
The Gathering Storm: Chapter 8

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Not quite twelve hours later, Ral stepped off the deck of a very different skyship onto the dock jutting from what they now called the Beacon Tower.

The skyship was part of the small Azorius fleet, done up in the Senate colors and comfortably appointed for hauling dignitaries quickly around the city. The crew had worked the ropes with quiet efficiency, and a formation of thopters had flown escort as the vessel ascended, watching with unblinking camera eyes. Ral frowned at the machines, which hovered overhead as he strode down the gangplank. Here in Azorius territory they were as thick as flies on a corpse, and he doubted anyone came or went without their knowledge.

Dovin Baan was waiting at the foot of the dock, wearing a red and blue robe that set off his dusty blue skin, hands clasped at the small of his back. His calm seemed preternatural, even for the notoriously even-tempered vedalken. He gave a very slight bow to Ral, which Ral returned, holding his coat to keep it from flapping in the wind. They were at least twenty floors up, and though yesterday's storm had abated heavy clouds still raced across the sky, bringing a fitful drizzle.

"Master Zarek," Dovin said.

"Master Baan." Ral nodded at the skyship. "Thank you for the ride."

"Ascending the stairs is an inefficient use of time," Dovin said. "Your people have installed some sort of slingshot-and-bucket device for reaching the top quickly, but I understand it is still unreliable."

"Has anyone been killed yet?" Ral said.

"I don't believe so. One goblin suffered several broken limbs, and proclaimed that it was 'awesome' and she wished to 'try another ride.'" Dovin raised one elegant eyebrow, and Ral fought back a grin.

"Sounds reliable enough to me," he said. "You didn't have to meet me here, you know. I'm sure the foreman can tell me what I need to know."

"It seemed respectful," Dovin said. "I am a stranger on your world, as you know."

"Well." Ral shrugged. "Lead the way, then."

Dovin pointed, and Ral followed. The vedalken walked so smoothly he almost seemed to glide, as though he'd perfected this simple movement to the very utmost. Everything about him was like that —smooth, effortless, *perfect*. It was unnerving.

"You're very open about being a Planeswalker," Ral said.

"There is little reason to hide it, now that you have made the secret public."

“Why come here to stay? Bored of your homeworld—Kaladesh, was it?”

“I don’t bore easily, Master Zarek,” Dovin said. “The smallest system, fully studied, can hold as much interest as the largest. No, my departure from Kaladesh was the result of . . . unfortunate local politics, let us say.”

“You’ve settled in nicely here, then.”

“I am very grateful to Supreme Judge Isperia,” the vedalken said. “I visited a number of worlds before coming to Ravnica, and she was the first to make me feel as though I might have a place. I am grateful for the chance to exercise my talents in her service.”

“And what are your talents, exactly?”

“Perfection,” Dovin said simply. “The ability to refine a thing, little by little, until it becomes a true exemplar of what it was meant to be. A machine, a bureaucracy, a dance—the form matters little, only the process.” His face took on a blissful look, the first emotion Ral had seen him show. “Supreme Judge Isperia has been kind enough to let me work within the Azorius, and I believe she has been very pleased by the results.”

“Evidently,” Ral murmured. He thought of the ever-watching thopters, which by all account were an invention Dovin had brought with him. *It must help with perfection when you know what everyone is doing all the time.*

Ral was finding it very difficult to like Dovin Baan.

“Have our people been giving you any trouble?” he said, changing the subject as they passed indoors. The Beacon Tower was topped by a broad copper dome, pierced by a number of small doorways, and Dovin unlocked one of these with a key on his belt.

“They have made some unusual requests,” Dovin admitted, “but I have done my best to fulfill them. In some cases, I believe I have become the target of some variety of humor.” He pronounced the word carefully, as though it were an alien thing that needed careful watching. “I do not understand the utility of an alligator sandwich in this project, even if it is delivered especially quickly, but I—”

“I’ll speak to them,” Ral said, groaning inwardly.

“It’s no trouble. I believe they were quite surprised when I brought them one within the hour.” Ral couldn’t be certain, but he *thought* the ghost of a smile crossed the vedalken’s lips. *Not quite as oblivious as he puts on, then.* Dovin gestured at a door ahead of them. “This is the primary chamber.”

