

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 18

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“The failure is mine,” Niv-Mizzet said, his bass rumble resonating in Ral’s bones. “Once again, I have underestimated Nicol Bolas.”

“I should have known,” Ral said. “I never liked that blue-skinned snake.”

They stood in the Aerie, looking out through the great circular window over the darkened streets of Ravnica. Black clouds hung overhead, blotting out the moon and the stars, but as yet no rain fell. Flickers of energy from the great machine still rose fitfully into the sky, at longer and longer intervals, like the beats of a steadily weakening heart.

“You have performed your assigned tasks,” the Firemind said, shifting his vast bulk closer to the window. “When the guild summit failed, you surpassed even my expectations. You have done everything I could have asked of you, Ral.”

Ral’s skin prickled with unease. Praise like this—of any kind, really—was unlike Niv-Mizzet. He cleared his throat and ran a crackling hand through his hair.

“I didn’t consider that Vraska’s betrayal might have had a dual purpose,” the dragon went on. “It broke up the summit, and at the same time moved Dovin into a position of authority over the Azorius.”

“We’ll settle with him later,” Ral said. “For now there’s no time. I’ve sent runners to Kaya and Aurelia. We’ll gather a force and storm the Azorius node. If they haven’t done too much damage to it, we should be able to get it back online, and my people are already working on repairs here. A little time—”

“We are out of time, Ral,” Niv-Mizzet said. His voice was almost gentle. “Look.”

He extended one massive paw, tapping against the glass with a single claw. The window flexed and groaned in its mounting. Ral squinted, stepping forward and shading his eyes against the hovering lanterns in the Aerie.

There was a line of orange light, right at the horizon. It looked enormous, towering over the surrounding buildings, shading their spires with a hellish glow. As Ral watched, the line widened a fraction, a crack in the world levering itself open in the grip of incomprehensible energies.

“What in the name of . . .” Ral looked at the Firemind, who focused one enormous eye on him.

“Bolas comes,” Niv-Mizzet said simply.

“How?” Ral said. “I’ve seen planeswalkers arrive. It doesn’t look like . . . that.”

“I don’t know what magics he has harnessed,” Niv-Mizzet said. “But he is not coming alone. A legion of monsters marches behind him.”

Bolas wouldn't attack Ravnica if he didn't think he could win. Ral had said that blithely, in the lead-up to the guild summit, trying to convince the others to take the threat seriously. Now, for the first time, he truly understood what it meant. Against everything Ravnica could muster—the soldiers of the Boros, the inventions of the Izzet, the druids of Selesnya and the mages of Simic, the demons of Rakdos, the knights of Orzhov, the arbiters of Azorius and the spies of Dimir—Bolas was bringing an army he could pit against *all* of that. *And he expects to win.*

He shivered, and grit his teeth for a moment.

“So what do we do?” he said. “If we don't have time to fix the machine.”

“The beacon,” Niv-Mizzet said. “It is the only way.”

“Just . . . send out a call? And hope the Planeswalkers of the Multiverse come and save us?” Ral shook his head. “It sounds like a pretty thin hope.”

“Thin hopes are all that Ravnica has left, Ral Zarek.” The dragon's huge head swung around to face him. “I am entrusting the last of ours to you. Can you do it?”

“Of course I can,” Ral said, drawing himself up. “Getting there may be a little bit tricky. We built the beacon in Azorius territory because we thought it would be safe, and I'm sure Dovin will have half their army guarding it by now. But the safety systems won't let them damage the thing itself, I'm certain of that. If I can get to the top of that tower, I can turn it on.”

“Good.” Niv-Mizzet turned away. “I suggest you hurry. The beacon may be protected from tampering, but Bolas could still destroy it. I will prevent that for as long as I can.”

“You—what?” Ral said. He'd already been thinking about the best way to reach the beacon, but Niv-Mizzet's words snapped him back to the present. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I will delay Bolas to the best of my ability.” The Firemind gestured, and the big window swung open on noiseless hinges. The wind around Nivix's spire moaned and howled.

“But . . .” Ral shook his head. “The machine. I thought the whole point was that you wouldn't be able to stand up to him unless we . . .”

He trailed off as Niv-Mizzet turned back to look at him, one last time. Ral swallowed hard, meeting those huge, ancient eyes. The frills around the dragon's head flared.

