

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 1

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It was autumn in Ravnica, and so it rained, day after day.

The sky was gray from horizon to horizon, the sun only a vague hint of a brighter glow behind the clouds. Rain marched down the boulevards in sheets like a conquering army, infiltrated the tiny, crooked alleyways, rattled the stained-glass windows in the places of worship, and pattered off the trees in the gardens. In the squares, fountains overflowed, and the drains bubbled and vomited up debris. In the underground kingdom of the Golgari, far below the city streets, drips became trickles became torrents, as all the water slowly drained down, through layer after layer of ancient architecture, back to the long-buried oceans.

Any hint of sunshine was long gone for the day when Ral Zarek turned the corner of Frost Lane into the neighborhood known as Seven Swords. A few of the more upscale shops were lit by steady magical glows, but here most made do with cheaper oil lamps, which sputtered unhealthily in the damp. The few other passersby who shared the street moved quickly, heads down, huddled under umbrellas or clutching sodden coats.

Ral didn't hurry, nor did he keep his head down. He walked with steady purpose, his long, dark coat flapping around his ankles. The rain caused him no hardship at all; it started to bend away from him about five feet above his head, splashing into a neat circle all around him that was wide enough not to dampen his boots.

After all, he thought, with grim satisfaction, what's the point in being a "rain mage" if you have to get wet?

While he scanned the doorways and storefronts, he kept half his attention on the people around him. Tonight could be a trap—in fact, it was almost *certainly* a trap—but while he thought he knew what *kind* of trap, one could never be certain.

Not when you were dealing with Bolas.

Fortunately—both for his peace of mind and for their own good health—no one seemed interested. Seven Swords was not a rowdy neighborhood, nor a particularly rich one. The origin of its name, like so much of Ravnica, was lost in the mists of time, but these days it was just a small block of streets lined with large stone townhouses that had seen better days. Originally built for the rich, back when the area had been fashionable, they were now subdivided into tiny apartments, so a family might sleep, eat, and work all in what had once been some aristocrat's ballroom or pantry. A few businesses operated at ground level, mostly taverns, eateries, and pawn shops, the latter identifiable by their iron-barred windows.

Where Frost Lane met Green Street there was a small square, with a derelict fountain brought back to a semblance of life by the endless rain. It was lined by larger buildings, most of them in equally bad repair. Cast-iron benches were slowly dissolving into puddles of rust, leaving wide orange stains on the cobblestones. Ral turned, picking out the old signs, and finally found what he was looking for. On the corner, a worm-eaten wooden signboard covered in peeling white paint marked the entrance to The Silver Curtain. The doors below it had been boarded up long ago, and subsequently broken open. They hung half-open, revealing only gloom within.

Well. Ral stared into the darkness, as though force of will could make it give up its secrets. *I suppose there's only one thing to do.*

He felt a touch of nerves, a faint tightness in his throat, but he banished it at once. Instead he summoned his anger, the slow, hot rage that had powered him all these years.

How dare he come to me now?

Ral's hands tightened into fists. Distant thunder rumbled, and Ral could feel the lightning overhead flashing from cloud to cloud, as though the arcs were drawn across his skin. He stalked forward, pushing the doors wide, and stepped into darkness.

At the same moment, across the Tenth District, a young woman was breaking into Nivix.

Most people would have said this was, if not actually impossible, then at least suicidal. Nivix, rising like a spike above the lesser spires of the Ravnican skyline, was the headquarters of the Izzet League. The lower stories were packed with workshops, barracks, and laboratories, guarded by madmen with flamethrowers and tireless, watchful constructs. Above that were the quarters of the most senior members of the Izzet, home to some of the most dangerous mages and inventors in Ravnica. And above *that* was the Aerie, home to Niv-Mizzet himself. The Firemind, ancient dragon, parun of the guild and schemer beyond compare.

The intruder was headed for the very top. Most people would have said she was not in her right mind, and if she'd been able to she would have agreed with them. There was something else in there with her, another mind, a slithering, scaled thing that looked out through her eyes and had snuffed out her will as easily as blowing out a candle.

