

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 3

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The closer Ral got to New Prahv, the more he could feel his skin crawl.

The Azorius had always been officious and overbearing, but something had changed. *I've spent too much time locked in my workshop of late.* The streets around the great citadel of the Senate were as neat and orderly as ever, but now the soldiers of Azorius' Lyeve Column were everywhere, standing guard at the entrance to every important building and patrolling the street in their glossy white armor. Hussars trotted past, lances at the ready. In the skies overhead, for once free of rain, winged constructs circled lazily, staring down with multi-faceted, gem-like eyes.

They're running scared. Ral smiled tightly. The military presence was supposed to be a show of strength, but to Ral it tasted more like weakness. *They know there's nothing more useless than a senate nobody listens to.*

New Prahv itself was as impressive as ever, three titanic towers that dominated the Tenth District skyline arranged equidistant around a central courtyard, flanked by the domes and spires of lesser buildings. The borders of the enormous compound were marked by tall, spiked fences, and at the gate a dozen white-armored soldiers manned a checkpoint, processing a long queue of pedestrians. Ral ignored them and walked directly to the gate, where a blue-skinned vedalken sergeant glared at him through the narrow slit in his helmet.

"All non-guildmembers must have their papers processed before entry," the sergeant said. "Please wait your turn."

Ral gave the queue a contemptuous look. "I'm in a hurry."

"No exceptions," the sergeant growled. Two more soldiers stepped forward to flank him. "Please don't cause trouble, citizen."

Definitely running scared. Ral put on a haughty smile. "My name is Ral Zarek, personal representative of Guildmaster Niv-Mizzet. I'm here to see Supreme Judge Ispيريا on a matter of utmost importance."

"No exceptions—" The sergeant paused as one of the other soldiers whispered urgently in his ear. His blue lips curled into a sour expression. "Very well. Wait here."

"Not for long, I hope," Ral said.

It was, in fact, nearly a quarter of an hour before the sergeant returned, with a captain in tow. The young man, in a uniform but unarmored, gave Ral a slight bow.

"Welcome, Master Zarek. I am Captain Pytr Liosh. Come with me, please."

Ral favored the sergeant with one last superior smile as he followed the captain through the checkpoint. Liosh led him rapidly across the central square, past the three great monoliths, and into the

maze of subsidiary buildings that housed the administrative apparatus of the senate. Ral was struck by how different it was from the halls of Nivix—not just that the walls and floor were covered with cracks and scorch-marks, of course, but the *silence*. The floors were polished marble, with no carpets or hangings to muffle the echoes, and every footstep echoed like a thunderclap. Clerks shuffled past, heads down, not looking either at Ral or the guards who stood like ceramic statues at regular intervals. There was a steady stream of homunculi as well, small, wizened-looking creatures who performed menial administrative tasks, hurrying back and forth with their small arms piled high with scrolls.

Captain Liosh stopped in front of a grand double door, inlaid with the Azorius guild crest in silver. From inside, Ral could hear the faint sound of voices raised in anger. The captain coughed.

“The delegation from the Boros Legion has already arrived,” he said. “I understand that the guildmaster will be a few moments longer. Please wait inside.”

He opened the door, bowing again. Beyond, Ral found an oval conference chamber, with a long, highly polished table down the center. One side of the table was lined with high-ranking Azorius functionaries, in the white robes of senators or military uniforms.

On the other were more soldiers, but of a very different cut. Where the Azorius military was all chilly precision and gleaming ceramic armor, the Boros Legion delegation wore brushed steel, well-polished but with the nicks and scars that spoke of actual combat. There were five of them, ranging from two young captains up to an older minotaur woman wearing a lieutenant’s insignia. She sat in silence, arms folded, while her subordinates engaged in a shouting match with the gaggle of politicians.

Against the rear wall, watching, was an angel.

Aurelia. Ral couldn’t help but stare. He didn’t know much about the angelic hierarchy that dominated the upper ranks of the Boros, but Aurelia had become guildmaster after she ousted Feather. She was a head taller than him, but gave an impression of delicate grace that belied her size. Her features were striking, androgynous and beautiful, and her bright crimson hair flowed down over her shoulder like a river of blood dripping across her well-worn armor. Her great wings were folded behind her. She surveyed the ongoing argument with a faintly amused expression, like a parent watching children in fierce debate.

