thing happened. Thanks to you, I can move on from the pain of my past. But it’s pretty damn awful to see you still stuck on yours.”

It sounded like Vraska had tried to speak but Amelia wasn’t finished. Jace almost gasped at the fact she’d interrupted her Captain, but muffled the noise in his remaining glove.

“You’re not going to get what was,” Amelia stated, “Because he doesn’t remember what was. Besides, from the sounds of it, he didn’t treat you right anyway. But I understand, we get caught up imagining what might have been. We wish for the better times and look back through a rose-tinted spyglass. Just… there’s a difference between being selfless and harming yourself by ignoring what you need. I don’t want to see you hurt yourself Vraska, especially over something impossible like the past. And this… this is that. You’re chasing shadows and you’re going to fall in deep if you’re not careful.”

Jace’s heart had sunk somewhere about his stomach. She could only be talking about him. Who else did Vraska know with memory problems? He knew full well that Vraska had been fond of the old him. They’d talked about that a lot. Yet nowhere in that conversation had she implied he hadn’t treated her right. But what if she had decided not to mention that? What if he’d been terrible to her and she was trying to forget it? Well, the new him wasn’t going to be horrible but… was she going to live with that memory hanging over her and he wouldn’t? That wasn’t fair on her, and he’d have no idea how to make amends!

“I know,” Vraska replied. Her voice was softer than usual, almost pained.

“And I never intended to bring my past between us. I never wanted you to feel like you had to compete with a relationship that never happened.”

“Well I am,” Amelia replied, “And I was being sincere back then, before we went to Cicero’s. I didn’t really expect anything to come of it, so when it did… I was surprised but delighted. And now, and now this. I feel like fighting against your past is fruitless but I can’t deny it hurts. To get my hopes up and seeing them crash back down so soon after.”
“I’m sorry,” Vraska said, “For putting you in this situation, for getting your hopes up. I’m woefully inept at dealing with such situations but… I was sincere too. I did, I do, have a crush on you as well but now Jace is back in my life…”

She paused as if trying to gather herself.

“You deserve better,” her voice turned firmer, as if she had come to a conclusion, “Someone who can make you happy without feeling the need to compete. I can’t cut off my feelings for you or Jace, but it would be cruel to string either of you along. I need to grow up and work out what to do with myself before I try to become emotionally dear to others. I’m sorry for hurting you, I truly am.”

Amelia sighed again. There was a creak of floorboards. Jace wasn’t quite sure what she was doing. His head was too busy reeling at everything he’d just heard. Once again, there were definitely elements to their past relationship that Vraska had not told him about. He understood that old Jace was important to her. He understood that they were friends. Yet this wasn’t a conversation about friendship, or even being best friends – which he’d assumed they were. No, Vraska had been in love with him. Or at least crushing on him, which he felt like was much the same thing but… dear gods.

Jace frowned at his feet as he wrestled with the strange sensation that welled up in his chest. He felt sad, for Amelia. Who had evidently tried to have a relationship with Vraska before he’d turned up. Also, he pitied Vraska who was evidently having a hard time working out what her emotions were doing. His appearance had clearly turned a simple voyage into a very emotionally taxing one. Yet… there was no explaining the other part of his reaction. Of course, he felt confused too, about why Vraska had felt the need to hide this. However, that sensation was swiftly being eclipsed with a giddy sort of triumph that was making him feel lighter than air. He was smiling. He couldn't help himself! Where had this come from? What was going on?

“Krokt, what a mess,” said a familiar voice in his head.

He whipped round to see Vraska. Not the Vraska in the Captain's quarters. Not the teenage Vraska in ragged clothing. No, this Vraska was dressed in an elegant dark brown sun-dress, with a frill of what looked like living mushrooms about her shoulders. She had a wide-brimmed hat, decorated with yet more fungi, and looked like she was about to go to a tea party – she was dressed so fancily it must be for an occasion. It was certainly a far cry from her Captain’s leathers, though Jace couldn't help but think she looked amazing in both. In this new Vraska’s arms was a very peculiar item. It was some kind of soft toy – a cat, nearly four-foot-long with grey fur and gleaming yellow eyes.

What do you mean? He directed the question silently at the illusion. She laughed and rolled her eyes.

“You two,” she replied, “Are a mess.”

That wasn’t fair. Besides, wasn’t she one of them? Or at least an image of one of them born of the other’s thoughts? Technically she was both of them, which meant she too was a mess.

“True,” she conceded, “But I’m not permanent. You’re probably going to want to talk this out before things get truly complicated.”

And it wasn’t already? As the footfalls on the other side of the door got louder, the illusion-Vraska merely shrugged and vanished. Jace took a few steps back of his own, to make it look like he hadn’t been standing right outside all this time. When Amelia got to the door, he was halfway back
down the corridor, wondering why he hadn’t successfully managed to stop the illusions by now. They seemed to crop up when he was in emotional turmoil, but right then… This really was complicated.

Amelia stared at him and then at the compass in his hands. She shook her head and passed him by, leaving a trail of gloomy thoughts in her wake. Jace had promised not to read the crew's minds, but he couldn't help it. Amelia was projected loudly and she truly didn't like him. He wanted to mention that this wasn’t his fault. That he hadn't meant to get between them. But he didn't want to explain his eavesdropping. So he merely hurried back the way he’d come and up to Vraska’s door. It was slightly ajar but he made sure to knock before entering.

“Jace.”

Vraska looked tired. She was leaning on her desk, head in her hand, elbow on the table. In front of her was a large ledger and two scrolls of parchment, stretched out and weighted with empty tankards. A quick glance told Jace that they were an inventory. They were only a few days from Ixalan now. She must be checking over everything they’d got from the High and Dry in preparation for setting foot on dry land. Jace hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should try talking about what he’d just heard, before deciding not to. Once he’d got his own feelings about the situation sorted out, then he might have a go. Might. He could almost hear the illusion-Vraska’s laughter.

“You have the compass,” Vraska sighed, “I thought you might.”

Oh yes! The compass. That’s why he was here!

“I fixed it!” he exclaimed, hurrying over to her desk and presenting to her with a flourish. She stared at it, and then him.

“Was it broken?”

Jace nodded eagerly.

“Well, I got curious about how it worked,” he began, “Since it thought I was what you were tracking. And I’m not a city or anything. So, I had a look at the internal mechanisms, like I did with the spyglasses and Terence’s pocket watch, and that strange box Malcolm has.”

Vraska raised an eyebrow at him. He suddenly occurred to him that maybe she didn’t know about the strange box Malcolm had.

“It’s an image projector!” he explained, “You put a candle in there, and there’s little slides with pictures on, it’s like illusions but made with science.”

“Right, and the compass?” Vraska gestured for him to sit down and he immediately did so.

“The compass was very well made,” Jace explained, “Very intricate on the inside. But I think whoever made it deliberately sabotaged it before they gave it to Lord Nicholas.”

Now he had Vraska’s full attention. She sat up straight in her chair, her eyes glowing a little in concern.

“Explain, please.”

Jace told her about the loose bolts and how they compared to the rest of the compass, which had all been very well made. The more he spoke, the more concerned she became. It was gratifying that she agreed with his conclusion. There was no reason why the rest of the device was so expertly
produced. The loose fittings were far too important to be anything but deliberate. A loose bit of casing or a wobbly crystal could be wear and tear, but these were the internal workings that fixed the angle of the compass – they were vital.

“Also I found a weird metal,” Jace added.

“What do you mean?” Vraska asked.

He looked at the device. None of the strange metal bits were showing unfortunately, they were all encased in the inner workings.

“There’s an orange-ish metal in there,” he explained, “Very light, very durable. It’s not like anything I’ve seen before. It’s definitely not steel or copper or gold.”

Vraska’s lips worked as if she was trying to puzzle something out, talking the matter through without any sound.

“Can you show me?” she asked, “You don’t have to take it apart again. Can you project what you found?”

Jace nodded and did as he was told. He summoned an illusion, turning her desk into the table he had been using as a work bench. He pointed out piece by piece, the bits of odd metal he’d found and explained what they were all for. By the time he was done explaining, her expression had turned from one of curiosity to one of worry.

“Do you know what it is?” he asked eagerly. She nodded, slowly, as if she didn’t want to acknowledge the fact herself.

“I think,” she said, “It’s mizzium.”

Jace was still none the wiser but he was glad to have a name for it.

“What’s mizzium?”

“A specialist metal used in complex engineering,” Vraska continued, “I’m not an artificer, so I can’t tell you much. But it comes from one specific place and well… Lord Nicholas having access to it has implications I need to think through.”

“Why shouldn’t he have it?” Jace felt like she was trying to keep the information to herself, but he had discovered this, surely he could have some answers in thanks?

“Because…” Vraska cleared her throat a little, “Because mizzium comes from where we do,”

“Ravnica?” Jace suggested. She nodded.

