

Hour of Devastation

Ken Troop

From set *Hour of Devastation*

The Gatewatch, outraged by the mounting devastation that has overtaken Amonkhet, confronts Nicol Bolas to bring him to justice for his atrocities across the Multiverse. However, Nicol Bolas has plans of his own.



Damnation | Art by Zack Stella

Nicol Bolas flew toward the heroes, eager to kill someone today.

Either he would have deaths, screams, and blood, or he would, perhaps, have something better.

He did not expect to have both. One could not have everything. Not even Nicol Bolas. He was not greedy. Greed implies wanting something you didn't deserve.

Everything Nicol Bolas wanted was entirely deserved.



Imminent Doom | Art by Daniel Ljunggren

Several decades ago he had come to the world of Amonkhet, a blighted, superstitious backworld of interest to no one who mattered, to no one who was paying attention. He had prepared—layer upon layer of preparations. Miserable lives that would soon have ended anyway ended just a bit sooner, with a touch more violence.

Hardly worthy of the effort, normally. Except . . . except several decades were an eyeblink when he was fully himself, able to wield the divinity due him. But as he was now, merely a shadow of a shadow of a god, those several decades had seemed an eternity.

Ruminating on all he had lost fanned the glowing ember of hate burning in his chest. The growing flame felt good. The hatred felt right. *Today*, Nicol Bolas thought, *it begins*.

He flew down to the center of a ruined plaza. Rubble and broken bodies garnished the toppled statues and cracked obelisks. At the edges of the plaza, five planeswalkers stood arrayed against him, grim determination on their tiny faces. He knew each of them intimately. He had scouted them, studied them, analyzed and categorized them. Chandra Nalaar, pyromancer. Liliana Vess, necromancer. Jace Beleren, telepath and illusionist. Nissa Revane, elemental. Gideon Jura, invulnerable soldier.

They fancied themselves *The Gatewatch*. As though for some bizarre reason there were gates scattered throughout the Multiverse. That deserved watching.

The heroes, Nicol Bolas thought. *Bless them, each and every one*.

Clouds of yellow dust spun into the air, stirred by the beating of his massive wings. He saw the slight widening of Chandra's eyes as she realized, seemingly for the first time, just how *large* Nicol Bolas was. Her naiveté amused. Not for the first time, he wondered if these heroes would be suitable for what he required.

No matter. There were others, if need be.

Tiny perturbations prickled his mind, a cautious but insistent probing from Jace. *Yes, my dear boy, find your footing*, Bolas implored silently. He landed with a soft thump, his wings flexing with a final,

ponderous beat. He had not needed wings to fly for a very long time, but he loved the way it felt, his majesty fully unfurled and on display.

He lifted his head to the sky and roared, a throaty cry that shook buildings and quailed hearts. His roar echoed the cries of countless other predators throughout the eons, predators who have no more need to be silent. Over the long years, Nicol Bolas knew it served him poorly to be too much the dragon. But it was no fun to be the dragon too little.

The five planeswalkers stood uncertainly around him. He extended his mind outward and could feel the ripples of their telepathic communication, orchestrated by Jace. He could intercept it if he wanted, but thought it would be more interesting to see what plan they had come up with. Given their hesitation and dawdling, he was growing ever more certain they would disappoint.

Oh, they probably had a *plan*. A *plan*, charitably, could consist of *kill the dragon*. Or, *you burn it, you zombie it, you elemental it, you illusion it, you block it*. These were all, given enough leeway, *plans*. And plans of similar competence had served them well enough in their recent escapades. Nicol Bolas could appreciate efficiency. Why bother being smart when the Multiverse so conveniently conspired to keep your idiocy alive?

Chandra and Nissa began circling around him in each direction. *Yes, tactics, assuredly*. He wondered how much it would crush their spirits if he applauded. Metaphorically, of course. His talons did not clap together well.

Not for the first time, he marveled at how these planeswalkers had managed to stay alive as long as they had. They were children of a civilized and gelded age, these planeswalkers, this *Gatewatch*. They had no idea of the dangers lying in wait, ready to kill them . . . or worse. Their lack of actual power had somehow protected them from all the ways they could have died. Or rather their lack of knowledge of what actual power should be. None of them except for Lilliana had tasted true power.

Nicol Bolas ran a slithering tongue over his lips. It was purely for effect, but that did not make it any less necessary.