“Good luck,” Ral said quietly.

“You must succeed,” Niv-Mizzet said. “No matter the cost. Or else all of this is for nothing.”

The *parun* of the Izzet League, Niv-Mizzet the Firemind, launched himself from the great window of his Aerie. His wings snapped out, catching the night air with a mighty *whump*, and he soared upward. In the distance, the line of orange light had spread even side, and Ral could see the outline of a shape beyond it. An enormous head, with two long, curving horns.

The Undercity shook. Vraska sat on her throne and watched the dust drift down from the ceiling, tiny falls sparking in the light of the bioluminescent lamps every time the ground shook.

It's time, then.

“Storrev,” she said aloud.

The Erstwhile lich, standing beside the throne, inclined her head.

"I'm going to the surface. You have my instructions."

"Yes, my queen."

Vraska gripped the hilt of her saber, fingers tightening, and got to her feet.

"May I say . . ." the lich began.

Vraska looked at her, surprised. "Yes?"

Storrev cocked her head, considering. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Vraska shook her head, tendrils writhing. *I'm going to need it. We're all going to need it.*

linebreak Niv-Mizzet soared free through the skies above the Tenth District.

It was a pleasure he'd indulged in less and less as the centuries had blown past. He had always lived mainly in his own mind, and in any event his excursions had a tendency to cause a commotion. Most days he was content to abide in the Aerie, barely aware of his surroundings as he contemplated matters far beyond the ken of any mortal.

Tonight, though, he felt the creak of his wings, the lash of his tail, the rush of wind through his frills, and remembered how such things, too, could be enjoyable. An odd time for such a reminder, on the balance, but it was welcome nonetheless. His lungs heaved, like tremendous bellows, and he smelled the night air, gritty with soot and metallic with the aftermath of Ral's machine.

Ahead of him, the great portal split the night, widening steadily. Niv-Mizzet flapped his wings, gaining height as he closed. By the time he was within a few blocks of the thing, he was well above the tops of the highest spire, the spines of his back nearly brushing the low, dark clouds.

One clawed foot came through, orange light sliding off it reluctantly, like colored water draining away. Cobblestones cracked and splintered as it came down. With a vast crackle like tearing fabric, Nicol Bolas stepped through the boundary between worlds, standing outlined against the Ravnican night by glow of his portal.

He was misshapen, to Niv-Mizzet's mind. Standing on two legs, with his face flattened and broad, human-like mouth and features. There was entirely too much of the human about Bolas for the Firemind's taste. Humans were all well and good, Niv-Mizzet thought, but he wouldn't want to *be* one.

Bolas's horns curved upward, framing a hovering orb between them. His huge eyes glowed, the same lurid orange as the portal itself. He steadied himself on a nearby building, a forepaw more like a human hand gripping the stone and tearing deep furrows in it with its long claws. For a moment he looked around slowly, and then he focused on Niv, high above him.

"Ah," he said. His tone was urbane, cultured, with the vast draconic rumble concealed expertly underneath. "As I thought—"

Niv-Mizzet had never placed particular importance on politeness, or chivalry. What he *did* enjoy was efficiency. And in a fight, efficiency meant winning as quickly as possible.

His mind reached out, finding auras across the city, spells that he himself had carefully prepared for this moment. They tripped mizzium batteries, vast constructions of crystal and metal concealed in unassuming buildings all across the Tenth District. Each of them, carefully charged for weeks now, let loose its accumulated energy in a fraction of a second, sending a titanic bolt of power into the sky.

A dozen enormous energy blasts converged on Niv-Mizzet from all points of the compass. Space around him contorted, bending into a lens that smeared the light of the city into a glittering kaleidoscope. Another lens formed in front of it, then another, each disc crackling at the edges with the dragon's unleashed power. When the bolts from the generators struck the lenses, they *twisted*, narrowed, refined themselves like metal in the heat of a forge. Focused down, then focused again and again, until all twelve were coiled into a beam narrower than the palm of a human child, a finger of light so mind-numbingly bright that nictitating membranes reflexively slid over the dragon's eyes.