“Only Ravnica. And only very select people are allowed to use it. Which means Lord Nicholas has been working with that guild and… and someone in that guild not only works for him, but also tried to secretly sabotage his plans.”

“So, the plans might be bad for Ravnica?” Jace concluded.

“Yes, that’s what I’m worried about,” Vraska replied, “However there’s nothing we can do right now. We have to find the Immortal Sun. We can’t go back to Ravnica without it.”

That would definitely make Lord Nicholas suspicious. He sounded like a dangerous and powerful man, better not to make him angry too soon.
“When we find the Sun,” Jace suggested, “We could head straight to Ravnica afterwards. Find the most important person we can and warn them about Lord Nicholas?”

She made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

“Yes, we will,” she agreed, “As fast as we can. I have a bad feeling about-“

There was a loud bang and a clank as one of the tankards holding the scroll down fell off the table. This was followed by a series of further clanks and thuds as books fell off the nearest shelves, joining a further pair of tankards on the floor. Jace and Vraska stared at each other just as the ship’s bell began to ring loud and clear, echoing through the sleepy silence of the night. They got to their feet as suddenly the ship pitched sharply starboard. Jace grabbed hold of the desk as his chair tipped off its legs and almost knocked him to the floor. Vraska caught the compass before it fell off the desk and tucked it into a coat pocket. The ship’s bell continued to clang loudly. The ship was waking up loudly around them.

“To the deck!” Vraska barked, “Now!”

The corridors were rammed with half-dressed pirates as they pushed and shoved their way up and above deck. Amelia was already at the helm, a grey rain-cloak flapping in the fierce winds that were tossing their entire vessel to and fro. Malcolm, looking drenched to the bone, was trying to shake out his feathers but he was swiftly soaked once more by the torrent of rain beating a fanfare against their sails.

“It just started!” he bellowed at Vraska as she joined him and Amelia, “Literally out of nowhere! The sky was clear, not a wisp in sight! And then… what the fuck is this?!?”

He pointed at the skies which were completely obscured in roiling dark cloud.

They all jumped as a bolt of bright purple lightning struck the ocean only a few feet away from their ship. Thunder boomed directly overhead as the waves tossed their ship towards a looming shadow ahead.

“All hands on deck!!” Vraska cried as Malcolm went back to the bell, “Man stations! Keep us afloat!”

Her voice was almost lost to the weather however Jace immediately knew what to do. He offered her a spark of blue magic. She nodded and suddenly her voice boomed louder by tenfold.

“IN POSITIONS! ALL HANDS ON DECK!”

Water was coming down in sheets. Cannons strained at the ropes keeping them lashed in place, their weight straining at the bonds keeping them from causing harm to the sides of the ship. Three drowned-looking goblins swung wildly about the rigging, trying to climb upwards as the wind sought to toss them overboard. The sirens were unable to help them, grounded in the gale-like conditions that had drenched their fight feathers. Edgar splashed his way over to them as the deck was swarmed with befuddled pirates, trying to keep their footing on what was swiftly becoming as slippery as ice. Vraska looked about bewildered, but Jace knew the explanation for this couldn’t be natural. He focused his attentions on the roiling waves, opening up the part of him that didn’t deal with physical senses. The little bead of blue energy, the sensation of ice, within him that always took over when he tried to cast magic. He let the chill consume him, slipping over him from head to toe like he’d been drenched by something far colder than the current rain. Now he could see it, feel it too. There was green energy, the colour of bamboo leaves, swirling through the waters. He looked up and yet more coursed overhead like air currents. Magic, but whose? He followed the
streams to their source, looking for the spring from which all this power flowed. He found it in the distance, three bright green spots on the horizon. Tiny figures, just magical silhouettes, but their shapes were distinctive. Who else had fins?

“Merfolk!?” he exclaimed, “They’re...they’re manipulating the sea! And-and the sky!”

He caught his reflection in the water. His eyes were as bright as the lightning, two blue beacons staring at the distant shore. Malcolm slid over to where he was standing and followed his gaze.

“Ah, steaming dino-shit, he’s right. We’ve got Shapers out there!”

“Jace, can you counter their spells?” Vraska asked. He merely blinked at her in confusion.

“Can I do what?”

She smacked herself in the hair.

“Nevermind! Everyone hold on-“

CRASH.

It had been so dark that not even Malcolm’s keen eyes had caught the rocks before the ship did. Wood flew through the air, piercing the sails. Cannons ripped free of their restraints and tore their way off the ship and into the waves. Lightning struck the mast, splitting it as easily as it might a tree. One of the goblins let out a horrible shriek as Vraska desperately gestured for Jace to magnify her voice again.

“ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON-!”

Jace couldn’t help but scream as the next wave swallowed the ship whole.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Summary

Vraska and Jace arrive at the continent of Ixalan, not quite in the manner they expected. What was planned as a simple jungle expedition, swiftly turns into a race that could condemn this world entirely.

It came as no relief when Vraska realised they weren’t the Shapers’ only target. The sea had swiftly become a ruin of shattered wood and tangled rigging. She supported herself on three planks that clung together by the will of one long nail, as she surveyed the wreckage. A Legion of Dusk ship had also been crushed by the artificial storm. Parts of The Belligerent now crashed up against the gilt exterior of what had once been a floating cathedral. The masts of each ship had been woven together like two knitting needles, ropes knotted and useless as the sea ripped each ship apart seam by seam. The surface of the waves was a jagged wasteland of wooden shards and grasping figures. Barrels disgorged their contents, dropping their loads like stones into the deep, as pirate and vampire alike grabbed hold in an attempt to stay afloat. Seabirds were already braving the storm-tossed sky, looking for easy pickings amidst the carnage. Vraska cast her gaze left and right, heart pounding in her throat as she looked for her crew, for Jace, for any familiar faces between the flotsam and jetsam. Kicking her way towards shore, she saw clusters of people surround the wider chunks of ship. Her crew did their best to holler to each other, pushing their makeshift rafts towards the coastline. Halfway to the beach, her spirits soared as she spotted Jace splashing his way towards the sand, clinging onto what had once been part of an interior wall. The red paint on the wood was distinctly familiar. They’d spent so much time and money making the Belligerent seaworthy… it was tragic to see it like this. Yet no amount of money was worth more than the safety of her crew.

As soon as she reached the sand, she let the planks drift back out with the tide. Drenched to the core, she staggered up the thick sand and towards an outcropping of rock – the closest thing to an elevated view she was going to get. One by one, figures emerged from the tide, some welcome, others decidedly less so. Jace was swept onto the sand a few feet from her rocky ledge. Yet, no sooner had she clambered down, then Jace was obscured entirely by a figure in gleaming armour.

“How!”

Jace rolled to one side just as the stone vampire fell with a sodden thud. Vraska raced to his side, kicking up sand as she helped him to his feet.

“Where is—” he gasped, yet his words were cut off by a familiar battle cry. Two goblins, Breeches included, were fighting furiously against yet another vampire. This one evidently prepared for their adversaries as they bore twin blades.

“Is everyone—” Jace tried again. Vraska scanned the beach, noting the appearance of yet more vampires wading out of the depths. She was about to answer him when she spotted Amelia running towards her, cutlass out, expression grim. Flying above her was a familiar parrot – Phillip, the doctor’s pet.

“We’ve lost Terence,” Amelia yelled, “Edgar’s out cold but Malcolm’s trying to get him up and about. They knew we were coming!”
Evidently. What they’d planned to be a mere jungle expedition was looking more like a battle zone with every passing moment. If the merfolk knew they were coming, they could very well know what they were after.

“I heard them yelling about the Sun,” Jace commented, “The vampires, I mean. Their leader… they’re here for the same thing as us.”

Vraska’s worst suspicions were confirmed. This wasn’t going to be a trek. It was going to be a race.

“Go on,” said Amelia, “I spotted a dingy up ahead. Take a man or two and get going. Find the Sun before those bastards do.”

Vraska immediately wanted to object.

“All the crew-” she began, but Amelia cut her off.

“All the crew’ll catch up,” she stated, “We’ll deal with the vampires, get a bunch off your trail. Send us a flare, or some magic, and we’ll follow.”

Vraska didn’t want to leave them behind, to unknown dangers. Yet wasn’t that what lay ahead of her too? Unknown danger. She had imagined, perhaps naively, that she could bring all her crew home in one piece. Take everyone back to port. Return Malcolm back to Johnson. Make sure everyone was safe.

“Catch!” she suddenly proclaimed.

Amelia flinched but managed to catch the coinpurse tossed in her direction. Jace watched on looking confused as Amelia opened the pouch, seemingly confirming her suspicions.

“Your gold, what?” Amelia asked.

“This is even more dangerous than we anticipated,” Vraska explained, “I could be heading into the jungle to certain death. If so, nothing matters more than getting everyone else home safe. This was my mission, I brought you along with me and I promised to get you all back. So…”

She took a moment to breathe, the exhaustion of their situation momentarily catching up with her.

