

Rallying the Reluctant

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From set *War of the Spark*

I.

Mister Jace Beleren, the former Living Guildpact, had given the telepathic order: *Retreat. We need a plan. Contact every Planeswalker and guildmaster you can find. Meet us at the Azorius Senate. Now.*

Well, there's now, and there's *now*.

Mistress Kaya was still determined to make it to Orzhova first, and about ten minutes later, with Teyo and I still in tow, she succeeded.

But pretty soon it felt like that was *all* she'd succeed at.

She was immediately greeted by Madame Blaise, her chief servitor. In an attempt to rally the Orzhov to fight Bolas and his Eternals, Mistress Kaya asked Madame Blaise to call a meeting with Syndicate authorities, starting with Matriarch Teysa Karlov, head of the Orzhov's leading oligarch family.

Five minutes later, Matriarch Karlov sent her regrets, claiming she was still confined to her quarters, but having already arranged for (an already frustrated and angry) Mistress Kaya to meet with a trio of big shots, each of whom had, I guess, assumed more power over the church since Kaya had assassinated its former rulers, the Obzedat ghost council. Known collectively as the Triumvirate, these big shots came in one at a time, each accompanied by a small thrull on a leash that did nothing—as far as I could tell—except make their masters look more important.

Pontiff Armin Morov was a human, the patriarch of the Morov oligarchs. He was very old with graying skin and absolutely no hair, looking very much as if he were already well prepared to join a reformed Obzedat. Tithe-Master Slavomir Zoltan was a dangerously handsome vampire. And Mistress Maladola was an angel, a long-ago defector from the Boros Legion, who now acted as the Orzhov's chief warrior-executioner.

Mistress Kaya also asked Madame Blaise to fetch Mister Tomik Vrona, who was Matriarch Karlov's assistant. But Madame Blaise returned to report that Mister Vrona could not be found and apparently wasn't within the cathedral's walls. I knew, from following Master Zarek and Mistress Kaya around for Hekara, that Tomik was Kaya's friend, and I could see and feel her frustration fade, instantly replaced by worry, given the current conditions of Ravnica's streets.

So, with Mister Vrona absent and Matriarch Karlov abstaining, the six of us—or nine, if you count the thrulls—entered a Grand Cabinet big enough to hold ten times that many folk. And the Triumvirate did not sit close—to Mistress Kaya or each other—forcing everyone to shout everything that was said in order to be heard over their own echoes.

Mistress Kaya tried to explain about the dangers Bolas and the Eternals presented to Ravnica, the guilds, and the Planeswalkers.

Pontiff Morov, amidst an elaborate apology to his new planeswalking guildmaster, didn't see why Planeswalkers should be of any concern to the Orzhov. "Still," he concluded, "I am happy to issue a

church edict condemning the Eternals' harvesting of these 'Planeswalker Sparks'? Is that the correct term? Well, no matter. We'll play with the wording."

Tithe-Master Zoltan couldn't quite justify the expense of joining the battle. "Tithes have been down in these difficult times. And it hasn't helped that *you* keep forgiving debts, guildmaster. Let's allow things to settle, shall we? The economics of the war may look much better after it's over. A rebuilding phase in the city always brings in more revenue."

Mistress Maladola was the only one of the three who seemed even vaguely inclined to help. In any case, she briefly spoke of her itch to join the fight. But Tithe-Master Zoltan shot her a raised-eyebrowed look, and Pontiff Morov shook his jowly head very slightly, and the executioner quickly changed her tune. "If our new guildmaster would lead the charge, I'm sure the church executioners would be pleased to provide her with an honor guard—at least to accompany her to the summit meeting at the Azorius Senate."

"I don't need a token guard. I can take care of myself. You're missing the—"

"Please, guildmaster. We insist. Do we not?"

Tithe-Master Zoltan and Pontiff Morov concurred that they did, with the vampire adding that "appearances, at least, mandate you be accompanied as far as the Senate House."

And no farther. . .

Mistress Kaya glowered so hotly, I thought she might catch fire. "Listen to me," she said, trying to cool her anger. "You don't seem to comprehend the danger this entire world is facing."