Charmed lives, these planeswalkers had led. The problem with charmed lives, though, as Nicol Bolas had ample reason to know, is eventually the luck turns. Fate darkens. Charm abandons. It helps, in those moments of misfortune and unfairness, to have a very well-prepared and meticulous plan. Several, really. More than several, ideally, but unless you are a brilliant elder dragon archmage planeswalker, several would suffice.

Or one. Just one plan. Even a snippet of genius, tactical or strategic, would have given Nicol Bolas hope for their future. But he saw the plan written on their faces, in their narrowed eyes and tensed muscles, in the growing ripples of their telepathic chatter.

They had chosen *kill the dragon*. Bolas sympathized, to a point. Simple plans were often underestimated, especially by the brilliant. Far too often, an intelligent opponent had lost a battle because of an over-complexity of design. Simple plans wielded by a master were often devastating.

But simple plans wielded as the desperate last resort of the simple? The consequences of that approach were about to be displayed. He would have either blood or better, and either way he was hungry to begin.



Hour of Devastation | Art by Simon Dominic

Jace

The dragon landed softly in the plaza, and Jace was afraid.

Nothing about this day had gone as planned. There had been too much horror, too much death, too many lives they could not save. They had tried to help as they could, but they were gnats fighting a thunder storm. Jace had never seen so much death.

He felt empty inside, his mind dulled to the endless pain and grief it had been subjected to. For a moment, the images came: children screaming, people running futilely as they were slaughtered from behind, the incessant buzzing . . . no. He walled the images off again. There was a mission to complete.

But it was more than a mission now. Jace had pressed Gideon for an actual plan, had warned they could not engage Nicol Bolas unprepared, but Gideon had lashed out, his raw pain suffusing each word as he demanded to face the dragon now.

“He will pay for everything he has done. He has to.” It was that last sentence that so concerned Jace. But he did not argue with Gideon. None of them did, not even Liliana. They were all empty, all seeking meaning in the slaughter, in the cries of children. They wanted justice.

Justice had to exist somewhere, for it had yet to be found on Amonkhet today.

Are you sure ? Jace reached out to Gideon one last time, hoping there was a better plan.

We hit him with everything we’ve got. He will fall , Gideon thought back at him. Jace had never felt such an undercurrent of rage in Gideon, could feel his anger wrapped in Gideon’s normal stubborn determination. Jace was swept in its current, willing himself to believe they could be triumphant today.

They began. Gideon charged, his golden force shield shimmering, while Chandra launched goutts of flame. Seedlings burst from the ground, courtesy of Nissa, becoming roots and vines that twisted and

knotted around the dragon's legs. Liliana began raising the dead; there was no shortage given the carnage of the day.

Jace tried to attack Nicol Bolas's mind.

The walls around the dragon's mind were smooth and featureless, like dark obsidian. There seemed to be no entry, nothing to even latch onto. Jace had never encountered a mind so impenetrable, except for . . . the merest moment of a memory surfaced of *a mind as smooth and dazzling as a wall of crystal*. But even as the thought entered his mind, it erased itself, and he could not remember where he had seen such a thing—or even what kind of thing it was.

What . . . Jace shook off the sudden fugue that had overtaken him. It hadn't seemed to come from Bolas, but rather from inside himself. *What was I thinking about?* But he could not recall. Bolas's mind still loomed in front of him, closed and locked, as he futilely sought purchase.

His friends were not doing any better.

Nicol Bolas's tail whipped around, lightning-fast, and its end slammed into Gideon and his invulnerable shield with the force of a charging baloth. Gideon sailed into a thick brick wall lining one side of the plaza. His shield kept him unharmed, but he had no leverage to do anything more than be whacked against the wall by Bolas's tail like a ball hit by a stick, over and over as bricks flew and shattered with each impact.

The wall would crumble before Gideon did, but neither would be going anywhere for a while.

Bolas ignored Chandra's fire, trampled Liliana's dead, and broke Nissa's vines. He did not move to attack them, merely continuing to fling a helpless Gideon against the wall. He stared at Jace, knowing what the telepath was trying, and failing, to do.

The voice blasted into Jace's mind with all the subtlety of an avalanche, shredding several of his defenses effortlessly. *You have been alive for all of an eye-blink, and because of a thimble of natural talent you presume to touch my mind? And some have called me arrogant.* Bolas's laughter was acid, scarring Jace's mind.