The placement of the Planar Beacon had been dictated by the complex metaphysical geography of Ravnica, the same currents of energy that had powered the Implicit Maze. There had only been a few places that were suitable, according to the plans Niv-Mizzet had provided, and only this one, an Azorius outpost and skyship dock, had a ready-built tower of the requisite height. Isperia had consented to an Izzet crew moving in and taking over the top floors of the tower, constructing the great machine to the Firemind’s specifications.

Building the beacon had been part of Ral’s assigned tasks, but he’d left it to subordinates for too long, busy as he’d been coordinating the guild summit. For now, though, that task seemed well in hand. The raid on the Orzhov Cathedral had been a success. Hekara was still recovering in the Izzet infirmary, where Ral imagined she was having fun—the medics had a tendency to test their latest inventions on the patients, but he suspected they’d meet their match in the cheerfully fearless Rakdos emissary. Vraska had returned to her underground empire to prepare for the summit. And while they hadn’t heard from Kaya herself, Teysa had sent messengers to Isperia, indicating that the Orzhov would at-

tend the summit after all. The sphinx was busy coordinating the myriad diplomatic details, but it really looked as though the meeting was going to happen.

Which doesn't mean it will be a success. Getting the guilds to agree on *anything* was hard enough, without even taking into account the possibility that some of them had been infiltrated by Bolas's agents. Lazav was still a likely candidate for that, in spite of his protests, and Lavinia didn't trust Vraska in spite of her performance at the cathedral. Ral, oddly, found himself warming to the gorgon.

In any event, Niv-Mizzet still demanded a backup plan, and so construction on the beacon was proceeding apace. The space inside the copper dome was thick with wires, mizzium coils, and huge resonator crystals spaced at regular intervals. A smaller inner dome enclosed an area the size of a large room, with a single heavily shielded door leading inside. This was what Dovin now opened, leading the way into the heart of the machine.

When you assigned a task to the chemists of the Izzet, you usually only had the vaguest idea what you were actually going to get. In this case, Ral was pleased to see that they'd stuck fairly closely to Niv-Mizzet's design, with only a few decorative touches added on. The center of the beacon was a single metal stool, with a half-circle of steel control board curved around it, covered with an array of switches, buttons, and dials. A series of ivory keys, like a section of a piano keyboard, occupied the center. Wires curved away, up to the ceiling and out to the machinery between the domes.

Several humans, a goblin, and a viashino drew themselves up in front of the control board, bowing as Ral approached. Dovin looked on impassively.

"Master Zarek!" the goblin said. "Chief Chemister Varryvort, sir. Glad you could come to visit. Good timing, actually."

"Thank you, Chief Chemister," Ral said. "Why?"

"It's time to set the final security lockout, sir. We thought that you should choose the sequence, for safety's sake."

"Ah." Ral glanced at Dovin, who had a questioning look. "Activating the beacon is potentially very dangerous," he explained. "So there's a kind of key, a sequence that only Niv-Mizzet and I will know. Just in case."

"Very wise," Dovin said.

"You've finished the inner works, then?" Ral said to Varryvort.

"Yes, sir. All that's left is calibrating the resonators and modulating the primary power couplings. Give it a few more days and we'll be ready to go."

"For a machine that can only be either on or off, it seems to have a lot of controls."

"Most of these are for testing purpose, sir. We check the components individually, since we can't run a full-scale system test." The goblin pushed Ral toward the stool and indicated a single large switch. "Throw that switch, enter your sequence, and lock the switch back into place, and the beacon will be activated. As per the Firemind's design, it will *stay* activated until its internal power reserves run down, no matter what anyone does."

"Good." Varryvort seemed dubious, but Ral understood. *If we have to turn on the beacon, we may have already failed. I don't want to leave Bolas a way of shutting it off.* "The security sequence?"

“Ah, yes.” The goblin ran around the rear of the board and punched some buttons, and the piano-like keyboard lit up. “Go ahead. Seven keys, in any order. *Please* don’t forget, or I’ll have to tear this thing apart to get at the override.”

“I understand,” Ral said. He glanced over his shoulder, but Dovin was standing a respectful distance to the rear. Ral bent over the keyboard and entered a sequence, a bit of piano doggerel Elias had written for him long ago. The light brightened, then went out.