She was currently attached to a kite, a broad wood-and-canvas thing painted a dark gray, to be lost against the evening sky. Tame air elementals had borne her up, well above even the tip of Nivix's spire, but she'd dismissed them before making her approach. Niv-Mizzet and his minions had wrapped the Aerie in wards, and anything so crude as magical flight would be detected instantly.

Indeed, Ral Zarek, who had ultimate responsibility for the innermost protections of the Firemind, had done an exemplary job. Deep inside Nivix, there was a control room, manned night and day by loyal Izzet watchmen. Any attempt to teleport, phase, or otherwise pass magically through the walls or windows would set alarm bells ringing. Any brute physical efforts, needless to say, would do the same. Ral himself checked the wards every evening, and made regular inspections to ensure they were properly maintained.

Tonight, however, Ral Zarek was elsewhere.

His responsibilities in this area passed to Watch Captain Neero Jak, an innocuous vedalken who had risen through the ranks of the Izzet's guards on the strength of his willingness to obey orders and display absolutely no imagination. Like Ral, he would do his duty with careful thoroughness. Unlike

Ral, he was a fan of the comic opera. And last night, at a performance of *Spirogne Goes Hunting*, he'd had a chance encounter with a *delightful* young woman, and—

—Well, Neero didn't remember much of the night after that. But the young woman, who was the same young woman strapped to the kite, was a Dimir thoughtstealer, so her dates often worked out that way.

And now, if all had gone well—

In her magically enhanced vision, Nivix's wards glowed in every color of the rainbow, a vicious spectrum of traps and alarms. At the very top of the tower, where a vast window of curved glass looked over the city, they blazed particularly brightly.

Until, just at the appointed hour, they all went dark.

Neero Jax would have some questions to answer in the morning.

The intruder angled her kite, descending toward the tower.

It was no longer evident what kind of theater The Silver Curtain had been, since it had clearly been playing only to audiences of rats for years now. Ral stepped carefully through the anteroom, where scraps of old posters still clung to the decaying plaster walls, and edged past the ticket-taker's stall. Another pair of double doors led into the theater itself, a wide semicircular room with rows of rotting wooden seats on either side of a central aisle. At the far end was the stage, the proscenium arch half-collapsed, the eponymous silver curtain in shredded tatters behind it.

Ral was more interested in the man who sat at the edge of the stage. He was in middle age, with a lined, weathered face and long hair bound into ragged dreadlocks. Under his loose robe, much of his chest was replaced with smooth, flexible metal, and his right arm was a twisted cage of metal struts, ending in fingers like talons. He looked up as Ral entered, with a brief smile entirely devoid of humor.

"Tezzeret," Ral said. He'd suspected as much, from the message he'd gotten. "Still running the old lizard's errands, I see?"

"Ral Zarek." Tezzeret yawned with affected indifference. "Still killing time on this second-rate world."

The old rage shifted in Ral's chest. His hands tightened, but he kept his tone casual.

"I thought I made it clear last time that we had nothing left to say to each other."

"You may have nothing left to say," Tezzeret said. "But for reasons that escape me, *he* has decided to make you an offer. A *final* offer."

"Your *master* told me that once already," Ral said. Tezzeret's lip twitched, and Ral knew he'd scored. The prideful Planeswalker hated to be reminded of his subservience. "You should tell him his threats are less impressive when he doesn't follow through."

"As I said, I don't understand why he extends his mercy, only that it rarely lasts." Tezzeret pushed himself down from the stage. "You owe him a debt, Zarek. You can pay it, and reap the benefits of service." He cocked his head, and crimson energy rippled down his metal arm. "Or you can continue your obstinacy, and burn with all the rest."

"Tempting." Ral smiled thinly. "But I already have one arrogant dragon to deal with. I'd rather not swap him for another."