He frantically strove to erect stronger psychic shields, shocked at how easily Bolas had penetrated his outer walls. But perhaps, in his arrogance, the dragon had made a mistake. Bolas had left a trail, a metaphysical string connecting his mind to Jace's. Perhaps this was the handhold Jace needed.

He followed the trail, desperate to break through, desperate to save his friends.

It was working! He found a small crevice in the otherwise featureless obsidian shields. He concentrated on opening it wider, he just needed to . . .

If you wanted in, child, you merely needed to ask. Each word from Bolas was like boulders crashing down a mountain.

The obsidian shield disappeared, and Jace fell unexpectedly into Nicol Bolas's mind. There the dragon was waiting, smiling.

Nicol Bolas clutched Jace's mind as he tried to fight him off. He crumpled over with pain, livid with himself at how easily he had fallen for Bolas's ruse. *I have to do better.* He could still escape this trap, he just needed more time. Seconds, he only needed seconds . . .

Seconds you do not have, Bolas whispered inside his mind. *The Multiverse only suffers fools briefly. A useful lesson, if you survive.* The dragon held Jace's mind roughly, and squeezed.

Synapses crumbled. Pain blossomed. Insanity beckoned. A towering wave of darkness rose in the distance. Jace knew the crash of that wave meant dissolution. *Mind-death*. Without conscious thought, he began planeswalking away blindly, not knowing or caring where. He had to avoid that darkness.

He felt himself being pulled across the Blind Eternities as the wave of darkness struck, and then he knew nothing at all.



Jace's Defeat | Art by Kieran Yanner

Liliana

Liliana stared in shock at the empty space that Jace had occupied just moments before. The fight against Bolas was a disaster, as she had feared it would be. She had still been hoping Jace could come up with some plan when he screamed in agony. It was a scream she knew well—the scream of the dying. The primal scream of life not wanting to end.

Liliana shivered. *He can't be dead. He planeswalked away before the end. I saw it. He's alive.*

"That was your mind expert, I believe? Do you have a spare? I can wait, or I promise not to listen if you shout at each other." Nicol Bolas lingered on each word, his voice rumbling through the open plaza, punctuated only by the continued *thwaps* as he bounced Gideon off the wall.

Liliana raged inside. She had known this fight with Nicol Bolas was a terrible idea, and every misguided intervention and distraction trying to help the doomed inhabitants of this plane only furthered her certainty. The group was ragged and reeling and in no condition to confront a planeswalker as powerful as Bolas. She would have left already if she hadn't pushed the group past its breaking point with her machinations to defeat Razaketh. Several times she had weighed staying with the group against abandoning them, but she felt her investment in them justified staying.

Perhaps she had made the wrong choice.

But that wasn't the only reason for her rage. A long time ago, back on Innistrad, she had compared her feelings for Jace to those she would have toward a dog, a house pet. The boy had been stung, as she had intended.

Liliana cared about her pets. Usually tampering with anyone who belonged to her was a fatal choice. She hungered to show Bolas the consequences of his folly.

Yes, use us. Unleash your full power , whispered the Chain Veil hanging at her side.

You have never been such a fool as to think you can win this battle, Liliana , whispered the Raven Man.

And perhaps that was the biggest reason for her rage. She wanted her mind to be hers alone again.

If she was going to fight Bolas, she knew she would have to use the Chain Veil, and with it the spirits of the Onakke dead. It gave her great power, but that power always came at a cost. Every time she used it, she risked death or complete subjugation to the Onakke spirits within. Neither fate was tolerable.

There was a lull in the fighting as Chandra and Nissa dealt with their own shock at the loss of Jace. Nothing the three of them had done so far had been effective against the dragon. Nicol Bolas turned toward Liliana and smiled, a grotesque display of teeth and arrogance that Liliana found repulsive, not least because she recognized that she was prone to giving the same smile to vanquished enemies.

"Liliana Vess. It is so good to see you again. Your complexion looks remarkably . . . healthy." Bolas did not even try to mask his condescension.

Her fingers twitched toward the Veil. "I'm going to kill you, Bolas. I will see you die and then reanimate your corpse to—"

"Oh, please," Nicol Bolas cut her off. "These children lost this battle before they were even born. You know this. You alone amongst them know what true power was. You alone amongst them know what true power can be again."