It scythed down, accompanied by what was possibly the loudest thunderclap Ravnica had ever experienced. Windows shattered for blocks around, showering the street with glass. When it struck Bolas in the chest, the ancient dragon was punched off his feet, staggering into the building beside him and bringing it down in a collapsing shower of stone and roofing tiles. A moment later, the explosion of boiling rock and superheated air engulfed him, slamming outward with hurricane force. Carriages tipped over and slid sideways along the cobbles, trees snapped into splinters, and iron lampposts bent double. A wave of heat, rising from the blast, carried the dust upward, brushing aside the dark thunderheads and briefly revealing the stars.

Niv-Mizzet hung in the air, watching bits of burning debris arc out from ground zero and land across the city, like flaming missiles curled from catapults. The smoke and dust was so thick that there was no sign of Bolas, or even of his enormous portal.

All in all, he thought, he had to account it a successful experiment.

Buildings were still crumbling, adding to the circle of rubble, and others were on fire. The Firemind could hear screams and cries rising from the streets, but they made no impression on his mind. The humans of Ravnica were his responsibility, but only in aggregate. Individually, they did not concern him, unless they caught his particular attention. It was difficult to care much about anything so short-lived.

The real question was what to do next. It was hard to believe that the threat could be ended so easily—

A huge, clawed hand shot out of the murk, grabbing a half-wrecked building. Slowly, Nicol Bolas pulled himself to his feet, emerging from the settling dust. He shook himself, then spread his wings, blowing the smoke and grit away from him. The scales on his chest were bubbled and blackened, but he still smiled, showing a mouth full of long fangs.

"Niv-Mizzet," he said. "The vaunted Firemind. I always knew that you were the only one on this benighted world who would give me a proper fight."

"I am glad," Niv-Mizzet said, "not to disappoint."

"I don't suppose there's any point in asking you to submit."

"Go back through that portal and close it behind you," Niv-Mizzet rumbled, "and I may let you live."

"Very good," Bolas said, with a chuckle. "And so we begin."

Magic blossomed around the pair of them, crackling auras of chaotic energy. A hundred spells, each of which would have taken the complete attention of a mortal mage, dropped into being in front of Niv-Mizzet, requiring only the briefest flicker of his mind. Balls of flame screamed down, detonating on the rubble around Bolas with deafening explosions and showers of shattered stone. Bolts of lightning crackled across Niv-Mizzet's claws, flashing through the space between them and running in waves across Bolas's scales. Rays of pure destruction lanced out, turning everything they touched to dust.

Bolas's own magic spun a protective web, and the air around him was full of reflected lightning and ricocheting fireballs. A beam cut across a tottering building, and a chunk of stone puffed into non-existence, bringing the upper stories crashing down into the street in a torrent of rubble and screams. In answer to the elemental barrage, Bolas lashed out with the very essence of death, dark threads that reached into the sky and invisible phantoms that shrieked as they circled and dove. Niv-Mizzet brushed them away in turn, and where they landed on the streets, fleeing people fell in windrows—simply collapsing like broken puppets, or aging decades in a few seconds before crumbling into dust.

For long moments they lashed one another, spell meeting counterspell in a wild melee, a haze of dust and wild magic rising around both, lit from within by flashes like constant lightning. It was part chess match, part tavern brawl. The air between them was thick with magic, crackling and throbbing.

All at once, Niv-Mizzet was descending, diving through the front of the cloud around him, claws extended and jaw opened wide, his wings folded as he gained speed. Lightning crackled around him, and death magic slid over his scales. Bolas saw him coming and raised his hands, but Niv-Mizzet twisted with the flick of a wing, grabbing Bolas's upper arm with both foreclaws. A mighty wingbeat lifted both dragons from the ground, and Niv-Mizzet twisted, sending Bolas tumbling through the air. He crashed to the ground, rolling along a boulevard, ripping up cobblestones as his talons dug in and shattering a fountain in a spray of marble fragments.

"Now you *do* disappoint me," Bolas said, rising to his feet again. "Are we to grapple like beasts, then?"

"True strength," Niv-Mizzet growled, "comes from being true to one's nature."

Bolas snorted, and spread a clawed hand. Vast coils of death magic unrolled, reaching for Niv-Mizzet, who dove again to avoid them. He spread his jaws wide, and unleashed a stream of fire, dragging it across Bolas and making the ancient dragon raise an arm to shield his face from the flames. Behind him, roofs exploded, and a towering spire became a spurting chimney of fire. Before Bolas could recover, Niv-Mizzet was on him again, claws reaching for the damaged scales on Bolas's chest. Bolas sidestepped, raking Niv's flank with one claw, then staggered as Niv's head snapped out and buried sword-sized teeth in his wrist.