The pontiff said, "I imagine if things are that grave, the Living Guildpact will finally show his face and solve things."

"Beleren has shown his face. He's here and fighting alongside the rest of us. He's part of this Gatewatch organization that I gather guards the Multiverse from threats like Bolas. He and another Planeswalker, Gideon Jura, are doing their best to lead the forces opposing Bolas. But as Living Guildpact he's lost his authority, his powers. He can't just fix this for us. It's up to—"

The angel scowled and said, "Without his authority and power, what use is the man?"

"Indeed," said the vampire, "Why would we follow someone who squandered such opportunities?"

Their human companion added, "Perhaps the prudent thing would be to pull back our forces to a defensible position here at the Cathedral Opulent and wait things out. In a few days, the situation may look very different."

"In a few days," Mistress Kaya steamed, "'*The situation*' may look irretrievable."

"Well," the pontiff concluded, "I suppose we'll know soon enough, guildmaster."

We exited the cabinet together, more or less. The Triumvirate was eager to go their several ways but was delayed when the pontiff and tithe-master's thrulls got their leashes all tangled.

While they were sorting that out—with almost comic difficulty—I heard a loud stomping sound from behind me. Turning, I saw an armored giant—twelve feet tall with a helm that revealed no features whatsoever—approach Mistress Kaya.

"Guildmaster," he rumbled through his helm, "I am Bilagru, chief enforcer for the Church Militant. I was told you might require my services."



Tithebearer Giant | Art by: Wisnu Tan

Mistress Maladola said, “Well, guildmaster, perhaps we can build your Honor Guard around this great pillar.”

Both Mistress Kaya and the giant ignored her. She said, “You’re an enforcer, charged with collecting Syndicate debts?”

“Precisely, guildmaster.”

“Would you not agree then, that the guild’s debts will be considerably more difficult to collect if the dragon’s Eternals murder every debtor on Ravnica along with every debtor’s offspring—not to mention every member of the Syndicate?”

Mister Bilagru nodded down at her and grumbled, “Ghosts and spirits have run things inside the Orzhova for so long, everyone forgets that most of the collecting’s done by the living. I can take my enforcers—and what I can raise of the Syndicate’s military might—out into the streets to ‘protect’ Orzhov investments.”

“That, Chief Enforcer, would be much appreciated by your guildmaster.”

“I live to serve.”

Pontiff Morov started to object, but Mistress Kaya wheeled on him quickly: “There is, of course, another alternative. I can render all debt collection moot, by forgiving *every single debt* this instant.”

The pontiff, looking slightly panicked, immediately (and literally) backed off—nearly tripping over his tangled thrull in the process. “No, guildmaster. Nothing that extreme will be necessary.”

“Much that is extreme will be necessary before this day is out,” she countered, as—thrulls finally untangled—the Triumvirate took their leave.

Mistress Kaya turned to Teyo and me. “Time to go.”

II.

I felt very important—and also pretty lonely—as I entered the Senate House at Mistress Kaya and Teyo’s side. I longed to find Hekara among the crowd, to find it had all been a big mistake and she was still alive.

But not only was she not there, *no one* from the Cult of Rakdos had shown up for the summit. We were told that Lord Rakdos blamed Master Zarek, Mistress Kaya, Miss Lavinia, and Mistress Vraska (who wasn’t there, either) for the death of Emissary Hekara and had declined to send any representative at all in protest.

Likewise, with Mistress Vraska gone, there was no one from the Golgari Swarm. And word was spreading through the chamber that Dumb Domri was dead. Turns out he was a Planeswalker and got his Spark harvested by an Eternal. (Akamal and the twins had gone with him. I wondered if they were dead, too.) Anyway, nobody was here from the Gruul Clans, either. Since both Golgari and Gruul had been left leaderless, with no one—or maybe too many—stepping up to take charge, I suppose they couldn’t summon up anyone for the summit.

House Dimir also appeared to be a no show, and the Selesnya Conclave had retreated behind their borders. Meaning *half* of the ten guilds were providing absolutely no help to the cause.