"As I expected." Tezzeret shrugged. "In which case—"

His slow, deliberate pace vanished. Tezzeret slashed his metal arm, launching a spray of white-hot metal in Ral's direction. Ral was equally quick to react. Power flowed down his arm, into the mizzium nodes in his bracer. A crackling shield of electrical energy sprang to life, sending the projectiles spinning away in all directions before curving back to rejoin their originator.

Tezzeret had already hopped back up onto the stage. Beside him, something was rising out of the dust: a long-limbed, spider-like construct with a single glowing eye on a flexible stalk. Two more of the things shook themselves free of debris in the corner of the theater, and Ral could hear at least one more behind him, blocking the exit.

"A nice trick," he said, then looked up at the ceiling. "But how long can a storm mage last away from the storm?" Tezzeret grinned again. "I suppose we'll find out."

He ducked out of sight into the theater's backstage as the constructs charged. Ral spun, and the machine closing from behind crashed against his shield in a spray of sparks. He lashed out with his other hand, and a short burst of lightning crackled across the thing, sending it stumbling drunkenly backward to crash into a wall. Before he could finish it, the rest of them were on him, and Ral had to duck to one side as a clicking, hissing construct lashed out with scythe-like forelimbs. He gave ground, putting his back to the wall, and spread his arms.

It was, indeed, a problem for a mage of the storm to be cut off from the sky. The amount of power Ral could store in his body was limited, and the process was exhausting. *But that's the thing about the Izzet. We solve problems.* Fortunately, he'd come expecting a trap. On his back, a bulge beneath his trench coat, was the Mizzium-Ion Electrostatic Accumulator, Mark IV, the very latest from the Laboratory of Storms and Electricity. It was fully charged, mizzium rings spinning rapidly in their crystal chambers. Long conduits linked it to the bracers on his forearms, where output nodes helped shape and channel the power.

The original long-ago inventor had intended her device to produce harmless entertainment for children's parties. After the third fried clown, Ral had taken over the project for his own purposes.

Electricity cracked down his right arm, forming into a crescent-shaped arc of white-hot plasma. When the construct closed, Ral sidestepped and unleashed plasma with a thunderclap. Hardened steel parting like wet plaster, and the construct died with a screech of grinding gears. One of its fellows climbed over its corpse, blades swinging down, and Ral ducked and chopped its legs out from under it with another blast, leaving it to flounder helplessly.

The construct from the anteroom had joined its remaining fellow by now, and they squared up and came at him together, shoulder to mechanical shoulder. Ral let his shield vanish in a spray of sparks and raised both hands. Every hair on his body stood on end as the accumulator's energy flooded through him, crackling briefly over his fingertips before blasting out in a double bolt of lightning. Thunder shook The Silver Curtain, dislodging more plaster from the walls. The two constructs twitched like dying insects in the massive discharge, then sagged as soon as Ral lowered his arms, their delicate internals melted into so much slag.

He cast an irritated glance over his shoulder at the stage, but there was no sign of Tezzeret. *If he wanted me dead, this was a pretty poor attempt.* Ral's frown deepened. Tezzeret might be arrogant, but he wasn't stupid. *Which means he doesn't want me dead. And Bolas must have known I'd turn him down. So why call me here? A diversion.* Which meant he was in exactly the wrong place.

Flames were starting to lick at the walls of the old theater, rising from the super-heated metal corpses of the constructs. Ral was already running, out through the anteroom and into the rain, his coat flapping behind him.

The intruder hit the side of Nivix, letting go of her kite, which whipped away in the wind before tumbling to crash somewhere in the city below. That left the young woman without an escape route, but the *thing* in her mind didn't care about that. A mind mage herself, she recognized the work of a master in the controlling presence. Somewhere deep inside she was screaming, but her body calmly climbed the pebbled stone of the outside of the tower until she reached the great window, a huge multi-paned circle like an insect's eye.