“I’ll have Jace send signals. If you don’t hear from us in…over two hours, assume we’re gone. If so, don’t try coming after us. That’s an order.”

It was Amelia's turn to try to object, but Vraska wasn’t hearing it.

“Do whatever you can to get the crew back to the High and Dry, to get them home. They’re as much your crew as they are mine. You will make an amazing Captain; I just know it. They’ll follow you, and please, if necessary, lead them home.”

She willed Amelia to hear her sincerity. There was a moment of silence between them, punctuated by the cries of battle. Finally, Amelia nodded and pocketed the infinite money pouch.

“Yes Captain.”

Vraska let out a heavy sigh.

“Jace, you’re with me,” she said, “Amelia…good luck. See you soon.”
Amelia nodded, hesitated, before giving her a low bow.

“Good luck Vraska. I…I’ll be keeping an eye out for your flare.”

It was with a slightly heavy heart that Vraska located the aforementioned dingy. It was a tiny sailing vessel, tied up where the river met the sea. Vraska swiftly unmoored it and clambered on board. Whilst free of the jungle canopy, they would be able to ride the wind in their sails. Yet as soon as they were surrounded, well, they had a lot of rowing ahead of them.

“Can you cloak us?” she asked Jace, who was still looking back in the direction of the rest of the crew.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“They’ll be fine,” she assured him, “They’re survivors, all of them. It’ll take more than a few vampires to take them down.”

He chanced a smile.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just… they’re all the people I’ve ever known.”

It was a sombre thought, and their mood darkened further as they were swept underneath the canopy of the trees. Soon they were forced to take turns rowing as they delved deeper and deeper into the unknown. Every square inch of space teemed with life. From schools of brightly coloured fish that swam in spirals about their oars, to tiny flying lizards that fluttered about their mast like oversized gnats. Occasionally, a break in the trees would show where a large creature had trampled its way to the river bank. These gaps were often twice the length of their boat, instilling a sense of dread in how gargantuan these beasts must be. They had yet to see a dinosaur, for which Vraska thanked their good fortune. She had been led to believe they thrived in both air, water and sky. Ixalan was meant to be filled to the brim with them.

As Jace took over rowing duty, Vraska couldn’t help but dwell on what he said. He was right, of course. The crew of the Belligerent, at least according to his memory, were the only people he’d ever met. Like her, he’d probably assumed they’d go all the way together. Sail here, go exploring, and then sail back as one big happy unit. Yet here they were, separated. In the end though, weren’t they always going to separate? As soon as she found the Immortal Sun, she’d be able to go back to Ravnica. In all honesty, she hadn’t quite planned for how that was going to go down. She wouldn’t have wasted months on a return voyage, or even the weeks back to the High and Dry. She guessed now she could disappear at the first opportunity, and the crew would just assume her dead. She’d said her piece, given Amelia what she could. Infinite money should get them somewhere… Vraska sighed as she contemplated what might be next. Yes, she could go back to Ravnica. But Jace, Jace didn’t even remember what Ravnica really was. What would he do once he had the ability to planeswalk back? Would he follow her? It would be impossible to keep him in the dark about what he was. He would want to go back to Ravnica after all. Ugh, was it better to do it now?

“What is it?” Jace asked, tentatively breaking the quiet within the boat.

Vraska took a deep breath. Sure, why not now?

“Neither of us are from here,” she stated.

Jace blinked at her.

“I know that,” he replied, “We’re from Ravnica, in the North.”
She grimaced. The North lie was never going to work, was it?

“Ravnica isn’t just far away, it’s another world entirely.”

Jace’s eyebrows raised to an almost impossible degree.

“Another world?”

How to phrase this in a way he could understand…

“When you arrived,” she began, “You told me that when you arrived, you made your body disappear and reappear again. You felt like you were scattering and reforming.”

Jace nodded. Well, perhaps a demonstration would work best. She let out a steady breath, feeling the shadowy embrace of her magic encase her from head to toe. A moment later, she was on the other side of the boat and Jace had yelped in alarm.

“What did you-?!”

“I-I can do that too,” she panted a little, even the failed planeswalk drained her of a little energy, “Usually, when we disappear, we reappear somewhere else. On another plane, another world. We’re called planeswalkers.”

Jace looked like he had three million questions and she couldn’t blame him.

“One moment, let me explain,” she interrupted, “No, whenever we try to planeswalk on this particular world… well, something yanks us back. We’re not allowed to go back to Ravnica. We can’t leave this plane.”

Jace bit his lip, frowning as he tried to make sense of it all.

“You think…you think the Golden City might be stopping us from leaving?” he tried.

That made a lot of sense considering.

“I was given a spell that allowed me to contact another plane, once we find the Sun,” Vraska told him, “After that, we should be able to leave. By that logic, it’s the Sun or city itself that’s keeping us trapped here.”

“Is that possible?” Jace asked.

Vraska shrugged.

“A dragon taught me how to sail. Who knows what’s possible anymore?”

Jace’s confusion was swiftly turning into excitement – his expression was quickly shifting to delight as he rowed with greater enthusiasm.

“Vraska?” he said, after a moment lost to the sounds of the jungle.

“Yes?”

“Can I see the compass?”

She took out the compass. To her astonishment, it was pointing directly at her.
“I think I’ve got it!” Jace exclaimed, as if she had just proved hi point for him, “The compass doesn’t point just at the city! It points at sources of really powerful magic. That’s why it found me. That’s why it found you now, it’s tracking our planeswalking magic!”

She watched as the compass slowly rotated to point up stream. Whatever residual trace of her walk, perhaps what was left of that great glowing triangle… well, that had faded and now it was back on course. But he was right. He had to be right. For so long they’d tried to work out how the damn thing functioned and he’d got in one!

“That’s…incredible,” she said, smiling, “You’re right. The Immortal Sun must run off the same magic…that’s why it tracked all of us. You’ve solved it! You’re amazing.”

He suddenly looked rather bashful.

“You’re-you’re amazing too,” Jace managed, “I mean, we both have our own talents. I just put two and two together…it’s not that-

“It’s incredible,” she insisted, “Don’t be hard on yourself. You’re cleverer than you give yourself credit.”

They exchanged awkward smiles before realising that Jace had stopped rowing all together. He coughed a little, look at his hands and then winced.

“I’ll take over,” Vraska insisted, “Hopefully it won’t be long now.”

An hour or so later, Jace sent the phantasmal image of a draft horse back down the river. He did this again after a further two hours. Needless to say, the river was far longer than she’d anticipated and her fingers were starting to ache from all this rowing. Oar blisters ended up in similar spaces to sword blisters… her hands were going to be wrecked before they even saw the city.

“Wait!” Jace’s cry was hushed, as if he wished to grab her attention without alerting anything around her. He could of course, just speak to her telepathically, but she wasn’t in the mood to nitpick.

“What is it?” she murmured.

His eyes flared blue, bright under the shadows of the canopy.

“There’s people close,” he murmured, “A human, a vampire, a merfolk and… a minotaur.”

“A minotaur?” There were minotaurs on Ixalan?

She stopped rowing as Jace gestured for them to stay very still. They sat, hunched and stationary, for a good ten minutes before Jace gave a small sigh.

“Ok, they’re gone.”

Vraska grimaced as she tightened her grip on the oars.

“Why would a vampire, a merfolk, a human and a minotaur be working together?” Jace asked her, “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t think they’re working together,” Vraska replied, “I think we just dodged a fight.”

Jace looked very relieved as they settled in for a long night’s travel. A boat wasn’t the most comfortable place to sleep, but Vraska had certainly experienced worse. Still, she was quite glad to
abandon the little vessel the following morning. They moored it to the riverbank, beating their way through the underbrush as Vraska used her sword as a machete. Finally, the dense foliage opened up into a wide path beneath a perfect blue sky – you would never have thought there’d been a storm not so long ago.

“I’m not sure we should walk here,” said Jace. He pointed up at the clear sky.

“This path was probably made by dinosaurs.”

Vraska sighed. She didn’t want to keep hacking her way through the jungle. She’d be exhausted before noon. Still, he had a point, they’d seen evidence of some horrifyingly large creatures on their trip upstream.

“You think they trampled down all this?” she replied.

“No, it was cut by dinosaur loggers,” he retorted. For a moment she was taken aback by his perfect deadpan, before she burst out laughing.

Jace shook his head as if in despair.

“Don’t insult the noble trade of dinosaur forestry. I’ll have you-“

Vraska continued to laugh until they were interrupted by an odd scent on the air. It made her think of incense, more reminiscent of an Orzhov cathedral than any rainforest flower. It was a cloying, almost sickly scent. Perfume to cover the rot of a corpse. That was it, it smelt like a funeral, but a-

Suddenly, she was surrounded in a thick black smoke. She let out a hiss of alarm as the smell became almost overwhelming. Even her gorgon’s vision could not pierce this darkness, yet something was there, the scent of blood had joined the foul perfume.

