

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 17

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There were a lot of bars, taverns, and pubs in the streets around Nivix. Chemists, workers, and scorchbringers all liked to get drunk as much as the next people, possibly more, given the hazardous nature of their jobs. There were high-class establishments where project leaders could exchange information over a bottle of wine or three, and raucous winesinks where it was a poor night that didn't end with someone exiting through the window. Viashino pubs echoed to drunken lizard-song until the small hours, accompanied by the mournful melody of their traditional flutes. Even vedalken could occasionally be tempted to a glass or two of something, to better perfect their emotional state.

The tavern Ral was headed to was a different sort of place from any of those. It was not the site of anyone's celebrations, nor was there ever any kind of music. It was mostly underground, a staircase descending beneath a crumbling apartment block to a large, dark space, broken up by heavy support beams and subdivided into a hundred nooks and crannies.

It had a dark reputation, but not one that revolved around fights or vice. This was where you went when everything had gone wrong, when your project had collapsed or your rivals had triumphed or the wrong thing had exploded one time too many. The patrons were chemists with that mad gleam in their eye, engineers with flyaway hair who doodled compulsively on napkins, robed figures bent over mugs of beer muttering about how they were going to show them all. Schemes hatched in the booths and back rooms usually ended in flaming debris raining down on the city, and so, appropriately, the sign outside the tavern proclaimed that it was called The Smoking Wreckage.

Ral had spent a lot of time here, in the days before he'd gotten involved with Tomik. He liked the atmosphere.

Tonight, however, he was here because a note delivered to his office by a courier-elemental had summoned him. He wore his accumulator and gauntlets under a hooded robe, and surveyed the clientele as he came down the stairs. There were more people in than usual, which made sense. The resonator project, his grand scheme to modify the Guildpact against the will of Azor himself, was nearly completed, and most of the staff at Nivix had the night off.

There was no bar at The Smoking Wreckage, and no servers. Drinks were brought by tiny constructs, little platters with articulated legs. Their constant scuttling gave the place a writhing quality, as though it were alive and shuddering. It also meant there was no one to overhear, which was what the patrons demanded.

The note had directed him to a table at the back. Ral made his way over cautiously and found a booth shrouded by a heavy black curtain. Pulling it aside a fraction, he gave a sigh of relief, then slipped through it and sat.

"Lavinia," he muttered. "You might have said it was you."

"And risk my note being intercepted? A good way to get ambushed." Lavinia leaned across the table and twitched the curtain closed. "You're a hard man to meet these days, Ral. Don't spend much time alone."

"I've been busy," Ral growled. "I'm still busy. Saving the city and all that. After the disaster at the guild summit, someone has to."

"I know." Lavinia lowered her head, and there was genuine pain in her expression. "I failed."

Ral shook his head. "You told us to be careful about Vraska. I let my feelings blind me."

"A great many mistakes were made." Lavinia put her hands on the table. "But, thanks to you, it's not over yet. And so I still have work to do."

Lavinia, Ral noticed, was not looking her best. Her hair was snarled and greasy, as though she hadn't washed for days, and her skin was caked with soot. Her clothes, carefully nondescript, were rumpled and stained, and there were dark circles under her eyes.

"How long has it been since you slept?" Ral said.

"Does it matter?" Lavinia said. "Bolas is *coming*. We're out of time."

Ral stiffened. "When?"

"Tonight. I think." She rubbed her face. "I've broken some of his agents' codes. I'm on the trail of their leader, but I think he's made me. That's why I needed to see you."

Tonight. Ral's mind whirled. *Close, close.* The resonators were finished, the alignments completed. There were more checks, last-minute adjustments—

"We can make it," he said. "I'll have my people cut some corners, if they have to, but we'll get it done. I'll tell Niv-Mizzet we have to power up the machine at once."

"Good." Lavinia slumped back in her seat. "That's good. At least we have a chance."

"Come back with me," Ral said. "You were there at the beginning of this whole project. You should be there at the end."

She shook her head. "Can't. I've almost got him."

"The agent?"

Lavinia nodded. "I'll take him tonight. One less threat. The last thing we need once Bolas turns up is a dagger in the back."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Not yet. But I will."