“If we are weak,” one of the Boros lieutenants was saying, “it is *your* doing. The Legion and the Senate are intended to work together, for the good of Ravnica, but you have taken it upon yourselves to usurp our function.”

“Only because you refuse to perform it,” a pot-bellied senator shot back. “If the Legion would enforce the laws—”

“How are we supposed to enforce the laws when they change every day?” another soldier said. “The Senate has lost its grip.”

“The Legion has become a dangerous rogue element,” snapped an Azorius vedalken.

“Dangerous?” The minotaur woman leaned forward, silencing the others for a moment. One of her long horns gleamed dangerously, while the other had broken off, and was now capped by a silver stopper. “The Boros are dangerous only to those who would transgress against justice. Is that you, senator?”

“Of course not,” the vedalken shot back. “We are the *law*. How can we break it?”

“Justice and the law are not the same.” Aurelia’s voice was surprisingly high and musical. “The Azorius would do well to remember that.” She turned her glowing eyes on Ral. “Greetings, Master Zarek. We have been anxiously awaiting your arrival.”

“Send your complaints to the sergeant at the gates,” Ral said. “Or whoever designed this maze of a building.” He bowed toward Aurelia, and inclined his head to the Azorius side of the table. “Guildmaster Aurelia. Masters. Thank you for coming.”

“Zarek,” the pot-bellied senator said. “Good. I, for one, have some questions for you. Who *exactly* is this threat you claim is nearly upon us?”

“And what can you tell us about its capabilities?” the minotaur said. “How many men can it field, and with what equipment?”

“I think,” Aurelia said, “that it would be best to wait until Guildmaster Isperia and I have had a chance to discuss the matter.”

“I agree,” Ral said. The last thing he wanted was to get bogged down trying to convince these squabbling subordinates of the depth of the problem. “Will she be ready for us soon?”

“She is ready now,” said a cold voice from the other end of the room. A door there had opened, and a tall, thin-limbed vedalken stood beside it. “The guildmaster requests that Master Zarek and Guildmaster Aurelia join her alone.”

“It could be a trap,” the minotaur woman said at once. “Let her see us all together.”

“The honor of the Azorius would never allow such a thing,” the senator said. “But I agree that we should all—”

“The guildmaster has made her decision clear,” the vedalken said.

“I appreciate your concern,” Aurelia said. “But I will be fine.” The angel nodded to Ral. “Shall we?”

The next room was much larger, out of necessity.

Isperia, Supreme Judge of the Azorius Senate, was a sphinx. Her long, leonine body was bigger than a cart, made even bulkier by broad, feathered wings. Her enormous forepaws were folded in front of her. Her face and head looked more human, framed by long purple hair, her features as famously inscrutable as all her kind.

One chair stood beside her, and two more were set up opposite. Ral, already feeling at something of a disadvantage in conversation with this enormous creature, chose to stand, and Aurelia did likewise. The vedalken took the other chair, settling in with precise movements and folding his hands in front of him.

“Welcome,” Isperia said. Her deep voice had a trace of a lion’s roar in the bottom registers. “Aurelia. It has been too long.”

“It has,” the angel said. “I regret the recent . . . tension between our guilds.”

“And I don’t believe we have met, Master Zarek,” the sphinx went on. “I am, of course, well-acquainted with your master.”

“The Firemind sends his greetings,” Ral said. He glanced at the vedalken, curiously.

“Ah, yes.” Isperia nodded in his direction. “This is Grand Arbiter Dovin Baan. He is my second, and may have some expertise in the matter before us.”

“Greetings,” Baan said, his blue features emotionless.

“Your master called this meeting, Zarek,” Aurelia said. “I must say when I received his message, it seemed far-fetched. A dragon from another world? I’ve always dismissed such myths.” She smiled.

"It would explain much about Azor. And the Firemind must never be discounted entirely," Isperia said. "At the same time, we have grown used to ignoring his . . . flights of fancy. However." She glanced at Dovin, who cleared his throat.

"Nicol Bolas is quite real," the vedalken said. "I crossed path with him, or his agents, on my home plane of Kaladesh. My subsequent investigations led me here, where I believe he will make his next move."

"You claim to be from another world, then?" Aurelia said.