“Look out!” Jace cried.

The smoke vanished as swiftly as it had arrived. Vraska was now face to face with a gilt-armoured conquistador. The symbol of a black rose was emblazoned into her armour. The vampire’s fine clothing was splattered with blood that dripped from her snarl. Her fangs were bared wide and crimson. Vraska began to charge up a petrifying blast but the vampire was already looming over, ready for a serpentine strike. She wouldn’t, she couldn’t, move fast enough.

BOOM.

Thunder rolled overhead with all the ferocity of the shipwrecking tempest. The vampire was shocked enough to give Vraska the valuable few seconds she needed. She brought her sword up, knocking the vampire back as she caught the blade on her armour. The resulting battle was a quick and dirty tussle. The vampire had all the finesse of her kind but none of the restraint. She acted like a starved animal, lunging and spitting as they thwarted each other’s every blow. She hadn’t even bothered to draw her sword. She came teeth and fists first into the fray, trying to knock Vraska down. Yet even the vampire seemed to know her efforts were in vain. Just as Vraska felt the power well between her eyes, the vampire turned back into smoke. Vraska charged after her, yet the plume of foul vapor barrelled straight at Jace with unnatural speed. He gasped, but could do little to stop its momentum. Struck clean off his feet, his landed on the dirt with a painful thud. The storm around them disappeared as the vampire vanished into the treeline.

Jace gripped his head, but as soon as he checked his condition, he let out an anguished cry.

“The compass! She took the compass!”
Vraska continued to swear as she sheathed her sword. She helped Jace up before turning to kick the nearest tree in fury. Not only had they lost their sole guide, she’d allowed Jace to get hurt! This was all her damn fault for getting distracted!

“We can tail her,” Jace proclaimed, as she landed another solid kick against now-crumbling bark. Suddenly he produced another one of his horses and sent it soaring back coast-wards.

“We can kick all the trees we want later,” Jace continued, “I can track her magic. We can get the compass back but we can’t let her get too far ahead.”

Vraska took a deep breath. Ok, all might not be lost. They just had to catch a supernaturally fast vampire… great.

“Right, where is she now?”

Jace closed his eyes and visibly concentrated.

“She’s going – fuck!”

His eyes snapped open. In one fluid motion, he flung himself in front of Vraska, arms crossed before him as if bracing for impact. Not a second later, that impact occurred. An immense illusionary snake crashed into his arms, splitting perfectly in two against his psychic rebuttal.

Barrelling down the path was one of the strangest sights Vraska had ever seen. A massive elemental, made out of an entire river bank’s worth of foliage, was crashing down the path, bearing the form of a merfolk atop its immense bulk. The merfolk was as brightly coloured as the fish they saw earlier, far more vivid than any Simic hybrid she’d encountered. Close behind was a woman in steel armour, her plate mail gleaming as she rode on dinosaur-back, down the sunlit road. Vraska drew her sword once more, but Jace was one step ahead. She felt his magic pass over her like a sheet of ice cold water. They’d been cloaked.

“Where did they go?” cried the human woman, skidding to a halt atop her beast. The elemental-riding merfolk also came to a stop

“It is but an illusion.”

She raised one webbed hand and suddenly vines whipped up from the floor beneath them. They grabbed Jace by the ankles, toppling him face first in the dirt. Vraska let out a cry as the illusion dropped. On instinct, she put herself between Jace and the riders.

“Wait,” she called. The riders’ attention was now solely on her.

“Why are you following us?” she demanded, summoning all the authority she could muster. Behind her, Jace was still lying in the dirt. However, he was clearly aware enough to murmur:

“The merfolk knows about the compass.”

Said merfolk bristled in surprise and anger. Vraska decided to push their advantage whilst it lasted.

“Who are you?”

The vines around Jace’s feet receded, enabling him to clamber up and take a position at her side. The merfolk took a moment to calm her elemental before addressing Vraska again.
“My name is Tishana, an elder of the River Heralds and protector of Orazca. One of our own heard some fruitful rumours about you, pirate.”

The merfolk that had alarmed Jace in the bar. Could it be?

“I am Huatli, of the Sun Empire,” said the dinosaur riding woman, “Warrior Poet, and bane of all that dare disturb our lands!”

Right. Locals of Ixalan. She had no quarrel with anyone who lived here, but she was going to find the Golden City regardless.

“None may possess the city.” Tishana continued, “Or what lies within it. You will hand over the compass or die where you stand.”

Vraska was finally ready to petrify someone. If she held the power much longer, she was going to give herself a headache. This merfolk clearly-

“We don’t have it!” Jace chimed in. Vraska folded her arms. Or they could just tell the truth. Jace was clearly doing something to the merfolk, beyond Vraska’s understanding. So she simply waited, in case petrification became their only option.

“A vampire is nearby,” Tishana commented, “It was she who took the device from you?”

Jace nodded.

“Yes, she ambushed us and took the compass with her.”

Tishana and Huatli shared a look. Vraska wasn’t sure if it was just her imagination, but she thought she could hear creatures moving in the treeline. Creatures who certainly weren’t there a moment ago.

“Well, thank you for your cooperation,” Huatli commented. Without another word, they spurred their mounts and bounded off into the jungle. Vraska immediately turned to Jace.

“Can you still track the vampire?”

Jace smiled.

“I can track all three of them.”

He sent one more illusionary horse before they set off into jungle. Yet it seemed this particular phantasm was unnecessary. No sooner had they reached another clearing, then a familiar voice called down from overhead.

“Oi! Up here!”

Vraska skidded to a halt and peered up.

Malcolm was sat in the treetops, looking a little bruised but otherwise in perfect health. He dropped to the forest floor with a triumphant whoop. At his cheer, the trees around them were suddenly full of movement. Between trunks and around bushes, familiar faces began to emerge. Vraska had never been so glad to be surrounded. Her crew. Her crew had made it. And…

“What’s going on?” Amelia pushed her way to the centre, ready to take charge.

“Our compass was stolen by a vampire,” Vraska relayed, “And there’s a dinosaur-riding knight and
a elemental-riding merfolk chasing said vampire to get the compass for themselves. We, are chasing all three, to get our compass back.”

“Sounds like a pickle,” said Malcolm, “Seems like they’ve got some hefty advantages but then again… so do we.”

He gave a bird-like whistle. Jill and Drew, his fellow sirens, joined him almost instantly. At once, Vraska understood what he meant.

“Alright,” she said, “On my signal, ambush them from the skies. The rest of us will need to fan out, the quicker of foot should try and circle round so we meet them at every angle. The vampire is strong, but she’s not immune to the element of surprise. The merfolk is likely a shaper, she can control the surrounding foliage so look out for her vines. The Sun warrior has a dinosaur – that danger goes without saying.”

The crew had managed to salvage a great length of rope and what was left of a sail. How they’d carried it all so far into the jungle, was anyone’s guess. However, Vraska was grateful they had. Navigating the jungle, tracking their quarries, it all became so much easier with the sirens scouting ahead. Jace could track their minds, but his mental pursuit did little when it came to large masses of rock, or thick clusters of trees. Malcolm, Jill and Drew kept them on the quickest and most even path. Breeches and his siblings cut through the trees, jumping between and dodging branches with the utmost ease, using their strong grips and wiry tails. Amelia and Vraska led the charge of the less nimble. Jace kept a few steps back, keeping them constantly alert to any changes in the trio’s path. They raced for what felt like over an hour, the vampire had clearly been given too much of a head start. However, as they splashed their way through a small stream, Jace exclaimed

“I think they’re fighting!”

Thank the stars, they were. By the time Amelia bagged them a Sun warrior, wrapping the sail cloth around her head so she could neither see nor grab the tumbling compass, the vampire was entirely out of the picture. All Vraska had to do was grab the compass and make sure it was safe, secure and back where it belonged. How lovely that they had done most of the fighting for her!

“Onwards!”

It was just like Vraska had imagined it. She, Jace and her crew, charging together towards the Golden City of Orazca. This was how it was meant to be. Captain and crew together, from start to finish. Jace was admittedly an unexpected bonus but they wouldn’t be here without him. A stampede of footfalls and cheers announced their arrival. The Thaumatic Compass was vibrating in her grip. Its pulses growing frantic, it’s orange glow so bright it was almost blinding to behold. Vraska couldn’t help but grin as her heart leapt and her nerves sang with the sheer excitement of it all. They were doing it. They were doing it together.

“I can see it!” Malcolm cried.