Look, if Gateless me is the only person even close to being a Gruul, Rakdos, or Selesnyan ambassador, we’re all in trouble. Presentable, I’m not

Things weren’t much better with the other guilds either.

The Azorius Senate guildmaster, the already infamous Dovin Baan, had—like Mistress Vraska—been working with Bolas. He wasn’t attending the summit, even in his own seat of power. Miss Lavinia and a few old-school Azorius *were* here, having formally disavowed Baan and his leadership. But they had no real authority over their guild. The bylaws of the Senate still listed Baan as guildmaster, and the Azorius do love their bylaws.



Dovin, Hand of Control | Art by: Kieran Yanner

And the Orzhov Syndicate? Well, Mistress Kaya got the Honor Guard she hadn’t asked for, and I guess Chief Bilagru had taken his enforcers into the streets to kill Eternals. But otherwise, Matriarch Karlov

and the Triumvirate were barely paying lip service to being on their guildmaster's side. As Master Zarek ruefully commented, the Orzhov were "stingy about paying *anything*, lip service included."

All told, that meant only the Izzet League (led by Master Zarek and Chamberlain Maree), the Boros Legion (led by its guildmaster, Mistress Aurelia), and the Simic Combine (led by Mister Vorel, theoretically with the full support of his guildmaster, Prime Speaker Vannifar) had shown up in force.

I was eavesdropping on Master Zarek—still honoring Hekara's request for no good reason—when he asked Chamberlain Maree, "Fifty percent won't be enough, no matter how we squeeze this, will it?"

She looked up at him grimly. "I'm sorry, guildmaster. But even *ninety* percent won't be enough. We tried to play percentages last time. When Niv-Mizzet was alive, we might have been able to get by with eight of ten guilds. With him dead "

So Master Niv-Mizzet's dead, too

Seemed like there were all sorts of folk I had seen recently—Hekara, Niv-Mizzet, Dumb Domri—who went off and *died* shortly thereafter. I decided to stick as close as possible to Teyo and Mistress Kaya.

Master Zarek said, "With the Firemind dead, the only option is Operation Desperation."

Operation Desperation?

"And for that to succeed," Chamberlain Maree added, "you'll need cooperation from *ten* of ten guilds. There can be no exceptions."

Master Zarek nodded. "Bring me options," was all he said, though he didn't exactly look hopeful that there'd be any.

But the chamberlain nodded curtly and dutifully walked away.

III.

Mister Jura and Mister Beleren were standing in front of the late Mistress Isperia, former guildmaster of the Azorius Senate, current statue decorating the Senate Hall.

I was eavesdropping again—and you don't have to tell me it's a nasty habit, I already know.

But it's also a useful habit. At times, a necessary one

Mister Beleren muttered, "Sphinxes. Bigger troublemakers than dragons.

Mister Jura raised an eyebrow.

Mister Beleren belatedly and begrudgingly corrected himself: "Than all dragons but one."

"Didn't know you had such a problem with sphinxes."

"Alhammarret. Azor. Isperia. Never met a sphinx who wasn't an arrogant, aloof, pain in my—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Isperia did a lot of good on Ravnica. In fact, if Vraska hadn't turned her to stone, we might be in much better—"

"Vraska's vengeance was well earned!" Mister Beleren's voice was a low, quiet whisper—that forced me to inch a little closer to hear—but his passion was obvious. "You don't know her. You don't know her story."

"I suppose I don't," Mister Jura said with some surprise.

It occurred to me then that Mister Beleren was at least a little bit in love with Mistress Vraska. I thought about that and figured they'd make a real cute couple.

Mister Jura put a calming hand on Mister Beleren's shoulder. At first, the latter gentleman looked about ready to knock it off but he took a deep breath and even managed a weak smile.

"We need to get to it," Mister Jura said. "The longer we're sequestered in here, the more damage Bolas and his army can do out there. So take a minute. Compose your thoughts, and let's call this meeting to order."

Mister Beleren nodded and started to walk away—before pausing to say, "You're a good friend, Gideon. I don't know if I've ever told you that."