"Yes," Baan said. "I am a Planeswalker."

Ral cleared his throat. "I realize the idea seems absurd at first," he said. "But I can give you my personal assurance that such people exist."

It felt strange to say it so baldly. Not long ago, Ral had been working desperately to prevent the secret of Planeswalkers and other worlds from becoming widely known. He'd assumed that if those without the Spark became aware of the strangers in their midst, the paranoid reaction would be dangerous for all of them. Every Planeswalker he'd met over the years had the same policy, an unwritten rule that kept their abilities hidden from most of the Multiverse.

Now he was breaking that taboo, to two of the most powerful and influential creatures in Ravnica. *But there's no way around it.* He'd never convince anyone that Nicol Bolas was a threat if he couldn't explain where the dragon was coming *from*.

"I have received documentation from Niv-Mizzet on the subject," Aurelia said. "I assume you have as will?"

Isperia nodded. "I am prepared to accept his word, for the moment."

"Let us proceed on that assumption," Aurelia turned back to Ral. "This Nicol Bolas is coming to Ravnica, then, from parts unknown. He is powerful?"

"Significantly more powerful than my master," Ral said. "At present."

"And yet that is hardly an insurmountable obstacle," Aurelia said. "Forgive me for being blunt, but if it came to a confrontation, I would certainly hazard the combined might of the Legion against Niv-Mizzet alone. I cannot see why this Bolas would be any different."

"I agree," Isperia said. "One dragon is much like another."

"Bolas won't be alone," Ral said. "He has allies."

"Who?" Aurelia said. "How many? In what strength?"

"At least some Ravnicans," Ral said. "We know that Lazav and the Dimir are working with him."

"Hardly unexpected," Isperia said. "You have no other information?"

"I have my personal experience," Ral said. "Bolas is no simple threat. What he wants, he usually gets."

"I concur," Baan said, his tone still neutral. "If he is coming to Ravnica, it is because he believes himself strong enough to rule."

"For the moment," Isperia said, "let us move on. What is Niv-Mizzet's proposal?"

"He wants to amend the Guildpact," Ral said. "To make himself into a force capable of defeating Bolas. He pledges to leave the Izzet behind, and to take no further part in the conflicts of the guilds."

"A lofty appeal," Aurelia said. "But not one I have a great deal of confidence in."

"Who would lead the Izzet afterward?" Isperia said.

Ral gave a slight bow. "I would."

The sphinx regarded him curiously. "And do you believe the Firemind would remain neutral, as he claims?"

"I do." Ral didn't add that it was damned hard to get the dragon to care about anything *now* if it didn't bear directly on his studies. "I think this is our best chance."

There was a long pause.

"I am not convinced," Aurelia said slowly, "that this Bolas is as dire a threat as you claim. However . . ."

She looked at Isperia, and the sphinx nodded slowly.

"There is a sickness in the guilds," the angel said. "The Living Guildpact was intended to keep them in check, but Jace Beleren is gone. I suppose he is also one of these Planeswalkers?"

"Yes," Ral said. "Niv-Mizzet believes he may be dead."

"He was on Kaladesh," Baan said mildly. "Where he went from there, I do not know."

He knows Beleren? Ral shot the vedalken a sharp look, and resolved to question him further later.

"In any event," Isperia went on. "The Living Guildpact is not performing his function. It may be that further amendments are required." The sphinx's huge body shifted in a shrug. "At the very least, it will do no harm to assemble a guild summit."

"Getting agreement will not be easy," Aurelia said. "The Gruul will object on principle, and the Orzhov will consider only their own private advantage. As for Dimir, who knows?"

"Niv-Mizzet has his own plans in motion," Ral said, with a lot more confidence than he truly felt. *If he can bring the Gruul to the table, he truly deserves to be called the Firemind.* "But you agree, in principle?"

The angel nodded. "Yes. The present situation cannot go on, and this threat must be addressed. The Boros Legion will negotiate in good faith."

"We will handle the particulars," Isperia said. "But convincing the other guilds to attend at all will still be your responsibility, Master Zarek. I hope you are equal to it."

"Leave it to me," Ral said, forcing a grin.

In spite of his misgivings, Ral had to admit as he left New Prahv that things were looking, if not actually *up*, then at least less than completely hopeless. For all that the other guilds protested against the authority of the Azorius, the Senate commanded a vestige of respect. Isperia's endorsement went a long way toward making this look less like an Izzet power play, especially with Aurelia and the Boros also on board.