“Keep going!” Vraska called. So close! The anticipation was almost dizzying. As they ran, she couldn’t help but spot veins of gold running through the nearby rocks. Even the leaves on the trees had turned a rich and beautiful yellow. Ixalan itself was revealing their destination now, guiding them to victory! The land had too long kept its secrets, and they, they would be the first to see its splendour. At last, their rampage brought them into a clearing, bright with the noonday sun. Stopping in their tracks, the crew exchanged gasps and cries of wonder as, shining bright above them, the spires of Orazca pierced the sky. They stood like gleaming blades in a rack, perfectly vertical against the horizon. Whatever lay beneath was hidden in yet more trees, as if nature had tried to hide such beauty from view. The compass was going berserk. Rattling in her hand like a
tool possessed. She tucked it back in her pocket as she surveyed the immensity of what they had found.

“That’s it,” she panted, turning to Jace who had just caught up with her, “Orazca. Home to the Immortal Sun. Home to whatever is keeping us here. Be they the same or otherwise.”

“What does the Sun actually do?” Jace asked, leaning over a little as if to stretch out the aches of the journey.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “It might literally be what keeps us here. It might give eternal life. It might make an army invincible. It might be a wellspring of power too great to control. It might be all those things at once or none at all.”

“I don’t think it’s meant to be here,” Jace wheezed, “Maybe it came from somewhere else. Makes sense for it to come from another world.”

“Maybe.” They couldn’t say until they had found the thing, and even then, it may be beyond their understanding.

Off to one side, the rest of the crew were gathering their bearings and steeling themselves for the next leg of their journey. Those with intact rations and waterskins were sharing out what little they had. Some had filled their pouches with jungle fruit and were treating them like food and drink combined. Vraska turned to them, intending to make some rousing speech about the trials ahead. Yet no sooner had she taken a step forward, than the ground began to shake beneath her feet. The sirens immediately took to the air whilst everyone scrambled for something to hold onto. Breeches grabbed Amelia, who in turn grabbed a nearby tree-root, only for it to be ripped out the ground at the force of the tremors. Many fled to the edges of the clearing, trying to climb trees as a great crack appeared in the ground beneath them. Solid rock parting as easily as ripped paper.

“Look!”

Amelia was not looking at the earthquake beneath their feet, but at the spires looming overhead. They were beginning to rise, like Steam Festival rockets, higher and higher into the air. The city itself was emerging from the jungle, a giant gleaming edifice awakening from its slumber beneath the blanket of trees. The force of its emergence quaked the jungle for miles around. Vines snapped, trees were violently uprooted, flocks of birds and dinosaurs alike were sent screeching into the heavens.

“What the-“ Malcolm cried, flapping over to where Vraska stood, holding onto a nearby boulder.

“Captain! Did we do this? Was this because we approached?”

Somehow Vraska couldn’t believe that. She shook her head.

“Someone got here first.”

It looked like Malcolm had something else to say. But no sooner had he opened his mouth, than a colossal bellow echoed from the city below. The mighty roar sent more winged creatures streaming into the sky. The second had the crew freezing in their tracks, too frightened by the primal noise to scrabble even against the force of the tremors. Another deep guttural sound echoed through the air, like something had awoken from the very depths of the earth. Indeed, it felt like a beast, some sort of monster unlike any other, was rising from within the city, awoken from its slumber by the city’s ascension. The jungle shook with every roar, the ground trembled with every quake and yet the city rose further and further towards the sky.
Vraska was so shocked, so transfixed, that she realised far too late that her feet were wet. It didn’t seem to matter in the face of such magnificence. However, water was now flowing thick and fast, filling up their clearing with alarming speed. A crevasse had formed in the earthquake, redirecting the surging river they had once used as a guide. Before them, the city was blooming like a flower. True to its name, every wall, every window arch, was made of pure gold. Yet its detail, the brickwork was outlined in turquoise, amber and jade. Truly beautiful without being the slightest bit gaudy. Ancient carvings, a language she could not parse but only marvel at, ran over every surface. Waterfalls coursed through golden ducts, leaving dazzling rainbows in their wake. She took a step forward, letting go in the urge to get closer, to bask in its light. Yet even a single footfall seemed too much for the fractured stone. Another quake set her tumbling to the ground, colliding hard, her wrists crunching painfully as she tried to throw out her hands to break the fall.

“Vraska!”

Her joy was replaced instantly by terror.

The edge of the clearing, the very spot she had previously been standing, had been cleaved in two. Jace was clinging onto the boulder for sheer life, trying to not to join the flow of the river, now coursing over the edge. Pirates scattered as stone crumbled and trees were swept into the turbulent waters. Vraska however charged straight ahead, feeling the water increase in volume with every step she took deeper into what had become a waterfall.

“Vraska!” Jace choked, coughing up water as the river frothed and foamed about his obstruction, “Vraska, don’t it’s-“

“Grab my hand!” Vraska planted her feet in the riverbed, grabbing onto one of the few surviving trees that stood in the river’s path. She reached out for him, panic rising swifter than the foam as she grasped for his arm, his hand, his clothes, anything to keep him with her. With a grunt of pain, she stretched to her limit, fingers brushing against his when suddenly…

“JACE!”

The boulder Jace had been so desperately clinging onto could no longer take the river’s barrage. Solid stone was cleaved from the river bank. Their fingers touched once, twice. Two fingers entwined and then let go.

“VRASKA!”

“JACE!”

She screamed and screamed, but in only a matter of seconds he was gone. The water surrounded her, shoving her, bombarding her until she had no choice but to fall in the same direction. No, she had a choice. And it was a choice she would make willingly, without effort, without thought. For what was this, what was any of this even for, what was the point of making it out alive, if she couldn’t do with him?

The water dragged her to the edge as she ignored the cries of her crew. She felt her feet being swept out from under her and took a deep breath.

3.

2.

1.
She dived. Towards what, she did not know.
Memories

Chapter Summary


She felt like the world was chasing her at double speed. Fragments of tree and shattered boulders followed her into the watery abyss. She wanted to close her eyes. Shut them tight so not to see the shadow below. Yet if she hit a protruding rock, collided with one of those ragged trees, it would be the end of her. She was no good to anyone injured. One heavy impact could leave her drowned at the bottom of goodness knows what depths. She had to stay alert. Not just for debris, but for Jace. So far he was nowhere to be seen, lost to the churning waters ahead of her, but there was only one direction he could have gone. So, she followed. As she had always followed, onwards, downwards, until she found the base of this sudden waterfall. They hadn’t gone through so much. Lost and regained each other so many times. They hadn’t cried, fought and smiled together, just to lose each other like this. She was Jace’s protector. She would take him home. Even if he didn’t remember what home was, she would show him all over again. Take him back to the bridges across Tin Street. Reintroduce him to the sights and smells of city life. They just had to get through this. Make it out alive. Please, oh cruel and unfeeling gods, just let him make it out alive!

The urge to clench her eyes shut won out as she hit the pool at the bottom. Panic consumed her. Dragging her towards the murky river bed as she kicked and beat at the current. The waterfall slammed gallons upon gallons of water above her head. Shoving her down every time she grasped at the surface. Pain shot through her limbs as she tried to push herself up and out of the churning waters. At last, with one mighty kick, she broke the surface. Gasping and spluttering, she fought to remain afloat as she was pelted with spray. She fought her way over to the bank, where vast columns of stone and gold had broken apart the earth. Fragments of rock and soil clung to their bases – fragile steps for which to get out of the water. She splashed her way through the deluge. Almost reaching the pillars, her course was suddenly diverted, not by the river, but by a sight that had her heart pounding.

“JACE!”

Now free of the mist, she could see him sprawled on the opposite bank. He was loosely clinging onto the same boulder he’d been gripping above, half in the water, half on dry land. Vraska dove back into the current, fighting with all her might to bridge the distance between them. She grabbed hold of a branch that had wedged itself in the river bank, tried to use it to pull herself closer. Yet no sooner had she put her weight on it, than she felt a crack – not in the branch, but in her mind. It was a painful snap. Like a rope breaking under the strain, like being struck with a leather cord. She physically winced, recoiling as her vision swam. The waters about her no longer green and filled with debris, but blue and full of… buildings?

“What?”

She was looking down on Ravnica. Soaring high above the spires she had long associated with home. She could see the pillars of New Prahrv in the distance. Hundreds of people, as tiny as insects, swarming the streets below. What was this? What was- No sooner had she seen it, than the image vanished. Alarmed and confused, she continued hauling herself to the opposite bank.
she was closer, she could see blood gushing from the side of head. He lay on his side, his face coated crimson except for the two bright beacons that were his eyes. His gaze was alight with magic. Had he just seen what she’d seen? Was he causing it?

“Jace, I’m coming!” she called, scrambling up the bank towards him, “Hold on!”

Feet on solid ground once more, she kicked up dirt, small stones cascading into the river. Only a few paces away from the prone form of Jace, she was once again beset by a sudden glimpse of Ravnica. This time it was a wide-open space, a courtyard paved in white stone, surrounded by quarrelling figures dressed in guild colours. She recalled this from Jace’s explanation to her. This was the Forum of Azor, the end goal of the Implicit Maze. In the centre was a dias, and atop the dias was a dragon.