The dragon did not lie, but she thought again of Jace's final scream, of the boy planeswalking blindly away. The etched runes on her body and face glowed a dark purple, as the Veil continued its insistent whispers. *He cannot stand against you with our power. Use us!*

The dragon leaned his head down closer to Liliana, lowering his voice to a soft, smooth tone. "I understand, Liliana. You joined them, confident in your ability to manipulate. But the problem with surrounding yourself with fools is . . . this." The dragon swiveled his head, taking in the rest of the scene, even as Chandra and Nissa huddled close, trying to come up with a new plan.

Every word he said was truth, and the truth was too much for her to bear. She stroked the Chain Veil, drawing in the power she would need. *Yes* , the voices inside those golden links cried, *yes, we will destroy him!*

The dragon continued in his smooth voice. "Do you know, Liliana, how to use the Chain Veil so that it doesn't rupture your skin or drain you of life? Do you know how to make the spirits of the Onakke serve you as their master instead of seeking the destruction of your soul and body? I do, Liliana. I do."

He lies! screamed the Onakke in her head. *Interloper! We will crush him!*

You know he speaks truth, Liliana. He can help you. The Raven Man.

Shut up! she snarled at all the voices in her head, and they mercifully went silent. She was drawn out, exhausted. Did Nicol Bolas actually know how to unlock the Chain Veil? It would kill her one day. It demonstrated with every use she was not its master as it bucked her will and ravaged her body.

"Yes, it's a nasty weapon in the hands of the untutored. A testament to your power and skill that it hasn't killed you already. But I can help you unlock its power, Liliana. Its true power."

Liliana let the Veil drop limply to her side. She caught Gideon's eye. He had remained grimly stoic throughout his ordeal as Bolas's plaything, though still he continued to careen into the crumbling wall. *I need more from you than stoic silence, Gideon*, she thought to herself. Liliana hated being uncertain of her next step.

Bolas stared at her, his eyes black pools of malice. "I promise you this: whether you use the Chain Veil or not, if you fight me today, you will die. I am a better telepath than your mind mage, more destructive than your fire mage, more powerful than your elemental, a better general than your so-called tactician. That each of you has lived so long is merely a function of how useful you can be to me."

Nissa and Chandra approached together. Nissa's eyes glowed bright green, and the earth rumbled under her feet, buoying her height by several inches. "You lie, dragon," she snarled, her face contorted in a rare display of anger.

He turned to her, bemused. "Lie? Me? Look around you, elf. What need have I to dissemble here?" The rumbling under Nissa's feet grew more turbulent.

Bolas straightened, his massive form once more towering over each of them. "Liliana. Go. Leave if you want to live. The safest place in the Multiverse is the place where I have use of you."

They were not going to win today. That was clear. As Bolas himself had said, these children lost this battle before they were even born. It was true. What were they going to fight for? To die? This was ludicrous, even for them. She looked again at the space where Jace had been, his agonized screams echoing in her mind. She felt something wet at the corner of her eyes, but willed it away, refusing to show weakness to anyone.

She didn't know what made her turn to the others, but she did it anyway, the words coming before she could stop them.

"Come with me. We've lost. You can see that, right? We're *not* going to win today. We can regroup, find Jace, figure something else out." She didn't care that Bolas could hear her; he knew they didn't have a chance today, and he wouldn't believe they would have a chance in the future.

He's right, whispered the Raven Man. The Chain Veil was silent.

Chandra would not meet Liliana's eyes. Nissa shook her head. The anger on Gideon's face was obvious, but he offered no argument, no plea to change her mind. She was unused to the swirl of emotion she felt. Better she had just left, uncaring of their fate.

"Please. If you stay here, you will die. This is not the way." She hated the pleading in her voice, but she let her words stand.

They did not respond.

She turned back to Bolas. "Where . . . where do you want me to go?" She swallowed uncomfortably, finding it as hard to speak these words as the others.

"No!" Chandra screamed. "No! We trusted you! *I* trusted you! No!" Chandra's head and hands burst in flame anew. *You knew who I was, child. You knew.* But those words she could not say aloud.

"Away," Bolas said. "Away. I will find you, and then we will talk. There are so many useful matters to discuss. Go now, Liliana Vess."

Her choices always led her here. Another betrayal. Another disappointment. Another trap. It was the comfort she found in the dead. They could not be betrayed. They could not be disappointed. They could not look at her with hurt and anger in their eyes.