Gruul is still going to be a problem, though. Not only were the chaotic tribes constitutionally opposed to anything like cooperation with the other guilds, their rivalry with Boros ran deep. *And Dimir is already against us. I hope the Niv-Mizzet really does have something up his sleeve.* He walked out through the market square that fronted New Prahv, outside the Azorius checkpoints but still well within their jurisdiction. It was bustling with the break in the rain, thick with sentient creatures of a dozen different races and a hundred varieties of beasts of burden. Above the heads of the humanoids, faeries flitted back and forth on colorful trails of magic, mixed with the buzz of insects and the whirr of small constructs. Stalls around the edges of the square sold food and drink: spitted potatoes, fried mushrooms in fantastic varieties from the depths of the undercity, roasted meat of dubious origin, and wine that might or might not have come anywhere near a grape.

“Master Zarek?” a small voice said, while Ral was contemplating a haunch of something green and scaly. He looked around, frowning, and then glanced down to find a small elven girl tugging at his sleeve.

“I don’t want to buy anything,” he growled.

“Someone wants to talk to you,” the girl said, looking shyly at the cobblestones. “Says it’s important.”

“I don’t—”

“Says it’s about bowl-uhs. Dunno what that means.”

Ral froze. His eyes searched the market.

“Where did he want me to go?” he said.

“Was a lady,” the girl said. “Sit on the bench and wait, she said.”

Before he could stop her, the elf slipped away, darting nimbly through the crowd. In the center of the square were a set of stone benches ranged around a central fountain, in which a statue of Azor was surrounded by water-spouting nymphs. Many of them were occupied, but Ral couldn’t see anyone who seemed threatening.

Even Tezzeret would hesitate before trying something this publicly. Not only was the square full of shoppers and merchants, but Azorius guards were much in evidence, patrolling in small groups or standing at intervals in their glossy white armor. *If it’s a trap, it’s a subtle one.* He made his way over to the bench, found a clear spot, and sat down. It gave him a good view of half the square, but the back of his neck itched, wary of what might be hiding out of his line of vision. He felt half-naked without his accumulator and mizzium bracers, left behind out of respect for his Azorius hosts. When he reached out with his power, only a few crackles of lightning in the brooding clouds overhead were close enough to tap.

Across the way, a troop of Rakdos puppeteers were performing, to the delight of a crowd of watching children. Under the stern eye of the Azorius guards, they settled for biting satire instead of setting things on fire, much to the disappointment of their audience. One of the puppets had a shock of wild hair with a white streak down the center. *I wonder what they’re saying about me now.* “Zarek,” said a woman’s voice behind him. “Don’t look around.”

Ral put his chin in his hands, pretending to be absorbed in the puppet show. “And you are?” he murmured.

“Lavinia,” the woman said. “Formerly of the Azorius.”

Lavinia. He knew her by reputation. She had been one of the Senate’s most notorious investigators, dogged in her pursuit of anything that looked like wrongdoing or corruption, prior to working with Beleren as Steward of the Guildpact. Her resignation from the guild had caused a minor scandal, though it had been quickly swallowed up by all the other strange news of late.

“I have an office, you know,” Ral said. “You’re always welcome to make an appointment.”

“They’re watching you.”

“A lot of people are watching me. It comes with the territory.”

“Don’t play dumb. You know who I mean.”

“Bolas.” Ral grimaced. “Care to tell me how you know that name?”

“I still have my sources inside the Senate,” Lavinia said. “That place leaks like a sieve. By tomorrow morning, everyone in the district will know what you and the sphinx are up to.”

Ral shrugged. “We were planning to announce it in any event. So what’s *your* angle? I thought you left the guild.”

“I left the guild,” Lavinia grated, “because I started pulling on a thread, and they didn’t like what I found.”

“What thread would that be?”

“There are agents of a foreign power in the Tenth District,” Lavinia said. “I’ve been tracking them for months, intercepting their communications, trying to understand their purpose and who they work for. Now I have the answer to at least one of those questions.”

“You think they work for Bolas.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“So why are you telling *me* about it?”

“Because you’re far too trusting.”