“It occurs to me,” Dovin said as Ral stood, “that this system is a bit fragile. What if you were to be incapacitated? Would it not be better to have a few individuals with knowledge of the code?”

“I’ll tell Niv-Mizzet,” Ral said. “If anyone gets to *him*, I think we have bigger problems.”

“Ah, yes,” Dovin said. “I do hope I have the opportunity to speak to your Firemind at some point. I’m sure I would find the experience fascinating.”

“I’m sure you would.” Ral shook his head. “Okay. The backup plan is on track. Let’s try to make sure we don’t need it.”

“Supreme Judge Isperia is hard at work.” Dovin gave another slight bow. “She will bring the guilds together, depend on it.”

I certainly hope so. For some reason, Ral saw Garo’s face, speaking Bolas’s words, and shook his head.

Kaya awoke, and immediately wished she hadn’t.

Everything seemed to hurt, from pain in her chest when she breathed too deep to an egg-sized lump on the back of her head. *Remind me not to get punched by any more giants.* More worrying, though, was the feeling of being *bound*, as though something had grabbed her on the metaphysical level and refused to let go. *Those damned ghosts did something to me. A curse, maybe?* She’d heard of death-curses, but not undeath-curses. *I suppose anything’s possible.*

With a sigh, she opened her eyes. She found herself in an elaborately decorated bedroom, the somber tones and excessive gilt indicating that she was still somewhere in the Orzhov Cathedral. She lay on her back in a four-poster bed, with silk sheets and pillows dripping with tassels and fringes of pearls. The rest of the room was furnished in a similarly elaborate style. *Which means we won, I guess. This certainly isn’t a prison cell.*

After a moment, the door opened, and a gray-clad serving woman came in with a pitcher of water. She gave a start when Kaya sat up, or tried to. Kaya settled for propping herself on her elbows.

“You’re awake!” The woman regained her decorum and bowed deeply. “My apologies, Guildmaster. Is there anything you require?”

“That water would be nice,” Kaya said. Then, after a moment, “What do you mean, ‘guildmaster?’”

The servant poured a glass of water in silence and brought it to Kaya’s bedside, leaving the pitcher on a low table. Kaya drank greedily and pulled herself further up.

“How long have I been unconscious?” she said.

“Most of a day.” The servant bobbed nervously. “Excuse me, Guildmaster, but Mistress Teysa requested that we inform her as soon as you awoke, so that she could attend you. Do I have your permission to fetch her?”

“Not until you tell me why you’re calling me ‘guildmaster.’”

“Mistress Teysa will explain everything,” the woman said, with a pleading look.

Kaya sighed and waved her away. She drank more of the water, stretching her arms and testing her range of motion, wincing when her chest twinged. After a few minutes, the door opened again, and Teysa came in. She was dressed in her full guild regalia, black hair blending into an unrelieved black uniform, and cut quite a figure.

“Kaya,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“Hurt,” Kaya said, “and a little confused. What’s going on?”

“We won,” Teysa said, pulling a gilded chair across the room and sitting beside Kaya’s bedside. “The Ghost Council is no more, and the high officials of the guild have accepted the *fait accompli*.”

“I figured, since I’m in here and not rotting on a spike somewhere. So why are your servants calling me guildmaster? *You* are supposed to be the heir, aren’t you?”

Teysa pursed her lips, and looked over her shoulder to make certain the door was firmly closed. She leaned closer, speaking in low tones.

“There have been . . . complications.”

“I gathered,” Kaya said dryly. “What *kind* of complications?”

“The guild is party to a great many contracts, which are given force by our law mages,” Teysa said. “I believed—most of the guild officials believed—that most of those contracts were held by the guild as a legal entity, which means they would be unaffected by any changes in leadership. Unfortunately, it appears my Grandfather held a great many agreements *personally*. Perhaps the majority.”

“I’m not sure I’m following this.”

“When you destroyed him, those agreements transferred to you,” Teysa said. “That’s what knocked you out. You are now, effectively, the counterparty to most of the financial obligations routed through the Orzhov bank, as well as the holder of much of the debt of the Tenth District. To put it bluntly, you *are* the Orzhov, in every way that matters. The guild had no choice but to acknowledge you as guildmaster.”