She looked at Chandra, wondering if she would have to strike her down to survive. The air around her was growing very hot. *I don't want to kill you, Chandra.*

So leave, whispered the Raven Man.

It was one of the few times she agreed with that damned voice. She surrounded herself in a glowing nimbus of dark energy and vanished into the void, her tears finally free to fall in the empty spaces between worlds.



Liliana's Defeat | Art by Kieran Yanner

Chandra

She wanted this day, this awful, horrendous day, to be over. Nothing had gone the way they planned.

She had thought Gideon's plan was brilliant, free of the useless details that always ended up changing anyway. It was a short, simple plan that played to their strengths. Perfect.

Even if it wasn't perfect, it gave her free reign to burn something. She needed to burn something to deal with all the horror and bloodshed she had seen today. She couldn't burn away grief. She couldn't burn away terror. She couldn't burn away heartbreak.

So she resolved to burn away Bolas instead.

But it wasn't working. Yes, he was a dragon, and she knew that, but she thought there was a decent chance she could still hurt him. It wasn't like he was literally made of fire. She needed to try harder.

Nicol Bolas looked down at the planeswalkers and smiled. "And then there were three. I didn't want to annoy your dear departed necromancer, but between us, I admit I know a fair bit of necromancy. Do you have an opening in your Gatewatch? Is there some type of application process?"

"Shut up!" Chandra screamed. She hated people who talked and talked just to show how clever they were. She hated traitorous necromancers who pretended they were your friend. Most of all she hated losing—hated, hated, *hated* it.

Her fire was blinding white, coruscating rivers of flame that lashed the dragon. Bolas's eyes narrowed, and he was forced backward for the first time in the fight, letting Gideon drop to the ground as the dragon retreated.

I hurt him! I did it! It was the only exhilaration she had felt all day. "Gideon! Nissa! We can do this!" Gideon was already up and making his way over toward her. Nissa was strangely silent. Chandra didn't know what Nissa was up to, but she trusted her to come up with something.

"Enough, foolish child." The dragon lofted into the air, out of reach of her strongest fire blasts, but that didn't stop her from continuing to launch them. It felt good to be doing something.

"Chandra Nalaar. You had so many useful characteristics. Powerful. Emotionally unstable. Easy to manipulate. Refreshingly predictable unpredictability. I really wanted to make this work." Bolas's voice boomed through the empty air. *I am not easy to manipulate*, she thought, her anger revving up. Her flames lit up the night sky.

"But fire, against a dragon? A *dragon*. I have standards." Bolas ascended even higher, his wings flexing wide.

He finished his climb and dove down back toward Chandra, his wings now hugging his massive body. *Bring it*, she thought. This is what she wanted, the opportunity to let it all go, let everything burn. The fire poured out of her, free and unreserved.

If this was the way she would die, then she would take the bastard with her.

The earth rose around her.

A large spur of rock and soil and root thrust up from the ground seeking to impale the oncoming dragon. Bolas swerved at the last moment, but more spurs launched, deadly spears aiming to kill. He avoided them but circled around wide.

"Yeah! Go Nissa!" She glanced over at Nissa on the far side of the ruined plaza, and saw her friend completely outlined in a green aura, as she wielded the earth against the dragon. She knew Nissa would come up with something great. Chandra was now protected, cradled between several spurs of thick rock, able to launch her fire at will. "We can do this . . ."

Bolas's tail crashed through the rocky spurs, shattering them as though they were thin glass. Propelled by the dragon's tail, a large wave of rock and dirt rushed toward Chandra. She reflexively cast a huge fire blast to repel the oncoming assault, but the wave still hit her, knocking her into one of the far spurs of rock.

Pain coursed through her body. Several of her ribs were broken. She groggily struggled to stand as she saw the sinuous form of Nicol Bolas weaving through the broken spurs, his agility mindboggling for someone that large. He swooped in and grabbed her in a huge claw.

She tried to summon more fire, but she was in so much pain. Nicol Bolas squeezed his claw, and she felt another rib snap. She screamed in agony.

Nicol Bolas smiled. "Yes, Chandra. Let me show you what a dragon can do."

An enormous earth elemental rose behind Nicol Bolas, swinging a massive fist into the dragon's jaw. Bolas grunted and turned to face the elemental, dropping Chandra to the ground.