Mister Jura chuckled. "I'm *quite* sure you haven't. But to be fair, I don't think I've ever said it to you, either. I'm a little bit ashamed you beat me to it old friend."

Mister Beleren smiled again, looking simultaneously boyish and old. He was lean, fit, tan, and apparently in love. But the weight of Bolas's attack clearly weighed on his slightly stooped shoulders, and it revealed the age in his face.

Watching him go, Mister Jura straightened his back and then turned to scan the crowd, which was short on guild representation—but heavy on Planeswalkers, including himself and Mister Beleren, Master Zarek, Mistress Kaya, Teyo, and many, many more—many whose names I hadn't yet caught. One of the Planeswalkers had even brought his dog, who had two tails and the *softest* fur.



Mowu, Loyal Companion | Art by: Kimonas Theodossiou

Mister Dack Fayden, a local psychometrist and thief, whose excellent work in the latter discipline I'd been surreptitiously studying for the last couple years, turned out to be another Planeswalker, kinda explaining how I'd lost track of him on more than one occasion. He was flirting a bit with Miss Rai, complementing her on the style and cut of her dress—while eyeing the gold filigree jewelry she wore all over her person. She appeared both flattered and cautious, which seemed appropriate.

Mister Beleren returned, nodding to Mister Jura, who nodded back. It was time, I suppose. So I scurried back over to Teyo and Mistress Kaya.

Teyo asked, "What were you talking about with them?"

"I listened more than I talked."

He smiled at me. "You? Listened? Really?"

I elbowed him in the ribs. He said, "Ow," but he didn't lose the smile. It's a very nice smile.

Oh, boy. Don't get used to it, Araithia. He's a 'walker, and when this fight's over, he's just gonna 'walk away. . .

Together, we watched Mister Beleren and Mister Jura step to the front of the dais. Mister Beleren enhanced his voice magically to fill the hall: "Let's bring this to order, please. We need a plan."

"And you two strategic geniuses think you can come up with one?" The rumbling voice, dripping with sarcasm, required no enhancement to be heard. It came from a demon-man in the corner, a Planeswalker. Ob Nixilis, they called him, and most everyone was giving him a wide berth—except Mister Pencil-Mustache-Planeswalker, who had earlier made a sincere effort (with insincere motives, maybe) to buddy up with ol' Mister Ugly-Ob.

A low buzz rose up from the crowd. No one seemed to like the demon-man, but it was clear plenty shared his opinion. Mister Beleren's tenure as Living Guildpact had been inconsistent, and his leadership wasn't universally recognized by Ravnicans. Or by Planeswalkers, apparently.

Mister Jura stepped forward and spoke with his own deep loud voice (no enhancement necessary): "There'll be time for everyone to have their say. But standing around muttering to each other isn't getting us anywhere. So how about we stow the snide comments for the time being and *listen*?"

There was another, briefer, collective murmur, but that was followed by an uneasy silence. Mister Beleren took advantage of: "We face a number of problems. Five to be exact. Some of you are aware of all of them, but many have only just arrived and haven't had the opportunity to get your heads around the whole picture. So let me offer some clarity now."

He shot a glance at Master Zarek, who shrugged. So Mister Beleren continued: "One. The Izzet's Beacon is luring more and more unsuspecting Planeswalkers to Ravnica, where they run the risk of becoming more fuel for Bolas's power."

As if on cue, another Planeswalker materialized in the middle of the crowd amid a flash of turquoise light. He was an older man with turquoise eyes and a carefully trimmed white beard. Mister Jura leaned over and whispered something to Mister Beleren, but I was too far away to hear.

Mister Beleren sighed heavily and went on: "We need to disable the Beacon, which is under Izzet and Azorius guard at the aptly named Beacon Tower. Getting there may be difficult, but the real problem is the machine itself, which was built with safeguards to prevent Bolas from shutting it off."

"Brilliant," snorted the planeswalking minotaur I'd seen materialize in the plaza earlier that day. "How you fools love to play right into the dragon's claws."

From across the room, Miss Huatli countered, "As you did by coming here?"