"*Enough*," Bolas growled, pressing his other palm flat against Niv-Mizzet's skull. Bolas's orange eyes went jet-black, and the power of his mind surged through the link between them.

It would have been enough to burn a mortal's mind to ash in moments, but Niv-Mizzet was no mortal. He was the Firemind, fifteen thousand years old, and in that time he had learned a thing or two. Bolas's mental assault, a black tide of violence and oblivion, slammed against the mental barriers Niv-Mizzet had erected. For a moment his defenses strained against the waves, but when Bolas's power ebbed Niv's wards were still intact. Bolas recoiled, like a man bouncing off a door he expected to be open, and Niv-Mizzet used the opportunity to surge out of his grip, raking Bolas's chest with his rear claws as he scrambled back into the air.

"Still disappointed?" Niv-Mizzet said. His great chest was heaving, and blood dripped along his scales in a dozen places where Bolas's spells had scored. His great frill had been shredded on one side by the black dragon's claws.

"You have . . . a little strength," Bolas said, straightening up and flaring his wings. Black blood was flowing freely down his chest, where Niv-Mizzet's claws had torn deep into his flesh. "But not enough."

"And yet *you* have come to *my* world." Niv-Mizzet reared up in the air, wings thrashing. "Why? Simple lust to conquer? What appeal can these mortals possibly hold for you?"

Bolas's lip turned up at one corner. "You could not possibly understand."

"I fancy I understand a great deal."

"Not this." The glow in Bolas's eyes darkened to crimson. "You say 'mortals,' as though you were not among them. But when I was born, I was as far above you as you are above the least creature that cowers in its own refuse. Planeswalkers did not simply flit from Plane to Plane like *travelers*. We *owned* the worlds and everything in them, the creatures and the cities and the land itself. The pathetic creatures that name themselves gods were as nothing beside us. Can you imagine what it is to have embodied such glory? And then to be dragged down into the *mud*?"

This last was a roar, echoing off the streets and buildings. Niv-Mizzet perched on top of a convenient spire and cocked his head, considering.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose that would make me quite angry."

"Angry." Bolas sneered. "I am going to kill you, little dragonling. And then I am going to put things right, back to the way they *ought* to be. Your Plane, and everyone in it, will be mine to command."

"Will we, now?" Niv-Mizzet spread his wings and leapt into the air again, conjuring a rain of burning stones that fell hard and fast around Bolas. The elder dragon whipped his wings, deflecting the missiles, and they crashed into streets and buildings, blasting out craters in a block that was already mostly rubble.

Bolas struck back, launching miasmas of decay and twisting lines of void energy, and for another few moments the two dragons were locked in thaumaturgical combat. But the test of the strength confirmed the unpleasant truth of what Niv-Mizzet had sensed earlier. In any such contest, over the long term, he was going to lose.

It was not an easy thing to admit. For fifteen thousand years, he had been confident that no creature on Ravnica could challenge him if he exerted himself. Not even Rakdos himself, Niv had always believed, would be up to if push *truly* came to shove, although of course it would be terribly inelegant to allow any such thing to every really come to pass. And, logically, he'd known that Bolas's power must be considerable, since Bolas was obviously aware of Niv-Mizzet's presence and had chosen to go through with his invasion anyway.

But it was one thing to arrive at such a conclusion, and quite another to feel it in your bones. Deep down, Niv realized, he had always believed that Bolas had made an error, that when they came head to head the elder dragon would find himself overmatched. The realization that Bolas had the power to back up his words was profoundly unsettling.

Perhaps, Niv concluded, he had been a bit lazy for the past few thousand years, letting mortals run his errands for him. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to be done about it now.

What advantages could he claim for himself? Preparation, but his initial attack had spent that and Bolas was still standing. Allies were useless. Knowledge, then. They were fighting on Niv's plane, his home. That ought to be worth something.

Folding his wings in tight, he dove, claws extended.

Bolas sidestepped, mouth gaping wide to blow a line of black-tinged fire that Niv-Mizzet rolled to avoid. Niv felt death magic licking at him, but his back claws again raked Bolas's chest, and the elder dragon bellowed with rage. Niv-Mizzet pulled out of his dive, darting up and over a row of surviving buildings, and Bolas followed, huge wings pulling him slowly into the air. His flight was inelegant—bipeds weren't suited for wings, Niv-Mizzet thought with a sniff—and his taloned feet brushed against the roofs below him, scraping tiles away in a shower of broken clay.