She opened a belt pouch, clinging nonchalantly to the tower with one hand, and came up with a small metal device with a suction cup at one end. She'd acquired it from a black-market Izzet artificer—some irony there. When it was stuck fast against one pane of the window, she touched the end. The little thing gave a high-pitched whine that set her teeth on edge, and then the glass of the window sagged and melted, still cold but flowing as easily as water. It ran down the leading and out of the way, and the intruder slipped easily into Niv-Mizzet's inner sanctum.

A half-dozen alarms ought to have been blaring at that point, but instead there was silence. The Aerie was a single massive room, sized for the convenience of an ancient dragon. A variety of telescopes and other optical instruments stood at the window, pointed variously at the sky or out across the city. Books were everywhere, piled in drifts or stacked on shelves until they were in danger of collapse. Presumably the prodigious intellect of the Firemind could make some sense of the confusion.

There was surprisingly little of the machinery for which the Izzet were famous, no smelting vats or bins of spare parts, no steam-belching contraptions. Niv-Mizzet was beyond such things, experimenting in the realm of pure thought and magic. But even ancient dragons needed to sleep from time to time, and the parun of the Izzet was currently curled up in one corner of his stone-walled laboratory like a cat, the tip of his serpentine tail twitching lazily beneath his nose. The sound of his slow breath was as loud as a blacksmith's bellows.

Even with the outer wards breached, Niv-Mizzet was far from helpless. The floor of his sanctum was layered in arcane traps, visible to the intruder's enhanced sight as lines of blue-white energy crisscrossing the floor, flanked by twisting columns of runes. An ordinary thief or assassin might have found these an impenetrable barrier, but the presence in the intruder's mind knew that no defense was truly impregnable. It calculated for a moment, then moved its host forward, stepping confidently through the barriers.

The intruder stepped, waited a heartbeat, turned, sidestepped, sprinted forward, paused again. Magic pulsed and shimmered through the web of wards, searching for heat, for movement, for the spark of life. The young woman held her breath for so long her vision went gray at the edges as she shuffled backward in front of a bookcase, then spent a moment recovering before turning an easy cartwheel and walking on her hands through a section of densely interleaved runes.

Not bad, the presence thought. *But not good enough*. Before long, its host stood at the side of the sleeping dragon, reaching a cautious black-gloved hand to lay on one of Niv-Mizzet's long, dark horns. The presence called on the young woman's power, her subtle magic reaching out toward the Firemind. Even here, at the center of his power, Niv-Mizzet was paranoid. Ever since Jace Beleren had touched his thoughts, prior to becoming the Living Guildpact, Niv-Mizzet had taken to warding his mind more carefully. Even with the guidance of the intrusive presence, no mind mage could extract any secrets from the dragon now, not without his noticing.

But adding a secret . . . oh, yes. The intruder touched her temple, and when she pulled her finger away a blue glowing thought strand dangled from it, fragile as a spider's thread. She lowered her hand, letting the strand brush along the dragon's scaly skin. It fell from her finger and sank into Niv-Mizzet's head,

merging with his thoughts. *Just a very small addition, when all's said and done.* Task accomplished, the intruder turned away. The innermost ring of magical traps was just in front of her, and the presence in her mind identified the one it wanted, and forced her to step forward.

No! The Dimir mindmage struggled to fight back. *You've done what you wanted. At least let me try to get out of here! Sorry, my dear.* The presence took firmer hold of her mind. *Your part isn't done yet.* The presence unsheathed mental claws, and the young woman, in the depths of her own mind, screamed again. It flayed her memories, twisting, shifting, and destroying. Sculpting what it wanted.

When it was satisfied, it nudged her forward another step. Her foot came down squarely in the middle of a stasis trap, and blue-white energy snapped into a taut sphere all around her, freezing her in place as firmly as if she'd been encased in ice. At the same time, magic pulsed a warning, both to Niv-Mizzet and the unfortunate guards down in the control room.

Behind the intruder, the dragon opened one slitted eye.