"I have . . . a suspicion." *Tezzeret.* Ral wasn't certain he was still on Ravnica, but it seemed logical that he would be coordinating Bolas's spies. "Be careful. If you're dealing with who I think you are, he's very dangerous."

"Believe me, I know," Lavinia said. "I've been following him long enough that I'm familiar with his methods."

"Do you need backup?"

"It would only tip him off." She got to her feet. "You do your job, Ral, and let me do mine. I will not fail again."

Ral gave a slow nod. "Good luck, then. If we survive, I owe you a drink."

"Good luck." Lavinia gave him the ghost of a smile. "If we survive, I'll take you up on that."

Ral strode through the gates of Nivix, power crackling around him. Arcs of lightning briefly connected him to the iron doorframe, worms of crackling white light crawling across the brackets of the torches as he passed. His long coat billowed out behind him, and his hood had fallen back, revealing his wild frizz of hair with its single white streak.

"Gullifen! Noz! Fredon!" he bellowed. "Message to all sections! We're throwing the switch *tonight*. Bring all resonators online as soon as possible. I want status reports across the board."

"Tonight, boss?" said Gullifen. She was a goblin and one of the projects primary engineers, responsible for the parts of it constructed within Nivix itself. She hurried along beside Ral, taking two short strides for each of his long ones to keep up. "We're not ready!"

"We're ready," Ral said. "Or we'll *get* ready. We don't have a choice."

"But the calibration tests—"

"Listen," Ral said, rounding on her. A small horde of goblins, humans, and vedalken who had gathered behind him as he walked abruptly pulled up short. Ral straightened up, feeling the weight of all those pairs of eyes, and cleared his throat. "If we don't activate the machine tonight, then a dragon so old he's practically a god is going to come to Ravnica and make damn sure we don't get a chance to turn it on tomorrow. You understand? So if there's no time for calibration testing, tell your people to make certain they get it right the *first* time."

Gullifen swallowed hard and saluted. "Yes, boss!"

The crowd blew apart like a dandelion puff, workers and chemisters running in every direction. Some were headed for the bowels of Nivix, where the vast mizzium coils that would power the central node were housed. Others hurried off to subsidiary systems, or went to send messages to the other stations. They'd planned this moment, practiced for it, and Ral felt a moment of pride that everyone knew their place.

"Upstairs," Ral said to Gullifen. "We'll start testing the other nodes when they come online. Do as much as we can."

"Yes, boss," the goblin said.

Ral took the steps three at a time, leaving Gullifen to follow as best she could, and ascended to the tenth floor. Here, a substantial section of the labs and offices that filled Nivix had been torn out, opening up a vast space for the machine's control chamber. Eight stations, each a metal workshop covered in glowing crystals, wavering dials, and glowing mizzium coils, were arranged in a semi-circle around a central dais and panel. Ral mounted the steps and looked out across the room, where chemisters were scurrying to and fro, taking up their positions.

"Power coming online!" a tech shouted. "Operating at ninety-seven percent."

"Node number 1 ready to activate!" another said.

That was the center of the network, here in Nivix itself, the only site Ral could implicitly trust. He looked down at his own control panel, where there were eight small metal switches, and above them a single large double-pronged knife switch, painted red and bolted in place. He reached for the first of the smaller controls and flicked it up.

"Bringing up number 1," he said. "Give me status."

"Node number 1 coming online!" an operator sang out. "Aligning with the grid."

"Looking good," another added. "No interference so far."

High atop Nivix, Ral knew, the resonator would be unfolding itself, mizzium coils spinning in their chambers, crystal projectors shifting to line up with the complicated strands of the Guildpact spell. It looked a bit like a spider doing some kind of elaborate stretching exercise with multiple limbs. In the basement, the generators would be roaring, power surging through arm-thick cables strung along the outside of the building.

Gullifen stumbled into the room, panting, and headed to her own station. A moment later, she called, "Number 2, number 5, number 7 all reporting powered and ready!"

"Get on the others," Ral shouted back. "Bringing up number 2."

He flicked another switch, and a second section of the control room came to life, dials twisting wildly and crystals throbbing. For a moment, Ral held his breath.