Ral laughed. “I like to think I’m appropriately paranoid.”

“Listen,” Lavinia said, lowering her voice. “This is an organized network, spread through all the guilds. I don’t know what their goal is, not yet, but if you’re working against Bolas, they’re going to try to stop you. And I don’t know how many more agents there are that I *haven’t* identified. You can’t trust anyone.”

“Except you, I assume.”

“You’d be a fool if you did.”

“What do you want, Lavinia?”

“I want to help you. Whatever Bolas has planned, it’s not going to be good for Ravnica. But you have to be *careful*.”

“I’m second in command of a guild of mad geniuses,” Ral said. “I haven’t gotten there by being careless.”

“Even if you manage to bring the guilds together, it’s likely that Bolas will have already sunk his claws into them.” Lavinia sighed. “I hope you know what you’re doing, I really do.”

“Knowing who is already on his side would be nice, if you really want to be *helpful*.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Lavinia said. “I don’t want to spook them, not yet. I’ll contact you again when I have something.”

“Thanks.” Ral waited for a response, and when none came he looked over his shoulder. The bench behind him was empty.

Well. That was . . . odd.

Lavinia’s not wrong, Ral thought as he walked across the Tenth District. *A little paranoid, maybe, but not wrong.* Bolas was a born schemer and knew better than to put all his bets on one throw of the dice. *If he has one agent among the guilds, he’ll have many.* Somehow, they’d have to figure out who was on the dragon’s payroll before the guild summit convened.

He did his best to put it out of his mind, at least for the moment. As always, coming here brought a little surge of guilt—not that he was doing anything *wrong*, but that he was stealing time that might have been put to use at Nivix, studying reports or checking up on his projects. As always, Ral assured

himself that everything was on track. *It will take time for Isperia to send her messages and receive replies. We won't have any new information until morning, at the earliest.* The brief respite from the autumn rains had ended, and Ral put up his deflection spell and kept his head down as the gutters once again gurgled and splashed.

The apartment was in the Dogsrn neighborhood, a genteel rectangle of quiet streets tucked away from the major thoroughfares. It was close enough to Nivix for convenience, but far enough that it wasn't part of Izzet territory. Renting it had been an odd experience—it had been a long time since Ral had any cause for handling money, and he'd been surprised to discover that he was, if not rich, at least comfortably well off. He'd spent decades living in the Izzet laboratories, while the guild's bean-counters had dutifully credited his account with regular contributions. Apparently Niv-Mizzet was generous to his most successful underlings. *No wonder Chamberlain Maree is so eager to maintain her position.* Belatedly realizing he was on the hook for dinner, he stopped in at a viashino eatery on the way there. The old lizard-woman behind the counter grinned to see him, showing a mouthful of sharp teeth, and barked a laugh at his usual request to “hit him with her best shot.” Two curries in waxed paper packages secured, he made his way up the streets of Dogsrn, past brick-faced apartment buildings with window-box gardens and wrought-iron fences. His key let him into one, safely anonymous in the center of a row, and he climbed three flights of stairs.

He was running late. No sooner had he shrugged out of his coat and put the food on the table than there was the sound of another key in the lock. Ral opened the door and raised an eyebrow at the sight of Tomik Vrona, his hair soaked through and his glasses splattered with raindrops.

“You look like a wet rat,” Ral said.

“I feel like a wet rat,” Tomik said. “Left my coat at the cathedral. I thought I could make it here before the skies opened up again.” He pulled off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt, which didn't actually help much. “This one your fault, too?”

“You cause *one* thunderstorm, and they never let you hear the end of it,” Ral said. “I brought curry.”

“Hmm. I suppose I can forgive you, then.”

Tomik stepped forward, and Ral leaned in and kissed him thoroughly. Finally Tomik broke away, shoved past Ral in spite of his mock complaints, and headed straight for the table.

“I see where your priorities are,” Ral said.

“Damned right,” Tomik said, sitting down. “I missed lunch.”

“I think the brown one is yours.”

“I can tell by the fact that breathing near it doesn't sear my nasal passages,” Tomik said. “Honestly, I don't understand how you can eat that stuff.”

“Spend half a year stuck on campaign with a bunch of scorchbringers, and you'll learn.” The viashino had a habit of seasoning their food with whatever spice, vegetable, or fungus would burn hottest. Ral's curry was an angry crimson, full of chunks of seared meat like bloody icebergs. He speared one, savoring the heat of it.