"Surely you don't think to *flee*," Bolas shouted, sending wave after wave of magic after Niv-Mizzet as they raced out of the Tenth District.

"Of course not."

Niv wheeled around in the air, faster than Bolas could ever have managed, and dove again at his opponent. This time Bolas did not step aside, but met Niv's forepaws with his own hands. Niv's momentum drove them down and into a row of elegant townhouses, brick and stone shattering like glass around them.

They were locked together, hand in hand. Bolas opened his mouth wide and blasted a stream of flame, and Niv-Mizzet countered with his own, the two gushing curtains of fire meeting between them in a spectacular explosion. The wave of heat washed over both of them, scorching Niv's fins. He shifted his weight, letting one arm drop, then folded himself over and kicked Bolas with his hind legs, sending the elder dragon into the air. Bolas's wings shot out to steady him as Niv-Mizzet got airborne again.

"You're not going to win," Bolas said. "You know that."

"Maybe not," Niv-Mizzet said, half to himself. "But I'm going to try."

He dove again. Once again, Bolas squared up to receive him, and the momentum of the plummeting dragon drove them both downward. This time, though, Niv-Mizzet let go early, pulling away. Bolas spread his legs, waiting to hit the ground in a crouch and spring back up—

—but there was no ground.

They had come to the edge of one of the Simic guilds' zonots, an enormous hole in the urban surface of Ravnica, descending all the way through the Undercity to the seas that lay deep underground. The edges of the gigantic shaft were encrusted with buildings, cranes, and stairways, clinging to it like barnacles, but the center was a long, empty drop. Bolas fell and kept falling, startled. His wings came up, but he wasn't a strong flier, and there wasn't room for him to beat hard and gain much momentum.

Niv-Mizzet, in any case, didn't give Bolas time to right himself. A lance of liquid fire leapt from his throat, directed not down at Bolas but across the zonot, at the rocks and stone that made up the lip. The fabric of the city, walls and buildings and basements, exploded into fragments. Niv aimed carefully, just below the edge, undercutting a huge shelf of stone and buildings as his white-hot breath tore deeper into the substructure. After a few seconds, it lurched, then began to slide, breaking away from the ground and slipping down through the smashed, molten rock into the shaft of the zonot. A huge chunk of stone and masonry, bigger than a city block, came free, breaking into smaller pieces as it tumbled. Wood and stone, brick and iron, people and carriages, thousands of tons of the fabric of Ravnica descended into the depths, cascading down on Nicol Bolas's head.

Niv-Mizzet paused as a massive wave of dust came billowing back up the zonot, huge eyes blinking. The air was full of screams, wails, and crackling fire, but he ignored them, listening for the sound of shifting stone below. To have killed Bolas was unthinkable, but even an ancient dragon might be inconvenienced for quite some time if you buried him under a thousand tons of rock. Perhaps—

Black lightning speared up out of the pit, crackling into the clouds overhead. One stroke, then another. More dark energy reached the edges of the zonot, crawling along it in titanic arcs. Niv-Mizzet felt the death magic's tug; in the buildings lining the pit, the terrified inhabitants fell silently into piles of dust.

A sphere of darkness rose, slowly, through the billowing clouds. Chunks of rock still fell from the broken edge of the zonot, but where they contacted the void, they simply dissolved, utterly obliterated. Niv-Mizzet backed away, perching on a building, as the black orb reached street level and kept rising.

When it was nearly to the lower edge of the clouds, it halted, then blew apart in a shower of black sparks that fell all across the city, dissolving whatever they touched into absolute nothingness.

Bolas hung where the sphere had been, huge wings flapping slowly, black blood still dripping from the slash on his chest. He stared down at Niv-Mizzet, his glowing eyes burning with rage.

Niv looked back up at him. He felt something strange, an emotion unfamiliar to him. Long moments passed as he considered it.

Fear, he decided. So this was what fear was like.

It was, Niv-Mizzet thought, unworthy of the Firemind. So he pushed it aside, roared his defiance, and leapt skyward, even as tendrils of death and destruction unfolded from Bolas's outstretched hands.