At the front of the room, in front of the banks of controls, was a table with a map of the Tenth District. The nodes were marked on it by small colored lights, all dim except for the bright white glow that represented Nivix. As Ral watched, a second light grew and brightened, and then an arcing bridge snapped into being between them, energy crackling and strobing.

"Number 2 online!" a tech shouted. "Aligned and receiving. Interference less than zero point three!"

"Coolant pressure rising!" one of the vedalken said, uncharacteristically alarmed. "The outflow pumps are backed up."

"I knew that was going to be trouble," Gullifen said. "If we close down, we can get someone to—"

"Vent it," Ral snapped. "Plenty of water in the tanks."

"Venting!" A moment later, there was an unearthly howl, audible even ten stories up, as steam boiled out of a dozen spots in the streets around the building. The plumes rose higher and higher, surrounding Nivix in a white cloud, lit from within by spitting, sparking energy in fantastic colors.

Node number 2 was in Azorius territory, near New Prahv. A single line of brilliant light connected it to the resonator on top of the Izzet tower. Deep in his mind, Ral felt the Guildpact shifting, titanic magical energies realigning in response to the pressure of the machine. Every mage in Ravnica would feel it, though only a handful would know what it portended. *Tonight we change the world.*

"Bringing up number 5 and number 7," Ral said, flicking switches. "Check power consumption and get me status on the rest."

"Power's high, but holding," one of the goblins said. "As long as the couplings hold, the generators will make it."

"Number 3 and number 4 report ready!" Gullifen said. "Checking number 6 and number 8."

Ral frowned. Number 8 was the Undercity node, in Golgari territory. If something was going to wrong, it would be there, where they'd had the least time to prepare. *If Vraska tries to attack now . . .*

Ral. Niv-Mizzet's voice echoed in Ral's mind, though the dragon was nowhere to be seen.

Guildmaster, Ral thought back. *Apologies for the late notice. I received word that Bolas plans his incursion tonight.*

You have acted correctly, the Firemind said. *I am in position on the Aerie. When the machine amends the Guildpact, I will be ready.*

We're nearly there, Ral promised.

Something went *bang*.

Things exploded all the time at Nivix, but this was a big one, even by Izzet standards. The room shook. Ral looked at the dials and saw half of them dropping and the other half rising toward the red.

"Conduit blew!" a tech shouted. "Power's falling. We can't keep the node up!"

"Reroute power," Ral snapped.

"The rest of the conduits won't take it! If we try, we'll lose the whole array."

"Blow every last one of them before we lose that node," Ral snarled. "We only get one chance at this, understand?"

"Wait!" Gullifen said. "I can handle this. The break's down on the second floor, we can send power through the laboratory systems."

"Do it," Ral said. "And hurry. I'm bringing up the rest of the nodes."

"All stations report ready!" Gullifen said, and dashed out of the room, a couple of other goblins at her heels.

Ral ran a hand across the row of switches, flipping them all on one after another. Down below, every crystal was glowing. The techs shouted to one another, hardly looking back at him now.

"Number 8 online!"

"Number 6 coming up!"

"Watch that resonance—"

"Interference rising to zero point nine!"

On the map, glowing lines reached out from Nivix, the spider on the roof spreading burning legs wide across the city. Ral watched them grow brighter with half his attention, while the rest was on the dials indicating power in the central node, which was still dropping.

"Get ready to reroute," he told the tech. "If Gullifen doesn't make it—"

"Blown conduit coming back up!" another tech said. "She's bridged it in above the breach."

"Make sure it holds this time," Ral said.

"Distributing."

There was a long moment—not silence, since the room was full of buzzes, clatters, crackles, and the hiss of steam—but a collective intake of breath. On the map, seven strobing lines connected Nivix to the other resonators. In Ral's mind, the Guildpact groaned, the lines of forces that comprised it shoved to their breaking points by the titanic energies unleashed.

"That's it," someone said. "Network fully activated. All links up and holding."

“Interference falling to point six.”

“All stations report holding steady!”

Guildmaster , Ral said in his mind. *We are ready.*

As am I , the Firemind thought back. *Do it.*

Ral reached for the big switch.

Lavinia pounded down the narrow alley, her worn boots splashing through noisome puddles.