“*What?*” Kaya shook her head. “You have got to be kidding.”

“I assure you I’m not,” Teysa said. Her expression was grim. “It took some effort on my part, believe me.”

“Why?”

“Because the alternative would have been to kill you while you slept. We don’t know if the contract transfer would work the same way with a living person as it did with a ghost, but some of the guild officials were willing to try rather than acknowledge the authority of an outsider.”

“Oh.” Kaya hesitated. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Don’t mention it,” Teysa said dryly. “It seemed a poor way to repay you. And, in any case, I won’t risk the future of the guild on assumptions about how unknown magic functions.”

“Okay,” Kaya said. “Obviously, now that I’m awake, we can solve this problem. I hereby give everything to you, right?” She looked down at herself, hopefully, but the strange feeling of being bound didn’t change.

“It’s not that simple,” Teysa said with a sigh. “I have our law mages working on the problem as we speak, but most of these contracts were concluded on a personal basis. They can’t be transferred without being broken.”

“I can’t *stay* here,” Kaya said, suddenly feeling frantic. “This job is over. I have debts of my own to collect.”

“I know, but please.” Teysa grabbed her hand. “You *cannot* leave, not yet. You cannot . . . planeswalk, you understand? That’s why I had them fetch me as soon as you awoke. If you vanish, it could be catastrophic, both for the Orzhov and for you.”

“For *me* ? Why?”

“Backlash.” Teysa shook her head. “These contracts were created to be *enforceable* . If they are all released at once, the combined force could easily kill you, or drive you mad.”

“You have *got* to be joking.” Kaya sat up straighter, wincing. “So I’m *stuck* here? As . . . guildmaster of this weird cult-bank thing? And—” She started coughing, which only made her hurt more, doubling over in agony.

“I *know*,” Teysa said. “Believe me, I am trying as hard as I can to fix this. We *will* get you out, I swear it.” Teysa waited until Kaya’s cough had subsided, and handed her the glass of water. “I owe you an enormous debt, Kaya. I would not be free, or even alive, if it were not for you. But . . . it will take time.”

“I don’t *have* time.” Bolas had promised her he would heal the sky. Back home, people were suffering. *They trusted me.*

“You don’t have a choice.” Teysa took a deep breath. “For now, you must act as guildmaster. I will . . . assist, of course, but you must make a few public appearances. Otherwise the voices in the guild who want to kill you and face the consequences will grow louder.”

“You have got to be . . .” Kaya shook her head. “You’re not. Obviously.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t anticipate this.”

“I should damn well hope not.” Kaya grit her teeth. “Get out.”

“Will you—”

“I’m going to get some rest. Then I’m going to think about this some more.” Kaya lay on her side, facing away from Teysa. “Now get out. The guildmaster commands.”

“As you wish.” Teysa got to her feet. “Again. I’m sorry.”

Kaya said nothing as Teysa walked away, and she heard the door open and close.

She did manage to sleep, a little. Kaya dreamed of a blue sky shot through with scintillating cracks, like a zig-zagging rainbow, and of a world that went a little madder every year. Several times, she woke to the sound of servants entering, quietly going about their business. *Apparently guildmasters don’t get privacy.*

Finally, she ached too badly to stay in bed. Kaya rolled over with a sigh, and froze. An old man with a missing tooth and wild white hair, dressed in the gray robe of an Orzhov menial, sat in the chair Teysa had vacated, staring at her with his chin in his hands. Kaya felt a simultaneous urge to hide from his scrutiny and punch his remaining teeth out.

Instead she said, “Is there a problem?”

“No,” he said. “No problem. I just wanted to congratulate you on your ascent to guildmaster. I’m so glad you’ll be staying a little longer on Ravnica.”

“*What?*” Kaya sat up, her hand automatically going for a dagger that wasn’t there. *Where did they put those, anyway?* “Who are you?”

“Just a poor debtor, come to check on the terms of his bargain.” The old man smiled, a shark-like grin that seemed *wrong* in his wizened face. There was something about his voice, too, that seemed familiar. Kaya breath caught in her throat.

“*Bolas?*”

“In a manner of speaking. Only a poor messenger, in truth, but enough to be getting on with.”