Wow, that's a lot of pain. She struggled to get up. She needed to help Nissa. Her head swam, and she stumbled once more. The ground trembled as the elemental and the dragon fought, and in the distance Chandra could see more titanic earthen shapes rising to join the battle.

Chandra smiled despite her agony. Maybe they could actually do this . . .

“Fine. I was being overly modest. I’m not *just* a dragon.” Nicol Bolas uttered a single word that left Chandra’s ears as soon as she heard it, and black tendrils rose from the ground, entwining themselves around Nissa’s chest and throat, strangling her as she thrashed violently in their grip.

No, no, no, I have to . . . Chandra took a step toward Nissa, and screamed in pain. She could barely move.

Nissa looked at her and shouted. “Go! Leave!” The tendrils attacked ceaselessly, and even as Nissa shredded them with magic more rose to take their place.

“No . . .” Chandra coughed, and there was blood in that cough, red drops that sprayed onto the broken rubble below. She tried to steady herself, resisting the urge to vomit. *Where is Gideon?* She swiveled around to look for him and realized she was seconds away from passing out.

Nissa yelled at her again. “Go! I will be fine! You’ll die! Go!”

Chandra couldn’t find Gideon. She couldn’t save Nissa. She couldn’t beat the dragon. She couldn’t even stay conscious.

If I stay here, I will die. She didn’t want to die. She planeswalked away in a fiery blaze, the only trace left of her presence the blood that stained the broken rocks as it, too, evaporated under the fiery heat.



Chandra’s Defeat | Art by Kieran Yanner

Nissa

Nissa felt relief as Chandra departed the world. She could not hope to save herself and Gideon while also protecting a grievously injured Chandra. She wasn’t sure she could save herself and Gideon even still.

This battle was not going well. Nissa was barely holding her own against Bolas’s spell, while her elementals lay dormant, no longer fueled by her will as she fought to stay alive.

Early in the battle, after it became obvious any shallow summonings would have no effect on the dragon, she had sought a deeper communion with the earth. It was like fighting through a thick sludge. Somehow the dragon's presence had intensified the land's resistance to Nissa's touch.

But she had finally broken through, finally wrested enough control to move the earth to her will, only for Bolas to have crippled her with a word. She had thought her destiny to be different on this world, had thought her time in Kefnet's temple opened up possibilities previously unimagined . . . but no. Kefnet and the other gods lay dead in the streets, their threads cut short, their uses unexplored.

And this battle, this confrontation against the evil that was Nicol Bolas . . . The Gatewatch had been exposed.

Nissa had never questioned the purpose of the Gatewatch before. There was always an immediate need, wrongs to be righted, evil to be overcome. And it had worked. For so long it had worked. Until now. Until a dragon of immense power and intellect had shown the errors of coming in unprepared and underpowered.

Perhaps there was a better way.

Such musings occupied her as she fought to regain control of the land. If she were to have any chance in this fight, it would be through the earth.

Nicol Bolas's thoughts penetrated her brain, rank and oily. *This land is not yours, elf. It is mine. You may not touch it.* Dark necrotic energy burst through the leylines she had struggled to control. The corruption lashed through her, shriveling flesh and tissue. She cried out in agony.

She realized the truth now. She never had a chance. The land had submitted to Bolas long ago, had acknowledged its master. She had to be away, *away*, but the tendrils of corruption held her in place.

The dragon approached slowly, his smile wide. "The time of pretend is over. You are blessed to witness the beginning of the beginning, Nissa Revane. It is a prize few mortals can claim."

Something blasted into the dragon's side, low and hard, knocking him off balance. It was Gideon, but Nissa had no time to think of how to help him as her very breath was stolen by the constricting tendrils. She used Gideon's interruption to flee from this dead husk of a world.



Nissa's Defeat | Art by Kieran Yanner

Gideon

Rage consumed him. Only once before in his life had Gideon felt so helpless. He had resolved never again to watch his friends die as he had when Erebos had killed all he held dear. This entire battle had been a nightmare from the beginning as Bolas had kept him out of the fight. Gideon could only watch in impotent frustration as Bolas dispatched of Jace and then convinced Liliana to abandon them without a fight.

He saw Chandra and Nissa both narrowly avoid death, and he was glad they had escaped. He could not fathom dealing with the loss of his friends again, especially knowing it would be his fault.