Overhead, lights shifted and glowed in the sky. Nivix, looming against the horizon, was surrounded by a boiling cloud of steam. Arcs of energy, like titanic lightning bolts stretching over miles, flickered between it and the sites in the rest of the Tenth District. Thunder boomed and rolled continuously, under a blanket of thick, dark cloud.

The ordinary citizens of Ravnica, the unguilded and the rank-and-file of every guild, were in for a terrifying night, no matter what happened. There had been no way to warn them about what was going to happen, not without tipping their hand to Bolas’s agents.

But that ends tonight. Lavinia’s hand brushed the hilt of her sword. *No more sneaking around.*

Ahead of her, the robed figure turned left, just as she’d expected. He was heading for a certain disused stable, a stone building he used for his meetings. Lavinia had finally broken enough of his codes to figure out for certain where he was going to be, and the stable was now packed with Azorius arresters. More troops were arrayed in the surrounding streets, to keep Bolas’s agent from escaping. *We need to know what he knows.* She glanced overhead and caught one of Dovin Baan’s thopters looking down at her, outlined against the shifting lightshow above.

She made the turn, carefully inching around the corner of a brick building. Bolas’s agent was striding confidently ahead, not bothering to check if he was being followed. When he reached the door at the end of the alley, he reached out for it, and the twisting light gleamed on bulbous metal. Lavinia waited until he’d gone inside, then followed at a run.

She yanked the door open herself, shielding her eyes from the expected glow of dozens of lanterns. Instead the stable was dark. It was a long, empty space, stalls long ago broken down for firewood, the only sign of its old purpose a lingering smell of dung. Her quarry stood alone in the center of it, his back to her, arms folded. Of the backup the guild had promised her, there was no sign at all.

Something is very wrong. But it was too late to back off now. She loosened her sword in its scabbard. *The thopters were there, at least. They know what’s going on.*

“You’re quite good at this,” Bolas’s agent said. He turned around, pushing back his hood. He was a tall, weathered man with dark dreadlocks. “Following people, I mean.”

“Stay where you are.”

“Am I under arrest?” He gave a humorless smile. “Lavinia, *formerly* of the Azorius. I don’t believe you have the authority to arrest anyone anymore.”

“The authorities will be along in a moment,” Lavinia said grimly. “In the meantime, I have some questions for you.”

“Very bold.” He raised his right hand. His fingers were steel talons, stretching from a twisted metal claw. “I suppose you’ve earned some answers.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Tezzeret. And, as you have guessed, I work for Nicol Bolas.”

“Who are your agents in the guilds?” Lavinia took a step forward. “How much do you know about what’s happening tonight? How did you suborn Glademaster Garo of Selesnya?”

“So *many* questions.” Tezzeret’s smile faded. “Perhaps a demonstration is in order.”

He waved his clawed hand, and in the shadowy corners of the stables, lights blinked on. Things began to stir, spindly, multi-armed constructs with spidery legs and long, bladed arms. Four of them straightened up, each taller than a man, and advanced to box Lavinia in.

Beside Tezzeret, something flickered, a vague shape in the air like nearly solid mist. Lavinia couldn’t make out much, but there was the suggestion of a face, and the curving arc of horns.

“Glademaster Garo, as you might imagine, was strong-willed,” Tezzeret said. “When it comes to someone of weak mind, or in dire circumstances, my . . . associate can take direct action. In other cases, I provide a little assistance.”

He twitched the fingers of his metal hand, and the constructs closed in. Lavinia tensed, drew her sword, and spun, slamming against one of the pair behind her. *If I can get back to the door, make him chase me, then the thopters will pick us up.* Where her backup had gone, she had no idea, but they had to be somewhere nearby.

The construct blocked her strike with two scythe-like arms, its spindly body sliding backward along the stable floor with the force of her blow. Lavinia spun away from it, wickedly fast, and aimed a cut at another of the machines, hitting one of its knee joints. Metal buckled, and the construct stumbled drunkenly. It remained in her way, though, its razor-arms swinging wildly, and she had to back off.