“You bastard,” she growled. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you? You hired me to kill the Ghost Council for you, but you knew I’d get *stuck* here.”

“I had my suspicions, let us say. Grandfather Karlov was never the trusting sort.” The old man, Bolas’s vessel, gave a one-shouldered shrug. “It does position us perfectly for the next part of your service.”

“There is no *next* part, you snake. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Ah, but you now require additional services from *me*, do you not? Aid for your poor, broken home plane, as we originally agreed, but also extrication from your current predicament.”

Kaya paused. “You can get me out of here?” Her voice was leaden; she knew the answer to the question.

“Law magic has been part of my repertoire for millennia,” Bolas said, his soft purr of a voice sounding unnatural coming from the old man. “I can shift your burden, yes. But first you must do something for me.”

Kaya took a deep breath, winced, and let it out slowly. “What do you want?”

“There is to be a conference,” Bolas said, leaning closer. “One that you will attend, as the Orzhov representative . . .”

In Ral’s dream, he was twenty years old again.

“Elias?” He poked his head into their shared bedroom, where the floor was covered in discarded clothes. It was empty, as was the study, where Elias’s writing desk was surrounded by increasingly precarious stacks of books.

“Down here!” Elias called.

Ral went down the stairs. They’d lived in the townhouse—a newly renovated, three-story extravagance, in the very heart of Tovrna—for nearly a year now, and it still seemed much too large to him. He had dreams of finding new rooms, full of inexplicable things, hiding around some forgotten corner.

He found Elias in the dining room with their two footmen, fussing over the dinner arrangements. The table would comfortably seat ten, but Elias appeared to be trying to cram in fourteen, with one of the servants holding a fifteenth chair in readiness. *His latest poem must really be bringing in the admirers.*

In the last three years, Elias’s career had taken off in a way neither of them had imagined possible. The doors of Tovrna’s oldest and most staid artistic societies had opened to him, and critics who looked down on anything written in the last century had suddenly taken an interest in his work. Elias wrote furiously, words practically dripping from his pen, and he was now acknowledged as the leading light of the fashionable set. He dined with oligarchs, and his own dinners were attended by the elite.

For Elias, it was all a mystery, the smile of some deity who had frowned on him his whole life. Only Ral knew the truth. No divine providence was involved, only the hidden hand of Nicol Bolas, which seemed to reach into every level of society with an effortless ease.

It can't all be Bolas, Ral told himself, as he watched Elias work. *He only opened the door. If Elias didn't have his own talent, surely he couldn't have gotten anywhere.* But, in his darker moments, he sometimes wondered.

The money coming in from Elias writing, along with Ral's own work, allowed them to live as befit their new status. Ral had expected to encounter trouble with their aristocratic neighbors, but even there his patron seemed to be smoothing the way. Everyone had simply taken it for granted that these two young men were to be accepted.

It was everything Elias had ever wanted. *Which means it's everything that I have ever wanted.* And if there was a cost, then Elias would never know.

"Ral!" Elias said, rushing over and giving him a quick kiss. "This is driving me mad. Tell me, would you rather sit next to Lord Villiers or that nice young woman from the sculpture studio?"

"Neither, I'm afraid," Ral said. He gave Elias a moment to take in his rough clothes and long leather coat. The expression on his lover's face tugged at his heart.

"You're going out?" Elias said.

"You know I have to," Ral said quietly.

"But last night you told me—"

"I know." Ral shifted uncomfortably. "I got word just an hour ago that they need me again."

"I need you," Elias said. "When was the last time you came to one of my dinners?"

"I can't remember," Ral said honestly. "But you know I'd just embarrass myself anyway." He reached for Elias's arm. "If I had to choose, I'd rather spend time with you alone—"

Elias jerked away. "Don't."

"Sorry." Ral shook his head. "I'll talk to the boss. Ask him if I can take a month off. Would that help?"

"It might." Elias's lip quirked slightly. "You'll come to my parties?"

"Every night."

"Well. Maybe not *every* night." Elias sighed and gave Ral another quick kiss. "All right. Stay safe."

"Always."

Outside, the sun had already set behind the row of townhouses, and color was draining from the sky. Ral pulled his coat a little tighter against the chill. He turned his steps away from the center of town, walking past the rows of elegant townhouses and the neat little parks, past even the ring of genteel poverty where he and Elias had struggled to survive, into the shadowy tenements that surrounded the bright center of Tovrna like a ring of bloated tumors.