“Niv Mizzet?”

The Izzet Guildmaster was looking down at her. Towering over the pillars that surrounded this place, high above even the largest elemental or troll. The dracogenius opened his mouth as if to speak, rows of glistening teeth making her tremble a little where she stood. Whatever he had to say, the parun never got a chance. The illusion vanished as quickly as it appeared. An illusion it was, but also more than that. As Vraska flung herself at Jace’s side, she realised what these images must mean. Jace was remembering. He had remembered Ravnica. He had remembered the guilds. He had remembered becoming Guildpact. Yet what it did matter when he was bleeding to death on the river bank?

Vraska pulled him up and out of the water. His head bled profusely over coat as she cradled him close. His hair had matted with the blood that now ran down his face, dripping over eyes alight with uncontrolled magic. They flashed and shone like two blue flares, projecting shapes and images wildly into the air about them. Random people she couldn’t name. Bits of buildings. Old books. Occasionally a person-like shape would disappear into the trees. Jace cried and groaned with every new phantasm. To a normal person, a head injury like this would undoubtedly cause brain damage. Jace however was a mind mage. His brain was his weapon, his defence, his greatest tool, his everything. There was so much power contained in this one mind but now... Now he seemed to have lost control of it. He looked like he was in agony and she had little idea of what to do.

“Jace,” she called, “Jace, you’re going to be fine. Breathe. Just breathe.”

Vraska ripped a strip of cloth off her trouser leg and tried to bandage his head to stem the blood loss. However, as she leant over him, she was suddenly beset with a wave of psychic force. She dropped the cloth. Clutching her head as an intense pain sought to rip her mind in two. For a brief moment, the waterfall behind them turned into an entirely different cascade of water. An immense wall, topped with giant bismuth-like protrusions filled her vision. Then, just as suddenly as it had changed, the jungle was back. Birds squawked overhead and dinosaurs roared in the distance.

“Jace!” she called, vividly aware of where they were, “Jace…can you hear me? You’re going to be fine. If you can send an illusion to the crew, they can help-.”

“Vraska…” The mental touch was more like a whimper of pain.

“Jace!” she followed the connection back. Begging for him to keep talking, but she was instantly beset by another excruciating burst of memory.

It was as if she stood in the room, watching. A teenage Jace was on the floor, curled up in agony.
A man, half flesh, half metal, stood over him. They were surrounded by gleaming machine-laden shelves and trays full of cruel looking metal instruments. The room was dark if not for the faint glow of several wicked looking devices, pulsating against the far wall. Too late she realised she’d seen those tools before. She’d seen those knives and screws in the flashes of nightmare, during the last time Jace hadn’t been able to contain his memories. That time it had also been out pain and fear. Vraska covered her mouth as the man advanced on Jace, kneeling down and lifting him with one arm made of jagged and twisted metal.

“*I’m going to make damn sure you learn from this,*” he hissed.

Wrenching apart Jace’s robes, the man, no monster, slashed thick decisive strokes into the boy. Jace wailed and screamed, flailing in his merciless grip. Vraska couldn’t help but shake, tears welling in her eyes. That was Jace’s old mentor Tezzeret! That was what had happened before he’d almost bled out on their carpet! Her ears were filled with Jace’s petrified screams. The adult Jace’s cries echoing with his childhood torment. What was even worse, there was nothing she could do about it. This was memory! This was illusion! She couldn’t go back and change the past.

“Jace, this isn’t real,” she begged him, “Jace, you’re with me. You’re safe. It’s over. It’s all right.”

Jace merely wailed on the ground and suddenly Vraska found herself back on Ravnica.

Rubblebelt territory, she knew it immediately. The perfect place for strays like them to find shelter, and perhaps few ruined goods or coins. A hopelessly small Jace was sitting on a large rock, as a Gruul shaman gave him a bottle of what could only be moonshine. Vraska blinked as she realised what she was seeing. This was Jace getting his tattoos. At this point in time, he couldn’t have been on Ravnica for long at all. He’d only been there a month when they first met and back then he’d already had his markings. It was an odd way to make yourself feel better about a new place. However, having a cool new tattoo would be exciting for any teenager. She couldn’t help but wonder how long after this they had met, and how different things might have gone if they didn’t.

In the young Jace’s hand was a piece of paper, the symbols that would soon be his tattoos scrawled across it. So, they were a memory? Perhaps the only memory of who he was before, apart from his name. It made sense that he’d want them permanently placed on his body. That was one way of making sure he never forgot them again.

And Vraska was suddenly back, bent double in the mud. Her agony was undoubtedly only a fraction of what Jace was going through right now.

“*Jace, please,*” she said, “*An illusion, if you can, for the crew. So they can find us. They can help you. Please.*”

But all Jace could manage was a single gasping breath. It echoed like a death rattle as the waterfall dimmed from sight. The river vanished. The sounds of nature faded. Vraska stared, wide-eyed, as she was surrounded by cold stone, looming shadow and the smell of overly-ripe fruit.

She was in a small bedroom now. Cracked walls and moth-eaten curtains gave the place an almost abandoned air. Jace was there, of course, but so was another figure that made Vraska instinctively tense in alarm. It was Liliana Vess, sitting on the bed in state as Jace perched on a wooden stool by the fire. Liliana Vess seemed bored by absolutely everything Jace was saying to her. Yet, he always addressed her with a nervous excitement that had Vraska’s heart hurting in pity. Part of her wished to scream run, go, escape, but this had passed. Whatever terrible thing she was about to witness had passed and there was nothing she could do to save Jace from this pain.

“So, did you mean it?” past-Jace asked. Liliana raised one imperious eyebrow at him.
“Did I mean what?”

Whatever he was going to ask, Vraska didn’t want to hear it. Jace please! Don’t do this to yourself! Don’t ask her! She’s just going to hurt you! Vraska couldn’t bear it.

“That you would be sad if I died?”

No. No no no no no.

“I expect so,” Liliana commented, so casually that you would think she was talking about the fog outside, “Whatever we had. Whatever you want to call that. It was worth that much.”

Vraska hated this woman with every inch of her being. What kind of answer was that to an honest appeal for affection? That was a carrot on a stick, a bone for a dog, enough to please someone as desperate as Jace and to lead him on hoping for more. How could she. How could she do this and get away with it! If Vraska ever saw that woman again she would be dust beneath her feet!

“Have you seen anyone since?” Liliana asked. She was studying Jace like a scientist did a butterfly, right before that scientist pinned its wings to a felted board.

“You seemed to get on very well with that moonfolk woman.”

Vraska wanted to claw out her own eyes, her ears, anything to get away from this!

“She’s married,” Jace replied. He was immensely tense, as if suddenly the conversation had set off an alarm within him.

“Is she now?” Liliana seemed pleased. What right did she have to be happy about this situation? Here she was, feigning disinterest, but stringing Jace along, all for the pleasure of it! She was vile. Beyond vile. She was evil incarnate!

“Married, I think, with children,” Jace elaborated, “And, well, she’s not-not what I would look for anyway.”

He was staring very keenly at the fire now, as if wondering whether he should throw himself in. Vraska felt like her heart was being ripped in two.

“And that housemate of yours,” Liliana continued, “The monster you keep in your basement? What about her?”

She was a dead woman walking. Petrification was too good for her. Vraska was going to tear her apart with her talons!

“She’s—She’s my best friend!” Jace’s tone rose a little in her defence, “And she’s not a monster.”

Vraska felt a surge of affection wash through the terror. He’d defend her personhood? Even against a woman who so clearly had him wrapped round her little finger. Oh Jace… Oh wonderful foolish Jace.

“So?” Liliana pressed, “Have you or have you not?”

Jace looked at the floor. His expression was unreadable.

“No, we haven’t.”

“But?”
Who said there was a but? Vraska looked between them. She and Jace hadn’t slept together, there was no but! How could Liliana insinuate otherwise?!

“We haven’t,” Jace repeated, a little firmer, “She’s my best friend. I wouldn’t let anything come between us, even…that.”

This conversation was going to end in ‘that’, Vraska could just tell. She felt physically sick as Liliana first mocked Jace’s eagerness and then invited him to stay. She was infinitely relieved when the Ixalan river bank finally came back into view. However, that didn’t negate the fact he’d had to go through all that first hand.

“Jace, I’m so sorry,” Vraska pleaded, pushing back waves of nausea, “I-I should have killed her. I should have made sure she could never touch you again. I know I wasn’t supposed to see that. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but I will end her. I promise.”

There was a roar somewhere in the distance. Birds took flight. A dinosaur, a large one, was nearby.

“Jace, please, we need to move.”

He stirred a little, but instead of showing any sign of coherence, instead he gasped a single word: “Vryn!”