The minotaur snorted again—but said nothing more. I decided I liked Miss Huatli quite a bit.



Huatli, the Sun's Heart | Art by: Lius Lasahido

Mister Beleren jumped back in: “Problem number two. The Immortal Sun. Once the Beacon summons the Planeswalkers to Ravnica, the Sun keeps them trapped here. So, like the Beacon, we need to shut the Sun down. It’s not far from here in one of the New Prahv towers, being guarded by the new Azorius guildmaster, Dovin Baan, who we’ve learned is a pawn of Nicol Bolas.

“Three. The Planar Bridge from Amonkhet allows a seemingly endless army of Eternals to enter Ravnica and slay the Planeswalkers lured by the Beacon and held by the Sun. We have to shut it down, and we can only do that from the Amonkhet side.”

Miss Samut called out: “But how? I’ve tried to planeswalk back to Amonkhet, but the Immortal Sun—”

Mister Beleren held up a hand, saying, “I know. And we can’t wait for problem two to be solved. So we’ll utilize the portal itself to travel to Amonkhet.”

Miss Ballard scoffed, “*While* the Eternals march out of it? That sounds like a great plan for committing suicide.”

Mister Beleren actually smiled at this. “There are steps we could take to make it only a mediocre plan for committing suicide.”

“I’m game,” Miss Samut said.

Mister Beleren thanked her with another smile. But, turning to Mister Jura, his smile quickly faded, and when he spoke again, it was as if he was addressing his next point to Mister Jura alone, as if he half expected him to challenge him on it. “Problem four. Liliana Vess. She’s clearly controlling the Eternals for Bolas.”

Ah. Miss Raven-Hair’s name is Liliana Vess. Good to know.

“We need to make sure she can’t do that anymore. Ever.”

Mister Jura said nothing.

Mister Beleren exhaled in relief, loudly—his magically enhanced vocal chords made every little sound ridiculously audible. “Finally, five. Bolas, himself. Though if we can’t deal with the first four problems, the fifth is pretty damn hopeless.”

Another general murmur pretty much echoed that sense of hopelessness.

Mister Jura stepped forward, “There’s a sixth problem. We have a responsibility to protect ordinary Ravnicans, since none would be in danger if not for Bolas’s hunger for Planeswalker Sparks.”

Mister Beleren put a hand on his shoulder. “That’s right. Six problems.”

“Seven.” It was Master Zarek. “We need to reconstitute the Guildpact by uniting all ten guilds. Without the Guildpact’s combined might, we’ll never truly stand a chance against the dragon.”

“You tried that already,” Mister Vorel shouted, pointing at Mistress Isperia’s remains. “Look at the result. Isperia’s dead, and today you couldn’t even assemble representatives from all ten guilds during Ravnica’s greatest moment of crisis. What in the world makes you think you can reconstitute the Guildpact now?”

Another wave of murmurs threatened to become a roar, but Master Zarek enhanced his own voice with magic. It buzzed and crackled as he spoke over the crowd: “I’m honestly not sure we can. But we must try. The Firemind left behind one final stratagem. It’s a bit desperate—”

“More desperate than his last stratagem?” Mister Vorel asked, incredulously.

“Yes, in fact,” Master Zarek acknowledged. “But it might be our only chance.”

“All right,” Mister Beleren said, before the crowd could splinter into arguing factions. “Seven goals—or six, anyway, if we subtract going after Bolas for the time being. I propose splitting up our collective forces to achieve these goals.”

The murmuring instantly started up again. And the buzz was less than enthusiastic. One Planeswalker, an aven whose name I didn’t know, said, “What if we surrendered? Throw ourselves on the mercy of Bolas.”

Mister Fayden turned to the aven and said, “I don’t think Bolas is the merciful type. You probably didn’t see it, but a Planeswalker named Domri Rade attempted to switch sides and join up with the dragon. He was the first Planeswalker harvested.”

Another Planeswalker, a woman with jet-black hair and glowing green eyes, said, “Then let’s go into hiding. At some point, Bolas himself will want to planeswalk. He’ll have Baan shut off the Immortal Sun, and we’ll *all* be able to escape.”