Here, the apartments were small, but nonetheless packed with as many bodies as they could fit. Men slept in shifts, matching the endless work hours at the factories. Clotheslines crisscrossed the narrow alleys like spiderwebs, hoping vainly to eke out a few rays of sun. During the day, swarms of children ran wild, miniature gangs led by the biggest and strongest.

At night, of course, the *real* gangs took to the streets. Ral had grown up here, and he'd always known the slums were carved up into pieces of turf as intricate as any feudal kingdom. What he *hadn't* known, back then, was that those gangs ultimately paid allegiance to the oligarch families of Tovrna. It made sense—it was just another type of business, another investment, and the people involved were often the same workers who toiled in the noble-owned factories.

Ral still had no idea whether Bolas was a nobleman himself, or simply worked for one. He'd never seen him in public, and no one else seemed to know him. But his reach was vast. Working for him, Ral had learned, turning the tiny sparks of lightning he could generate with his power into a weapon with deadly potential. He directed that weapon as Bolas demanded, mostly against the thugs who worked for the other noble houses.

That was where Ral felt truly happy, working against the interests of people like the count and blood-ying the noses of anyone who tried to stop him. He hoped that someday he'd run into Gunther again, and show him what the "rain mage" had made of himself. Even the thought made small crackles of static crawl over his hands.

Some nights, though, the work was different. Like tonight.

It's all for Elias's sake, anyway, Ral thought, as he rounded the corner and found the building he wanted. It was a big hive of tiny apartments, hundreds of people living cheek-by-jowl. An old man with only one leg sat on the stoop, and stared rheumily at Ral as he entered.

Elias didn't know what Ral did, not exactly. He knew Ral had a job that took him out nights, doing important work for one of the noble families, but Ral had worked hard to keep him from finding out that the work mostly involved hurting people. *He doesn't need to know*. While Elias brought in some money with his writing, he spent with a lavish hand, and without the salary Bolas paid him the pair of them would be right back in the gutter, no matter how many fancy friends acclaim had bought them. *He's the one with talent. I'll do what needs to be done, as long as he's happy*.

He climbed up the steps to the third floor, then walked down a grubby corridor, peering closely at the number plates. When he found the one he wanted, he tried the knob. *Locked*. He glanced up and down, but no one was watching; Ral had grown up in a place like this, and knew that everyone learned to mind their own business. He carefully channeled power into the lock, until the cheap metal heated up enough that it bent easily when he pressed it inward. The door opened with a slight creak, and he stepped inside.

This was a large apartment, by the standards of the slums. It had two rooms, one for eating and one for sleeping. The former was mostly occupied by a table and a couple of chairs, and Ral found a young woman in dusty gray sitting in one corner, working with a pair of knitting needles. Ral knew all about that, too. In the slums, the wage the factory paid was just enough to buy food and keep a roof over your head. If you wanted anything else—clothes, medicine, books—you either made it yourself, or used your off-hours to work at a craft you could sell or trade. All the women in his mother's building had knitted, or sewn, or hand-copied documents for scholars too cheap to set type.

The woman was so absorbed in her work that she didn't look up until Ral cleared his throat. Her face was as haggard and gray as the rest of her, and she gave a little gasp at the sight of him.

"Anne Hannover?" he said.

"I . . ." She looked like she was on the point of denying it. "Yes. I suppose. Who are you?"

"I work for Master Venati," he said. "He asked me to come by and check on your payment for this month."

This was the part Ral hated, the slowly dawning realization in their eyes. The smarter ones got it at once, and this woman was one of the smarter ones. He was glad for that. He didn't have to explain what came next; that Master Venati expected prompt payments on his debts, and that when Master Venati was unhappy, people got hurt.

They all made the choice, Ral told himself. Even at his poorest, he'd known better than to get involved with loan sharks. *And if it wasn't me, it would be someone else.* Some of his colleagues positively hoped their clients wouldn't pay. *Better me than Big Sal, or Nak the Ripper.*

"I . . ." Anne's voice broke. "I don't have it. I'd have paid if I did, I swear it."