Perfect, the presence thought. It slipped away, leaving its host behind, trapped like a fly in a spider's web.
linebreak

That something had happened was obvious the moment Ral returned to Nivix, out of breath from his sprint across the district and wet through. He'd been too busy dodging traffic, once he'd returned to the busier neighborhoods, to keep up his rain-repelling spell. Even this late at night, the Tenth District bustled, the roads thick with carriages and pack animals while pedestrians spilled out of the taverns and theaters. Around Nivix, though, Izzet guards were out in force, cordoning off the tower's grounds. A squad of viashino scorchbringers prowled past, dragon-like humanoids in gleaming armor, pilot lights glowing on their low-slung flamethrowers.

Ral avoided the main doors, heading for a more secure side entrance. Two uniformed guards there recognized him and cleared the way, and he stalked past them, rain dripping from his coat onto the scarred concrete floor. The Nivix was a maze, but one he'd worked in for decades, and it didn't take long to get to the control room on the second floor. There were more guards here, and through the open doors he could see a pair of chemists with a horde of attendants tearing apart the spells and machinery. Before he could go inside and take charge, a goblin woman in the uniform of a guard captain stepped in his path.

"Master Zarek," she said. "Ah . . . so glad you've returned. There's been an incident."

"What kind of incident?" Ral growled.

"We're . . . not sure, sir. Something happened up in the Aerie. The guildmaster has . . . not been forthcoming. Chamberlain Maree has ordered the tower locked down as a precaution, and we're checking all the defenses."

Maree. Of course that jumped-up little goblin would take charge. *I'll deal with her later.* "I want a report on everything you find," Ral said. "In the meantime—"

"In the meantime, sir," the captain interrupted, "the guildmaster has requested your presence. At once."

"Ah." Ral paused for a moment, straightening his coat. "Send the reports to my office, then. I'll be in the Aerie."

The captain nodded and rushed off, clearly glad to be out of his presence. Ral turned away from the arguing chemists and walked toward the elevator, a little more slowly.

While he was grateful not to have to climb the stairs to Niv-Mizzet's roost, it was hard not to escape a nervous thrill when he stepped into Nivix's elevator. It had been designed by Bogo Sternwhistle to hurl high-speed rocks at passing clouds, and only repurposed for transporting people up and down when the goblin inventor couldn't get it to go quickly enough. Today, though, Ral was lost in thought, and paid little heed to the jerk as the rockapult/vertical lift started upward.

An incident in the Aerie? Did someone try to attack the guildmaster himself? That seemed more than a little mad, but assassins had targeted Niv-Mizzet before. A worm of fear turned in Ral's gut. He'd been away, which might bring suspicion in his direction; he'd served Niv-Mizzet loyally for decades, but the dragon was notoriously fickle when it came to his underlings. For a fleeting moment, he wished he'd stopped to charge his accumulator. *Not that it would matter.* The elevator reached the top floor with a quiet *ding*. Ral stepped out, glancing quickly around the Aerie. Nothing seemed immediately amiss. One pane of glass was missing from the great window, but there was none of the destruction he'd expect if Niv-Mizzet had fought off an attacker. *So not assassination. What, then* The dragon himself was hunched over in the far corner, fussing with something Ral couldn't see. As always, Ral was amazed at how lightly and gracefully Niv-Mizzet moved, considering his size. His long, blue-fringed wings were tucked against his back, and the spined membranes around his head flexed, a sure sign that he was agitated. When he turned to Ral, long neck curving to face the Planeswalker, his huge paws made hardly a sound on the stone, like he was some enormous cat.

"Ral." The dragon spoke in a soft whisper, but his words simultaneously echoed in Ral's mind in a deep, stentorian bass. He took another step forward, enormous eyes hooded. "Kind of you to join us."

"Apologies, Guildmaster." Ral made a half-bow, the accumulator shifting on his back. His long, white-streaked hair, not standing on end for once, flopped against his cheek. "I was called away on urgent business."

"What sort of urgent business?" the dragon snapped.

Ral blinked in surprise. He'd expected Niv-Mizzet to be focused on whatever had happened here; the dragon was nothing if not self-centered. His mind raced. "I was investigating a potential threat."