Tomik, watching, rolled his eyes and attacked his considerably milder curry. For a while they ate in comfortable silence, but it slowly transitioned into *un* comfortable silence. Ral polished off his food and found Tomik only halfway through his, staring absently down into the depths of his curry as though it contained some dangerous secret.

“Something wrong?” Ral said, after some hesitation.

“Oh.” Tomik laid down his fork and looked up. “You know. Guild business.”

“Guild business.” They said it almost simultaneously, and Tomik smiled a little.

It was a joke, sort of. He and Tomik had met when the young secretary was pursuing Teysa Karlov’s agenda of greater ties between the Orzhov and the other guilds. Tomik’s quick mind (and the way he fiddled with his glasses when he was flustered) had intrigued Ral, and he had taken the unusual step of suggesting they meet privately once the negotiations had concluded. After that, one thing had somehow led to another.

But it was clear to both of them that this—whatever *this* was, and frankly Ral didn’t want to think too hard about that—was only going to work if they kept their respective positions out of it. Ral had rented the apartment to have a private place to meet while keeping a low profile. It wasn’t that Izzet officials didn’t have lovers or partners, of course. Just that if it became widely known that the second-in-command of the Izzet was spending time with the personal secretary of the Karlov heir apparent, questions would be asked on Ral’s side, and he assumed the same was true of Tomik.

Given how much time and attention each of them committed to their guilds, it was a hard line to walk. Sometimes, Ral wondered if he was fooling himself if he thought this was more than a brief interlude, like a dozen others that had come and gone over the years. *But Tomik . . .* He shook his head. *Not the time.* Worrying about it wasn’t going to help.

“Guild business,” he said again, and sighed. “I know the feeling, believe me.”

Tomik looked as though he wanted to say something, but he only bit his lip and shook his head. Ral yawned, ostentatiously, and got up from the table.

“I, for one, have had enough of guild business for the day.” He gave Tomik a cocky grin. “What about you?”

Tomik grinned back.

In the broad, soft bed, with Tomik curled against his back like a comfortable cat, Ral Zarek dreamed. Or remembered.

In his dream, he was seventeen again.

The Tenth District, with its guildhalls and great markets, was the center of Ravnica, if a city that stretched on forever could really be said to have a center. By the same token, Tovrna was the outskirts, a backwater in the endless city. Once a power in its own right, it had slipped into somnolence over the centuries, ruled by a handful of petty oligarch families who owned the vast factory rows where the rest of the population labored. The downtown of Tovrna was a few blocks of elegant apartments and townhouses, surrounded by a thin ring of dilapidated buildings for the servants, scribes, and other hangers-on.

Beyond that were the crumbling tenements of the poor, and the long, low sheds of the factories themselves, powered by superheated gas rising from underground caverns. The machines inside whirled day and night, turning thread into cloth, pig iron into neat rods, or creating any one of a hundred other products Tovrna exported to the wealthier districts. It would have been easier and safer to use magic, of course, but mages were expensive. Tenement dwellers with nothing to lose were cheap, and easy to replace.

Ral's mother had been one such, working in a cloth factory until she'd been mangled in an accident when Ral was eleven. She'd lived a cripple for another two years, never really healing, with Ral doing everything he could to help her. After she'd finally died, it had only taken a few months for the thirteen-year-old to abandon his drunken lout of a father and strike out on his own.

Four years later, he'd managed a precarious existence. A place to live, a job of sorts. And, to his great surprise, love. *linebreak* "You're off?" Elias said, spying Ral changing through the open bedroom door.

Ral nodded, pulling on a shirt that was slightly less threadbare than the rest and examining himself in the cracked mirror propped against the pockmarked plaster wall. *It'll do*, he decided, *if I keep my coat on. It's not like the count ever pays much attention to me anyway.* His client had a great-grandfather in the Orzhov and pretensions to nobility.