A world Vraska had never seen before suddenly bloomed in front of her eyes. Huge ring like structures channelled glowing blue energy from distant fields into a towering city still many miles away. Everything was covered in a layer of dirt and urban decay. The gritty edge of civilisation occupied by the hardworking and the desperate. It reminded her of the Chute Precinct. People lived, worked and died here, by the strength of their own backs. It was entirely alien but distinctly to her. Like someone had transplanted the Undercity into this technological wasteland. Yet it felt even more familiar, through Jace’s memories, it felt like home. Somehow, Vraska just understood.

This must be Jace’s home plane. This was what he forgot so many years ago.

“Jace, I’m seeing what you’re seeing…but I don’t know how to help you,” she informed him to no response.

The rings changed, turning into a line of copper pans hung above a kitchen cabinet. A pleasant looking human woman – freckled with curly brown hair, paced her kitchen, reading out a book of herbal remedies to a fascinated toddler. She stopped to peel vegetables, placing her book to one side and continuing to read.

And there she was again, helping the toddler put his shoes on. And again, when the toddler suddenly starting tying his own laces. She seemed surprised, as if she had never shown him how to do that. Glimpses of her face flashed by like a series of moving pictures. Common household activities: mopping the floor, combing her hair, reading a book, smiling at a picture, wiping away tears, kissing a bruise... Then suddenly the stream of images turned harsh. A scowling man. A voice telling Jace that scholars were lazy, that they didn’t belong here. The cruel taunts of a bully. The pain of broken fingers. The magic. Magical texts, arcane circles, part-translated spells, complex diagrams Vraska had no hope of understanding. She was assaulted by knowledge and given no means to decipher it. Then came a feeling of forgetfulness. Of forgetting his first planeswalk, then his second planeswalk, then his third, and then so many planeswalks after that. He hadn’t just lost his memories once. He’d had them wiped again and again and again...

Now there was a sphinx. A male one – Alhammaret, the memories told her. He was as large as a dragon, an immense winged cat with the face of an older man. Around his neck was a wide silver
collar, a symbol Vraska instantly recognised as the one of the back of Jace’s cloaks. This sphinx. This sphinx was a mentor, a teacher, but not just that, a fellow mind mage. A mind mage powerful enough to-

Suddenly she was atop one of those vast ring structures. A young Jace was battling the immense sphinx, each striking out with unbelievable psychic power. The feeling of betrayal was almost tangible in the air and Vraska knew she was correct. Jace’s mentor, this sphinx, had been the one wiping his memories. Was there anyone in Jace’s life, apart from her, that hadn’t tried to manipulate him?

She watched as Jace struck with the full might of his power. The sphinx suddenly fell, letting out an immense wail like a newly born infant. Jace sprinted to his side, tears pouring down his face as Vraska had to take a moment to gather what had happened. Jace hastily tried to reassemble his mentor’s mind. But it was too late, the sphinx was broken, shattered. He flailed and screamed, only pausing to take desperate gulps of air. Jace sobbed at the realisation of what he had done and then Vraska felt it, the power, the spark. But it wasn’t a burst of release like it had been for her. A surge of power, lifting her away. No, she felt Jace’s mind disintegrating, his own memories let loose to the winds. His home, his mother… He was forgetting. This was it. This was why.

He was becoming the memoryless boy she’d met when they were both fourteen.

Vraska felt a jerk between her shoulder blades and suddenly she was free, out of the memory, surrounded by jungle once more. Beside her, Jace was weeping.

Not even pausing to consider the contact, she scooped him into her arms. Tucking his head into the crook of her neck, she held him tight. Jace sobbed in her arms, crying a lifetime’s worth of tears as she held him all the tighter. He sobbed. Weeping for everything he’d never known. Jace had spent so long with no memory of his childhood. There had been nothing before his fourteenth year. He’d forgotten. He’d forgotten so many times. He’d been hurt, so much, so often, that she couldn’t stop herself babbling endless apologies as he wept. She was sorry. Sorry for his pain. Sorry for all the times she wasn’t there. Sorry for all the people she’d been unable to protect him from. Sorry that she’d spoken of her own mother when he had lost all recollection of his own. Sorry that she’d dragged him into a world of murder and violence when he’d tried so desperately to escape another..

She hugged him close. Hugged him as if she could somehow make up for all the hugs he’d forgotten. All the hugs he was owed for a lifetime of pain and manipulation. She cradled him, her own memories presenting themselves, unbidden but so vivid in her mind. She held him thinking of her early years, of all the time she’d spent alone, shut away, shunned. The times she’d wanted companionship and all she’d got was hit. Jace knew what it was like. Being human hadn’t saved him. Jace understood her and she understood him. They were joined by a life that had presented them with so much suffering, so much hurt. But with each other…

“Jace, I’m here. It’s me, Vraska. I’m here and I won’t leave you. No one will hurt you, not while I’m here, not again.”

“V-Vra-“ His throat sounded like it ached as he tried to stammer out her name. As he struggled to find his voice, a low blue haze settled around their entwined forms. More magic, past his control, but it was somehow different to the last.

Suddenly, she saw herself. Sat in a dusty fireplace, sucking pastry crumbs off her fingers as Jace stared at her in amazement. Fear lingered in his thoughts, but it was nearly extinguished with sheer gratitude at the half a pastry he had just been given. Vraska watched herself, small and grimy, shuffle up a little to allow him room in the best spot in the ruin. The next moment, they were standing atop a stone walkway and she was looking out over Tin Street like the world was hers to
Jace was looking up at her in awe, marvelling at the sunlight dancing off the copper smudges of her hair. Somehow, she could feel what he was feeling. These weren’t just images, an uncontrolled display of memories like those before. It was if Jace was unconsciously acknowledging that she was here with him, and somehow through that, all his feelings had leaked through. That was the haze, she realised. She was literally feeling what he felt.

Through his eyes, she was strength, but also kindness and patience. The admiration was evident even as young Vraska petrified bully after bully. The adult Vraska watched on in increasing amazement of her own. As she saw moment after moment, fight after fight, escape after escape. As they fought to survive, and lived to enjoy their spoils, Jace looked at her like she was the best thing he’d ever seen.

As their childhood flashed before her eyes, Vraska realised something. Something that perhaps she ought to have realised years ago. Something she had been denying for as long as they had known each other. Something she’d been too deep into her own self-loathing to accept.

Jace didn’t think she was a monster.

He never had.

Of course, he’d said it time and time again. Yet she’d never allowed herself to believe it. Now she was entrenched in his emotions, it was clear as day. After that first encounter, when she’d almost broken his nose, he’d never once been afraid of her. Not at the petrification, not at the knife-fighting, not at the inhuman displays of emotion like her hisses. He didn’t think she was a monster. Truly. Never. Vraska found herself welling up again as she saw her position mirrored, teenage-Vraska sat beside Jace as they read a book together in bed. Jace was covered in bandages, but he still managed to occasionally peep round at her, just to make sure she was still smiling. He was genuinely concerned about her happiness. He wanted her happiness. He cared.

They grew before her eyes and her amazement grew with them. She saw Jace, tiptoeing into their bedroom during their long separation at the hands of Tezzeret and his obsession with Emmara. Teenager Jace knew that he had to leave soon, but he just wanted to see her, however briefly, before he went back to his terrible master. He wanted to know that she was well, that she was safe. Even if he felt he didn’t deserve the same concern. Then suddenly, they were older, and she was wearing a dress that truly did not fit and gave Jace the clearest view of her cleavage imaginable. Teenage Jace was overcome by the sight. She couldn’t help but feel embarrassed even now as his thoughts raced and a strange sensation filled the pit of his stomach. And then they were older still. Jace was coming back, feeling humbled, from a trip to visit Emmara. He arrived to find Vraska rearranging books in their bedroom and, for a moment, he was lost for words. He stood there staring, marvelling at the woman, not monster, in front of him. Teenage Vraska had looked at him oddly before going back to shuffling books around. Vraska didn’t even remember when this had happened, but she was stunned by his reaction. Teenage Jace stood there, open-mouthed, gaping like a fish out of water as he was struck by the sheer beauty of his roommate.

Beautiful?

It was a word Vraska would never use to describe herself. She couldn’t imagine it. She couldn’t think of herself as beautiful. Yet Jace seemed to think so. Time and time again, amidst flashes of firework-strewn skies and quiet evenings at home, meals out and walks through the park. Tiny instances, so small Vraska took them for granted, but Jace had thought about them many times. To him, Vraska was beautiful, and she’d only become more so throughout the years. Vraska felt tears trickling down her cheeks as she watched Jace hesitate by the florists on Tin Street, wondering if it
would be too weird to buy her flowers. Sat beside each other on the sofa, he wondered if he’d be allowed to put an arm round her, but respected her need not to be touched. The way his heart leapt when she offered him her hand to hold. The way her smile made him feel warm inside. Her laugh made him so deeply happy. There were moments, just moments, where he would look at her and think how lucky he was to know her. Jace thought she was far more beautiful than she could ever believe. She didn’t know how to process this as her tears came thick and fast. Usually she would deny this without question. But these were Jace’s thoughts. He was incapable of lying right now. This was all true.