"Ral." Niv-Mizzet took another step closer, and Ral felt the hot wind of his breath. "The time for lies has passed."

Damn. Ral had done a great deal of fast talking, over the years, to keep his secrets from the guildmaster. The existence of Planeswalkers, for a start, and the fact Ral was one, not to mention the true purpose of Project Lightning Bug—

"Let me help you." For some reason, there was an edge of amusement in the dragon's voice. "You were meeting with an agent of Nicol Bolas."

"I—" Ral froze. *He knows. How much does he know?* "Guildmaster . . ."

"Ah, Ral. You really are very clever." Niv-Mizzet's enormous head swung close, jaws parted. "For a human. Tell me, do you know how long I have been guildmaster of the Izzet?"

"Since the beginning," Ral managed. "You are the parun. Ten thousand years, at least."

"Ten thousand years," the dragon agreed. "Can you even imagine that span of time? Ten thousand years watching this city and its people. Ten thousand years to contemplate the nature of the universe. And yet you presume me unaware of your little secrets." Niv-Mizzet's mental voice rose to a roar. "*Do you think they call me the Firemind for nothing?*"

Ral took an involuntary step backward, bowing automatically. “No, Guildmaster. Of course not.” He hesitated, then cautiously looked up. “How long have you known?”

“That you are a Planeswalker? Since you first came here. The signs are not difficult to read, once you know the truth.”

“Then why pretend ignorance?”

Niv-Mizzet gave a dry chuckle. “In ten thousand years, I have found no tactic more effective than knowing more than you let on. I had no reason to interrupt your little game. Until now.” He ruffled his wings. “Who did you meet?”

“Tezzeret,” Ral said, deciding quickly that honesty was now the only way out. “He tried to convince me to serve Bolas, and then to kill me when I refused.” He paused, then added, “I believe his intention may have been to make certain I was away from the tower.”

“Plans that serve more than one purpose are Bolas’s hallmark.” Niv-Mizzet raised a foreclaw, and a blue-white sphere of energy floated up from behind him. Inside was a young woman dressed all in black, frozen in place, her eyes wide with terror. “While you were away, we had a guest. One of Lazav’s creatures.”

“Lazav.” Ral grimaced. “The Dimir are working with Bolas?”

“So it would seem. I have examined her mind.” The dragon turned to stare at the spy, then made her float away with another lazy wave. “She was sent to extract certain information from me. Bolas knows my plan, at least in outline.”

“Tezzeret implied that Bolas is coming here, to Ravnica.” Ral’s head was still spinning with the idea that Niv-Mizzet *knew* all of this. “It could be a lie, of course.”

“He is coming. What do you think the Interlocus has been in preparation for?”

Ral’s breath caught. The Interlocus was Niv-Mizzet’s mysterious personal project, which had consumed so much of the dragon’s time and attention—to say nothing of guild resources—for months. He’d delegated more and more of the guild’s day-to-day functioning to Ral. It had always rankled that, however much Niv-Mizzet seemed to trust him, he’d never explained the purpose of his plan.

“Bolas is coming,” the dragon repeated. “I have heard reports of the havoc he has wreaked on other planes, and I will not allow it happen here. He will come to Ravnica, and I will kill him.”

“Nicol Bolas is . . .” Ral hesitated again. “Very powerful, Guildmaster.”

“Your confidence is touching,” Niv-Mizzet said dryly. “Rest assured, I will be prepared for him. But there is a problem which requires your attention.”

“A problem?”

“The Guildpact.” Niv-Mizzet settled back on his haunches with a yawn. “To defeat Bolas, I must become stronger. Much stronger. And the Guildpact will not allow it. It was created to prevent one guild from becoming much more powerful than the others, after all. To preserve the balance.” The dragon sounded irritated. “To deal with this kind of threat is exactly why Azor created the position of the Living Guildpact.”