He scrambled up Bolas's legs, seeking desperately to ram his sural through the dragon's throat. Bolas grabbed him in a large claw and thrust him back toward the ground. All of Gideon's invulnerability had proven little worth against an opponent with the size and strength and mass of the dragon. He struggled and shook against Bolas's talons, but could not escape.

"You will not win. We will beat you." He spat the words in defiance, but the words sounded empty even to him. He needed to keep fighting.

"Will not win? Will not win?" Bolas's laughed rumbled through the plaza. "Gideon Jura, you are very bad at analyzing reality. I have fought against thousands of generals, thousands of tacticians and strategists and battle masterminds. You might be the worst. Let me help you. Ignoring obvious reality is a fatal flaw in our line of work. By all means, I understand the importance of . . . aspirations, but being able to accurately assess the facts in front of you is an essential skill in the trade."

Gideon was aware that the dragon sought to inflame him further, throw him off balance, but Gideon knew that goal was already accomplished. He had stopped thinking logically a long time ago. *And that is why I lost.*

"You partner with an illusionist, but you are the true illusionist. You regard yourself as invulnerable, yes? A conjurer's trick, Gideon. This is how vulnerable you are."

One of Bolas's talons began to glow as it pressed into the invulnerable shield protecting Gideon. The talon pushed, and pushed, and the shield parted like melted butter, the talon's sharp point puncturing shield and armor and flesh alike. Gideon grimaced in shock and pain, but did not scream.

"I could kill you, Gideon, anytime I want. But I suspect you would not mind dying, the way you play so carelessly with your life. And the lives of others." Gideon thrashed his head back and forth, desperate to escape.

"No, far better for you to live today. To know how pathetic you were, how useless you were. Even better, this is how little I care. I give you the choice. Stay and die, or leave and live. I am content either way." The dragon's smile gaped like a fresh wound.

Gideon was shocked to realize that a part of him yearned to stay. To no more feel the guilt of losing Drasus, Olexo, all his Irregulars. All the people he had seen die on Zendikar. He didn't want any more death on his hands. He could just . . . let go.

Distressing images swarmed through his head. Drasus staring at him, spitting the word, "Coward!" Erebos looming over him, the laughter of the God of Death rattling in his head, "Yes, coward, come to me!" Chandra screaming at him, "Traitor!"

He could stay and die . . . or he could leave and live. And learn, and fight. Bolas did not think Gideon's choice mattered. In the end, it was the dragon's indifference that settled his choice. He would prove the dragon wrong.

He willed his body through the Blind Eternities, the hole the dragon left in his shoulder only the most visible of his wounds.



Gideon's Defeat | Art by Kieran Yanner

The plaza was silent and still, lit only by the fires still burning from Chandra's rampages. A few minutes later than desired, Tezzeret planeswalked in.

"You're late," Nicol Bolas said. "Did you doubt?"

Tezzeret had served him long enough to know the right answer.

“No, master, I did not doubt. I was . . . delayed. You defeated them as quickly as you predicted.” He glanced around the plaza, looking for bodies of planeswalkers that weren’t there. “I can seek to find where—”

“No. It does not matter. This was better than blood.”

Tezzeret looked at him quizzically, but knew he would offer no more explanation.

“Master, I should update you on . . .”

“Later. Go and tell Ral Zarek to come to me. His progress is too slow.” Tezzeret hated being used as an errand runner, which was part of why Bolas enjoyed doing it so much. An unbalanced Tezzeret was an effective Tezzeret. Every time he found satisfaction he quickly became useless. “Go. Now.”

Tezzeret bowed his head and disappeared. In the quiet of the night, the first true night on Amonkhet in years, Bolas surveyed the bodies and the destruction and the quiet. He had wrought well in his creation sixty years ago. He had wrought well today. The planar bridge was his. The army was ready. The Gatewatch was loose in the Multiverse.

He roared into the night, letting loose a burst of flame from deep in his chest. Much of what Bolas did was performance for an audience, a critical part of his tactics in any engagement. But this roar was for himself. No more shadows. No more skulking. No more hiding.

Nicol Bolas, elder dragon, genius, archmage, planeswalker, was finally taking his first steps, visibly and openly.

Let all tremble now. They will certainly bow later. He lofted into the night sky to survey more of the devastation he had wrought. He was, for this moment, content.