The air around them darkened into an evening not too long ago. She and Jace stood in a circle of silver moonlight. They held each other’s hands as they told each other how much they meant to each other. Yet there were more words, more that Jace wanted to say. He couldn’t. Not after all he’d just told her about his relations with Liliana. He felt dirty, used, unworthy of her praise. Unworthy of her affection.

“Promise me you’ll come back safe,” she had begged him, “Wherever you go, wherever they take you, promise you’ll come back safe. I need you too. You are my strength. You make me believe in myself…and what I can do. We’re stronger together.”

“I promise,” Jace replied, “I promise I won’t go away for so long. I’ll say no, if it comes to that. I won’t let them tear us apart.”

I love you. But you deserve better than this. Than me

It floated in the air, unsaid, but so clear in Jace’s thoughts that she could hear them in his voice. Vraska’s heart was fit to burst. Suddenly the air about them grew incredibly hot. Not humid like the jungle heat, but a dry heat unfettered by the thick stone walls around them. What was lacking from the air in moisture, had been replaced by a thick layer of anger and fear. Yet amidst it all, that affection, that love, remained

Now it fuelled Jace’s indignation.

“I said no,” he stated, “And I meant, no.”

Vraska turned her head a little, still cradling the semi-conscious Jace in her arms. The memory-Jace was glaring at a familiar woman in purple silks. She was sitting on a large golden chair that looked positively throne-like, bowls of fresh fruit at her feet whilst a zombie wrapped in linen waved a fan of feathers in her direction. She seemed quite at ease as Jace sweated under his layers of robes. She straightened a little in her chair, one finger pressed to her chin, as if analysing the man in front of her.

“I heard you the first time,” Liliana drawled, “And I asked you what you meant. I’m not the mind-reader here, that’s you, remember?”

He flinched but stood his ground.

“I thought I made myself quite clear;” he replied, “The answer to everything you stated, is no.”

A flicker of irritation passed through Liliana’s gaze. She was good at concealing it, but not to the likes of Vraska.

“I would expect someone like you to have the intelligence to at least elaborate on his opinions,” she proclaimed, “Or has that beef-slab reduced every man in this place to his level of mono-syllabic grunts.”
Vraska felt Jace’s anger deepen, but also felt fear at his own reaction. It was as if he was scared by his own resentment of her. He felt like he was leading himself towards dire consequence.

“Gideon has nothing to do with this, as you very well know,” he replied, mentally steeling himself as he spoke.

“He doesn’t know what you’re playing at, none of them do. So, I am the one telling you this now. I will not let you use the Gatewatch as your personal demon exterminators. I will not let you manipulate them into getting you out of the mess you’ve made of your life. And I will not let you manipulate me.”

Vraska couldn’t help but gasp. How long was this after the last memory? The one where she’d strung him along like a fish on a line? This was clearly after she and Jace had reunited back on Ravnica. He was thinking about her even now, on this far-flung desert plane. His mind was made up. His thoughts were fixated on being the man he wanted to present when he got back home. It was love that fuelled this resilience. Love that meant he had finally summoned the courage to stand up to his tormentor. He was rejecting Liliana, standing up for his friends… Vraska was suddenly beset by an enormous sense of pride. Certainly hers and not belonging to the furious Jace she was currently watching.

Liliana let out a tittering laugh, as if he’d said the most amusing thing she’d heard in a long while.

“Manipulate you? Oh please, you’ve been smitten since I first met you. I hardly needed to raise a finger to have you trotting along behind me like the obedient puppy-dog you are. Do I really have to bring you to heel?”

Jace shivered a little but stood firm.

“I am not your dog,” he retorted, “Not your pet anymore. Whatever game you think you’re playing, I quit. I’m done begging for scraps. I can do so much better than the likes of you.”

Her expression froze. Her mocking smile faltered into a cheery grimace. Eyes betraying her shock at his seemingly-sudden change of heart, her gaze swiftly turned to a glare. She swung one leg over the other, exposing a large amount of thigh as her dress hitched up with the action. Jace did not respond.

“Oh really,” her voice still held some amusement, but it was thickly being covered by a layer of ice that even the desert heat could not melt.

“I would tell you to watch your tongue Beleren, but it appears we’ve passed that stage already. I’ve been so generous with my charity so far, but it seems I’ve been wasting my time on an ungrateful wretch.”

“You have an odd definition of charity,” Jace bit back, “Last time I checked that word didn’t mean seducing someone to deal with your own self-destructive vanity.”

She rose to her feet. The linen-wrapped undead hastily stepped aside. Liliana’s movement upset a bowl of fruit, causing them to bounce and roll across the sand-strewn floor.

“Who would have a pathetic little rat like you?” she demanded, “Snivelling around the feet of his betters, wishing he was so big and bold and strong as those he looked upon. Who is this fantastical person who could look at such a waste of space and think you worth any affection?”

“I’m not worthy,” Jace said, backing away a little but determined nevertheless, “Far from it. But I know there’s someone out there who’ll have me as I am. She’s always been there and I was just too
much of a coward to tell her how I feel. No more. After we finish up here, I’m going home, back to Ravnica where I belong and I will make sure you never darken our doorstep again!”

The memory faded as she advanced on him. Vraska could barely believe what she had just seen. She was so proud. So overwhelmingly proud to see him stand up to that wicked woman. To find strength in his love, his love for her no less! Tears poured thick and fast down her face. He was amazing. The most amazing person she would ever meet. No one ever would compare. No one would ever come close to how much Jace meant to her. They had known each other for so long, but somehow, she’d been ignorant to just how deep his feelings, her feelings, their feelings ran.

“You’re more than worthy,” she choked, “You’re perfect. And you’re so so brave, standing up to her like that. You showed her you are a person worth respecting, worth fearing even. I’m so proud of you.”

She hiccupped through her sobs, as suddenly the air around them blossomed with the sounds of the sea. She was shown an image of herself, aboard The Belligerent, singing an old Golgari folk song at the top of her lungs. Jace was doing his best to join in, eventually picking up the chorus and they sung together, free as swallows on the horizon. He looked up at her with sheer affection and admiration, unfettered by memories of the past. Even without knowledge of who she had been before. Even without their joint childhood, he had admired her. He thought her beautiful, magnificent even. Even then, after he’d watched her turn a vampire to stone, she wasn’t a monster. As he joined her at the helm, he was beaming from ear to ear, proud to finally have picked up the tune. Joy filled the air with the crash of waves and the cries of gulls. Vraska wasn’t sure she could cope with any more emotional overload. Her heart would surely burst. She wanted to hold onto Jace and never let go. Cherish him and his brilliance forever. Show him all the love and adoration he poured into every one of these memories. Together, she felt complete. She felt worthy of praise, worthy of affection, and she would do everything she could to let him know that his love was not a one-sided thing. This was no fleeting teenage fancy. Somehow, it had always been there, for so many years. But with their emotions so raw, so vulnerable like this, she finally understood.

“I-I love you,” she murmured as she gripped his sodden robes, cradled his head, smoothed back his bloody hair.

“Jace, I love you. I’m here. I’ll always be here. Please, c-come back to me.”

The blue light in his eyes flickered and faded. For a moment, Vraska feared the worst.

“Jace, no, please!”

He blinked. Once, twice… The light was gone now, but his chest rose and fell. His breathing levelled, His hands clenched in her coat.

“V-V…” He spluttered a little.

“Vraska?”

“Yes,” she replied immediately, “Jace, I’m here. You’re going to be fine.”

He shook his head a little, as if that wasn’t what he meant. She turned to rip another strip of cloths off the other trouser leg. His head wound was still bleeding. It needed attention. Yet as soon as she tried to turn away, he gasped:

“Vraska!”

“Yes?”
He swallowed, his bloody lips brushing against each other as he tried to summon the words.

“You…you saw everything?”

She nodded.

“Yes, what you couldn’t contain. I’m sorry.”

He gave a little jerk of the head. As if, again, that wasn’t what he was trying to say.

“You,” he managed, “You-You love me?”

She smiled at him. She couldn’t help it.

“Yes, of course I do.”

His lips cracked into a grin.

“I-I had a plan…” he murmured, “Really romantic plan… a confession…with flowers. This-this works too I guess.”

She let out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

“You can tell me all about it later. Please, let me wrap up your head.”

He nodded and shifted a little closer in her arms, allowing her to bind up the injury and wipe a little of the gore off his cheeks.

“Vraska?” he said, as she swept the last strands of bloody hair out of his face.

“Yes?” she replied.

Jace took a moment to simply stare a moment, his face flushing under the blood and grime.

“I-I love you too.”

Vraska let out a little hiccup. Dear gods, she had just stopped crying too.

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