“Beleren?” Ral said. “But he—”

“Is gone. And no one knows when or if he will return. Without him we are trapped.” Niv-Mizzet’s voice was a snarl. “Azor never anticipated a *Planeswalker* taking the position. It would have been better if it had remained in our control.”

Ral swallowed nervously. He'd been involved in that debacle, substituting himself for Niv-Mizzet's carefully designed artificial challenger for the Implicit Maze. He hadn't thought the dragon cared about that, but at this point he no longer wanted to assume anything.

"There is a final failsafe," Niv-Mizzet went on. "The Guildpact can be altered."

"Altered? Is that possible?"

"With the agreement of all ten guild leaders." Another humorless chuckle. "You can see why it has never been done."

It was certainly hard to imagine getting all ten of Ravnica's feuding guilds to agree on *anything*, much less changing the basic laws underlying their competition. "So what do you need me to do?"

"Get them to agree, of course."

"That's . . ." Ral shook his head. "I don't think that's possible, Guildmaster."

"It is the task I have assigned you," Niv-Mizzet snapped. "You will perform it to the best of your ability, or I will find someone who can." His tone softened. "When the Interlocus is complete, I will no longer be master of the Izzet. I will be apart from the guilds, above them. Our guild will require a new guildmaster, for the first time in ten thousand years." The dragon's eyes narrowed. "Consider this a graduation exam, of sorts."

"I . . ."

Ral straightened up. *Get a hold of yourself.* Niv-Mizzet had shaken him, no doubt exactly as the dragon had intended. But what he offered . . . *It's what I've wanted since the beginning.* A position commensurate with his talents. *Guildmaster of the Izzet.* He felt a universe of possibilities opening in front of him. *And all I have to do is convince ten mortal enemies to grant one ancient dragon enough power to stop another.* He cleared his throat.

"Understood, Guildmaster. I will begin immediately."

"Excellent." Niv-Mizzet sounded genuinely pleased. "I have some connections that will be of assistance. You'll receive their reports."

"Thank you," Ral said. "What of the Dimir? If they're already working for Bolas –"

"Leave the Dimir to me. If Lazav has thrown in his lot with Bolas, then we will simply need to replace him. No doubt one of his lieutenants will be unhappy with his guildmaster's choice of loyalty."

"As you say." Ral bowed again. "With your permission, I'll go and get started."

"One more thing."

Ral straightened up as a thick roll of draft paper floated over to him from one of the dragon's work tables. He picked it out of the air and unrolled it, frowning. The sheets were blueprints, fabulously complex, but still somehow familiar.

"What is this?" he said.

"A backup plan," Niv-Mizzet said. "A crossplanar beacon, based on the design of your Project Lightning Bug."

Recalling the lengths to which he'd gone to keep that project's true significance from the guildmaster, Ral winced. There was a hint of amusement in the dragon's voice.

“When activated, it will make Ravnica shine in the sight of Planeswalkers throughout the Multiverse. How many will come, I cannot say, but it may be that they will gather in sufficient power to defeat Bolas, in the event my own efforts are insufficient.”

“Calling a horde of Planeswalkers whose intentions we don’t know to Ravnica seems . . . extreme.”

“Indeed,” Niv-Mizzet said. “But better to have the option and not need it than the other way around. See that it is constructed according to my specifications.”

“Of course, Guildmaster. I’ll put our best chemisters on it.”

“You may go.” Niv-Mizzet settled down, pillowing his head on his paws. “I look forward to hearing reports of your progress.”linebreak

In the elevators, Ral took a few moments to calm his breathing.

Get the guilds to agree to change the Guildpact. It still seemed impossible, but half of Ral’s life had been spent doing the impossible. *You find the first step, and then you keep going.* He grinned, and ran his fingers through his hair, a crackle of electricity restoring it to normal frizzy state.

He could already see what the first step had to be. When he emerged from the elevator, he sent messengers racing in the direction of the Azorius Senate, bearing notes under the official Izzet League guild seal.

After all, how do you get started arranging an impossible meeting? He grinned to himself. *You start with the people who love meetings.*