Mister Vorel, growing angrier by the minute, shouted, “*That’s* your solution? Hide and abandon Ravnica to the Eternals and the dragon? You Planeswalkers are the reason Bolas is here, the reason Ravnica’s in danger.” He turned to the aven. “But I like your idea. The surrender—an enforced surrender, if necessary—of your type would allow Bolas to eat his fill. Once sated, he’ll leave Ravnica alone.

“Bolas is never sated,” a voice said bitterly. It was yet another Planeswalker. A woman carrying a long-bow.

An equally bitter Miss Samut agreed. “That is the truth.”

“Fine,” Mister Vorel said. “But let me make this clear. If you Planeswalkers hide while Ravnica burns, you’ll find little help or succor from its citizens and guilds.”

Suddenly, Mister Jura turned to Mister Beleren and said, “Maybe we *should* surrender.”

Mister Beleren looked quite exasperated. I felt kinda sorry for him, you know?

Miss Samut stepped forward. “Gideon Jura, it is noble of you to wish to make such a sacrifice. But do not forget the fate of Amonkhet.” She turned to face the crowd. “Bolas left my world completely desolated. Even now, a mere handful of survivors struggle to defeat the monsters that Nicol Bolas left behind to slaughter us. Bolas will not leave Ravnica as he found it.”

“Bolas. Is. Never. Sated,” Miss Longbow repeated. “There is literally nothing left of my world, Skalla, thanks to him. The dragon *must* die.”

There were shouts of “AYE!” at this—followed by more shouts that were, you know, less supportive and less polite. It was all falling apart.

Miss Lavinia spoke up: “One thing is certain. If we fight among ourselves, we stand no chance against Bolas.”

Mistress Aurelia shouted, “Hear, hear! The fate of Amonkhet and Skalla must not befall Ravnica.”

I noticed Mister Goldmane reach out a hand to Mister Jura, who took it and stepped down off the dais. Mister Goldmane said, “Remember your Oath. The Oath of the Gatewatch. Surrender is not the answer, my friend. The archer is right, and you know it. One such as Bolas will never be sated, nor will he show mercy. He views such things as weakness, and any attempt at such an appeal would only enhance his appetites.”

Mister Jura took this in and nodded. Then he made his way to the center of the crowd, moving among the Planeswalkers and guilded alike. He spoke, and we all listened. “Now that you all know of our existence, you could be forgiven for believing our ability to traverse worlds is an excuse for a Planeswalker to always run from a fight. But we of the Gatewatch took an Oath to always stay. It was a choice we had the luxury to make, and somehow, we thought that choice made us superior. Now we stand among you with that choice taken from us. Now the choice is whether to fight.”

He unsheathed his black broadsword with a considerable amount of flair. “This is Blackblade. It has already slain one Elder Dragon, and it can destroy Bolas, as well. With it, I hereby vow to take back this world. Who’s with me?”

His speech roused the whole crowd—or nearly all of it. Folks began to gather around him. Mister Goldmane put a hand on his shoulder, and that simple gesture seemed to act as a kind of trigger. From every side, Planeswalkers and Ravnicans reached out their hands to touch Mister Jura or—if farther back, like Teyo, Mistress Kaya, and me—to touch someone touching him, as if to draw strength from the strength of his conviction.

It was kinda great. We all had a real moment there for a second or two.

Well, all of us but Mister Fayden, who snuck up behind Miss Kiora to poach a barehanded touch of her fancy, shiny bident with his psychometry—and wound up looking a bit like he regretted every single life choice he’d ever made.

I was kinda giggling over that when a small Izzet goblin entered from a balcony door, shouting, “Masters, one a’ them God-Eternals approaches, at the head of a small army of those undead creepies! You got about eleven and a half minutes ‘fore they’s here!”

Mister Beleren called out, “Six challenges! Six missions! We need volunteers! Now!”

Mistress Kaya started forward—but Master Zarek intercepted her: “I need your help for mission seven.”

“Sorry,” she said, “I lost count. Which one’s seven?”

“Operation Desperation.”