Their apartment was in that precarious ring, too far from the center of the district to be respectable, but not quite part of the slum. It had once been fashionable, with high ceilings and faded gilt wallpaper in the hall, but most of the furnishings had long ago been stripped. Ral and Elias had replaced them with their own eclectic collection, mostly scavenged from oligarch castoffs. A few rickety shelves held small paintings and sculptures, courtesy of Elias's bohemian friends, who were always gifting one another with their latest artistic efforts. Privately, Ral thought that most of these looked like little more than lumpy trolls or blots of spilled paint, but his lover seemed to adore them, so he held his tongue.

Elias himself was at work in the main room, lying on his stomach in front of their ratty old sofa, pencil in hand. A stack of the clean white paper—one of the few indulgences Ral's meager earnings would stretch to—sat in front of him, the top sheet bearing a single word repeatedly crossed out.

"Tough morning?" Ral said.

Elias rolled over and threw one arm across his forehead with a theatrical sigh. Ral laughed, and Elias stuck out his tongue. He was a year older than Ral, but smaller and slighter, with dark brown skin and long hair dyed a deep green in the imitation of elven fashion, a look that was apparently the done thing at the moment.

"I'll have you know that I'm in the midst of wrestling my muse to the ground," Elias said. He lay back and carefully balanced the pencil on his nose, staring at the ceiling. "Aaaaany minute now. I'll be churning out the pages."

"Well." Ral wanted to jump on him, knock the pencil away and kiss the smirk off his face. *But I can't be late, not after last time.* "I won't distract you, then."

"No? Not even for a little while?"

Ral laughed, waved, and walked out the door.

It was high summer, and the sun baked the mud between the cobblestones into a fine dust that coated everything. Ral skirted the center of the district, sticking to back streets without much carriage traffic, until he came to the count's townhouse. It was enormous, at least four stories high, and had long ago swallowed the buildings behind it to extend further back from the streets. That was where the terraced gardens were, four levels of riotous green, producing fruits and herbs for the count's table.

Ral bypassed the front doors and went around the side to the tradesman's entrance—he'd only made *that* mistake once. A sour-faced butler greeted him when he rapped at the door. His expression as he looked over Ral's weather-beaten coat and patched trousers could have curdled milk.

"Ah," he said. "The rain mage."

Rain mage, rain mage. The man's voice echoed in Ral's head, taunting him. He swallowed a knot in his throat and nodded.

"You'll have to wait," the butler said. "The master is entertaining in the garden now."

"He told me this morning would be all right," Ral said. "I have appointments—"

"The count has changed his plans," the butler said, slowly and carefully as if speaking to an idiot. "You will have to wait."

And so Ral ended up cooling his heels for the better part of an hour in the kitchen, while the servants gave him curious looks and the life of the great house went on around him. When a maid finally summoned him to the gardens, he got a brief glimpse of the count and his guests leaving through the main door, like a herd of brilliant peacocks compared to the drab attire of the servants.

They'd left the gardens a mess, plants trampled and discarded plates and cutlery everywhere. That, at least, wasn't Ral's problem. He sat in the garden's highest tier, cross-legged, and focused.

Rain mage. They'd hung that name on him in the streets when he was a boy, shouted it at him in mockery. He had a talent for magecraft, he'd discovered, but not for fire or mind magic or healing or anything *truly* impressive. Just . . . rain. *What can you do with rain?* Overhead, there was a tiny crash of thunder, and then heavy drops began to land on the leaves of the garden. The parched, thirsty earth drank in the water, which curved politely around Ral himself.

This is what you could do with rain. The trick wasn't calling the rain, something Ral had been able to do when he was ten. The trick was getting it to rain *here* but not anywhere else; the count and his neighbors would not be pleased if he soaked their party guests. It had taken Ral years to learn that kind of control, not that it had earned him much respect.

Each tier had to be watered in turn, so it was well after noon before Ral was finished. He accepted the lunch the butler had, with bad grace, offered him, plain bread and leftover stew, and the small bag of zinos that had come along with it. Enough to pay the rent and keep himself and Elias fed for another few days, until the next job came along. Until Elias finally found an audience for his poetry, and made good on all his promises. *Just a little longer.* He'd just emerged from the house, shrugging into his coat, when he heard the call.

"Hey, rain mage!"

Ral looked up, and swore, very quietly.

Gunther was the count's oldest son, Ral's age, though you wouldn't know it under the layers of silk and cosmetics. Ral thought it made him look like a performer at the circus, but Gunther clearly thought himself the height of fashion, and his entourage seemed to agree, aping the boy's overdressed style. There were half a dozen of them, young men from respectable families, and one slightly older, slightly shabbier-looking fellow with the look of a hired hand. They blocked the way back onto the street.