"Master Venati is always happy to renegotiate your terms," Ral said.

"Whenever I do that, he doubles my debt," Anne said. "Please. Give me another month." She indicated her knitting. "I'm working hard, I swear. I hardly sleep. But food and medicine are so expensive—"

"This isn't the first time you've been late." Ral took a step forward, raising one crackling hand.

"Please—"

"Leave her alone!"

Ral hadn't really intended to hurt the woman, or so he told himself later. Injured people couldn't earn the money to pay their debts, after all. Mostly the clients just needed scaring, so that they had the proper motivation. But he kept himself ready, because sometimes they got violent. He wasn't taken *totally* by surprise when someone burst out of the bedroom doorway and came straight for him.

He was surprised, though, to find that it was a ten-year-old boy.

That made him hesitate just long enough for the boy to get inside his reach. Ral felt a sharp pain in his side, and instinctively slammed his hands down to shove the child away. His power leapt out as soon as he touched the boy, crackling through him in a vicious arc that set his limbs jerking and hurled him into the wall. He collapsed, twitching, as the woman screamed.

Ral stared down at his side, where a short-bladed knife had been driven in to the hilt. He wrenched it out and tossed it away, scattering blood. The woman had run to her son's side. Ral knelt beside her, bending over the child, feeling like he was in a dream. She screamed something at him, pounded her fists against his shoulder, but he ignored her.

He put one hand over the boy's heart. It was pounding wildly but irregularly, as current still coursed through his system. Ral closed his eyes and drew the electricity to himself, pulling whatever he could from the boy's small body. His shocks normally weren't fatal—he hadn't yet had to kill anyone in Bolas's service. *But I don't usually hit kids, either.*

Slowly, he felt the boy's heartbeat return to normal. The woman had left off hitting him, and gone back to shaking her son, who suddenly coughed and breathed in with a ragged gasp. She picked him up, cradling him in her arms.

"Tell him I'll pay," she said, her voice raw. "I'll pay, I'll pay, I'll pay. Just don't hurt my boy."

Ral got to his feet, in a daze. He pressed one hand against his side, and felt blood dripping past his palm. He turned away without a word and staggered out into the hall.

Ral never knew how he made it back to the townhouse, only that it took him some time. By the time he reached his own door, most of the lights on the street were out, and the carriages in front of the

house were gone. Ral's left hand was slick with blood. He fumbled with the latch for a moment before it clicked open, letting him stumble into the hall.

This is bad. His thoughts came dully. At first he'd thought the wound a minor one, but the bleeding wouldn't stop. *Nicked an artery, maybe.* He couldn't seem to get a decent breath.

"Elias." He didn't have the energy to shout. "Elias . . ."

There was laughter from the sitting room, then silence. Ral took a step in that direction, then another. Drops of blood spattered the carpet.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and saw the boy's limbs jerk spastically. Heard the woman's desperate pleading.

"I'll pay . . ."

As though he'd meant to do it. As though he'd hurt a child for Bolas.

"I'll pay . . ."

He reached the sitting room door. Heard a giggle, and pushed it open.

Elias stood against the wall beside a fireplace. Another man was with him, a tall, handsome man with well-coiffed white hair. For a confused moment Ral thought Elias was being attacked, couldn't understand what his eyes were telling him.

They were kissing, fast and hungry. The other man had his hands under Elias's shirt, and Elias gave that soft little sigh that he only ever made for Ral—

Some sound must have escaped Ral, because Elias jerked up straighter, pushing the other man away.

"Ral!" he said.

"You . . ." Ral stood in the doorway, swaying. "You were . . ."

It was all for you. I did everything for you. linebreak The woman pleaded. The boy's limbs jerked. linebreak *I sold my soul for you.* linebreak "I . . ." Elias shook his head, his eyes filling with tears. "What was I supposed to do, Ral? You're never even *here* and I just got . . . lonely, and . . ." His face screwed up into a rage. "What's wrong with you? Are you *drunk*?"

"I think he's hurt," the other man said. "Is that blood?"

Elias gasped, but Ral was no longer listening. Something inside him had given way, some primal instinct to *get away*, as far away as he could manage. And, it turned out, that was very far indeed. A spark blazed to life, ripping a hole in the world, and in an instant Ral Zarek was gone.