The two behind her took that opportunity to pounce. Pain lanced through her as a thin-bladed scythe struck her sword arm, fixing it in place like an insect pinned in a collector’s box. Another blade pinned her leg, and she dropped to one knee, gritting her teeth to keep from screaming. The construct twisted its blade, and the pain ratcheted upward. Her sword clattered to the floor.

“You . . . won’t get away,” Lavinia managed, staring up at Tezzeret. “The Azorius will find you.”

“Oh, my dear,” he said. “How little you understand.” He glanced sideways, at the hovering apparition. “I could kill you, but it seems like a waste. I’ve always believed in being efficient. So hold still.”

He reached into a pouch and produced a metal half-collar, angular and ugly with spiky protrusions. Lavinia could feel power running off it in waves, vicious and bloody, and she tried to scramble away, only to be pinned in place by the constructs with a fresh wave of pain. Tezzeret grabbed her chin with his metal hand, grip inhumanly strong, and gently pressed the thing around her throat.

“For the strong-willed, as I said, the process requires my assistance.” Tezzeret stepped back, and the shimmering, intangible shape moved in. “And, I’m afraid, a great deal of pain.”

Lavinia screamed.

linebreak The bolt clicked back with a grim finality. Ral put his hand on the switch and paused a moment, feeling the power of the great machine humming all around him.

“Activating primary resonance,” he said.

Electricity crackled across him, crawling along the switch as he pulled it down. It closed with a satisfying *clunk*, and all at once the omnipresent whine of machinery rose to a new pitch. With his magical senses, Ral felt the Guildpact straining, Azor's ancient strictures pushing back against this intrusion, but the energy the machine harnessed was titanic, and the magic began to give. Slowly at first, but bit by bit—

Down among the technicians, something exploded with an almighty *bang*. Ral heard bits of metal and crystal *ping* off the walls, and felt something tug at his cheek. Another blast followed, and another. The lights in the chamber went out, and screams rose in darkness illuminated only by the glow of spreading fires and instrument displays.

"Status!" Ral shouted, over the chorus of dismay. "What in the hells is going on?"

A babble of voices answered.

"Lost primary power—surge blew the board—

"No reports coming in—"

"Bleeding won't stop, someone—"

Ral. Niv-Mizzet's voice. *It has gone wrong. I know*, Ral thought back. *I'll fix it.* "Gullifen!" he snapped. "Get me something on the other sites. Send runners if you have to. Tox, go down to the generators, check the output. We'll bypass the main board—"

"I need *light*!" The shout was hoarse, desperate.

Ral raised his hands, and electricity arced from his fingers to the lamps hanging over head, turning them into writhing, crackling globes of lightning. By this shifting radiance, he could see that one end of the eight-part instrument panel was a shambles. Something—several somethings—had exploded in the second section, overturning tables and shattering gear in the adjacent nodes.

Damn, damn, damn. Just getting cleaned up would take time. *If it damaged the external nodes . . .* "Gullifen!" Ral shouted.

"She's here, sir," a younger goblin said.

Something in his tone made Ral fall silent. Gullifen lay on the floor of her control enclosure, at the center of a spreading pool of blood. Two other goblins sat beside her, one pressing a cloth to her throat, where a shard of flying metal had laid her throat open. The task was clearly hopeless—the cloth was already soaked through with crimson, and more blood pumped through it with every heartbeat.

So much blood, Ral thought, unable to tear his eyes away. *Who would have thought such a small body would hold so much?* Gullifen blinked, gaped like a landed fish, and died with a shudder. The two goblins beside her sat back, and Ral became aware the rest of the room was watching. Several of the other techs had injuries, too.

"Someone tell me what happened," Ral grated, tearing his eyes from the dead goblin. "Now."

"We got a surge through the connection to node number 2," a vedalken said. "I'm certain of it. The link spiked, and that blew the accumulator here."

"It came from their side?" Ral frowned. "That's impossible. The resonators are all controlled from here. Even if the damn thing blew up, the link should have cut out, not gone wild. Check it again—"

Not impossible, Niv's mental voice rumbled. From the startled expressions on the faces of the techs, Ral guessed that everyone present heard it too. *This is no accidental failure. The second node is in Azorius territory.* The dragon's tone darkened. *Dovin Baan has betrayed us.*