Ral kept his head down as he walked toward them.

"Rain mage!" Gunther said. "I'm talking to you."

There was nothing to do but answer, if he didn't want to actually walk over the boy. Ral sighed and looked up.

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do," Gunther said, "about my hat?"

His hat was large, green, and fringed with silk. As he tipped it toward Ral, a wet streak down one side was visible.

"It's absolutely *ruined*," Gunther said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Ral said. "But I was only doing as your father instructed."

And I'm sure the garden was empty. Gunther had to have noticed the rainstorm and gone into it on purpose.

"My father did *not* instruct you to butcher my wardrobe!" Gunther said. "Would you like to come with me and ask him about it?"

"No," Ral said tightly. "I'm sorry."

"You're simply going to have to pay for it." Gunther stepped forward. "Let's see your purse."

The entourage tittered, except for the hired hand. Ral fists clenched.

"No," he said quietly. "I won't."

"Excuse me?" Gunther bent forward. "You will. Or else you'll be *disciplined*."

"I won't," Ral said again.

Gunther's fist hit him in the gut, hard and fast. Given the way he looked, it seemed unfair that Gunther could throw a decent punch, but his father had apparently not skimped on his physical training, and there were muscles under the frippery. Ral doubled over, then straightened up slowly.

"Now *there's* a dangerous look," Gunther said. "What are you going to do, rain mage? Moisten me?"

"No," Ral grated. "Sir. I'd just like to go."

"Varo," Gunther said airily. "Show this fellow what a *real* mage can do."

The hired hand stepped forward. He caught Ral's eye, and shrugged.

"Sorry, kid."

Ral had time to throw up his hands before Varo made a complicated gesture, and a wave of raw force picked Ral up and tossed him against the side of the alley. The air went out of him in a rush, and he felt his nose break with a *crunch* and a spike of pain. A moment later he was lying on his back, spitting blood, while Gunther and his friends laughed.

"*Very* well done, Varo," Gunther said.

"Yessir."

"I think that's vengeance for my hat taken," the boy announced. "Who's for darts?"

An indeterminate amount of time passed. Ral had to work just to breath, and he could feel his nose swelling. He closed his eyes to slits against the sun.

A shape swam into view. A man, with his hand extended.

"Do you need help, boy?" The voice sounded friendly, amused.

Ral hesitated only a moment before taking the hand. A strong grip returned him to his feet. He blinked, eyes watering, and then winced as the stranger's fingers pressed against his face.

"That's a bad break," the man said. "I can do something about it, if you'd like."

"What'll it cost me?" Ral said, his voice blocked and nasal.

"Let's say . . . a moment of your time. I'd like it if you joined me for a cup of coffee."

Ral gave a cautious nod. The man pressed two fingers carefully against his broken nose, and Ral felt the weird sensation of flesh twisting against itself as it straightened. Healing magic tingled gently, then faded.

“Here.” The man handed him a handkerchief. “You might want to clean yourself up a bit. You look like you’ve been in the wars.”

“Thank you,” Ral said, relieved to breathe easily. He mopped at the blood on his face. “I’m not sure a cup of coffee is enough to repay you.”

“Well.” Now that Ral could see him clearly, the stranger was a tall, handsome older man, with his gray-ing hair tied back in a queue. He was immaculately dressed, though in a style that Ral found vaguely foreign. “Perhaps you could further oblige me by considering an offer. I think that you show promise.”

“What, at getting my teeth kicked in?”

“I admit I have been watching you.” The stranger cocked his head. “Am I correct that you might be amenable to additional employment?”

Ral nodded.

“And further, that you would not mind performing tasks that are counter to the interests of the highest echelons of society? Such as, for example, the count and his charming son.”

Ral, once he’d followed the circumlocutions of the man’s speech, found himself laughing.

“No,” he said. “I wouldn’t mind that at all.”

“Excellent,” the stranger said. “Then we have much to discuss.”

He extended a hand, and Ral shook it.

“Ral Zarek,” Ral said.

“Bolas,” the stranger said. He grinned, his smile showing very white, slightly pointed teeth. “Nicol Bolas.”