

Ashes

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From set *War of the Spark*
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I.

So a lot of things had gone well. The Izzet's Beacon, the Immortal Sun, the Planar Bridge, and the flow of Eternals from Amonkhet had all been shut down. Every guild had joined the fight, and Mister Fayden, Mister Karn, Miss Samut, and Mister Sarkhan Vol had even returned from Amonkhet with an impressively large spear, the property of a God named Hazoret, which had already proven useful in battle. Two of the four God-Eternals—plus any number of normal-sized creepies—had been destroyed. And best of all, *Hekara was alive again!* All good stuff, you know?

But it wasn't all sunshine and light, either. In fact, there was no sunshine at all. Bolas's so-called Elderspell had created a vast storm of magic, dropping all of Ravnica into an artificial night punctuated by the stolen Planeswalker Sparks that rocketed like comets toward Bolas and the mystic gem floating between his horns, feeding the dragon and his power. Many Planeswalkers had lost those Sparks and their lives to the Eternal army that still occupied our world. The attempt to kill Miss Raven-Hair, Liliana Vess, had failed, and that necromancer still controlled those Eternals for Bolas. And, of course, the new Living Guildpact—Master Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind—lay catatonic on the ground amid the ruins of the embassy, all his mystic energy expended on the killing of just one of the God-Creepies.

And there was Nicol Bolas, himself. The Elder Dragon still sat upon his throne, as if none of our efforts amounted to anything at all.

Most of us were back at the Azorius Senate House, for our second summit of this one incredibly long, incredibly horrific day.

Mister Jura was once again addressing the crowd of Planeswalkers, guilded Ravnicans, and me: "It was always going to come down to battle. Trying to resurrect Niv-Mizzet was a worthwhile endeavor, but even with his help, it would still have come down to a fight. So, all right, we don't have the Firemind's help. But things are far from hopeless here. We've thinned the Eternal herd. Destroyed half the dragon's God-Eternals. Now we need to finish this by using Blackblade on Bolas."

He spoke with such confidence, such authority, that he was pretty darn reassuring, you know?

"The plan, this time, is simple enough. For the moment, Bolas has pulled back the bulk of his forces to his Citadel. So we'll respond by launching a massive two-pronged attack. On the ground, every guildmember, every Planeswalker—hell, every Ravnican who can hold a weapon—will launch a full-frontal assault. Everything we've got. All at once. Everyone. Unless you can fly or can hitch a ride on something that does. Next, while the ground assault keeps the Eternals busy, Aurelia, me, and the rest of our combined air forces will engage from above. I'll make use of my invulnerability to get in close. Then I'll stab Bolas with Blackblade. And it will all be over." He made it sound really simple, really easy.

Too easy

I heard Mister Vrona ask Mistress Lavinia for a sword.

Master Zarek pulled him aside and said, “You’re not a fighter.”

“We’re all fighters today.”

The Gatewatch, meanwhile, was making a bit of a show over the renewal of their Oaths. Mister Jura began, raising Blackblade high once more and saying: “Never again. Not on any world. This I swear: for Sea Gate, for Zendikar, for Ravnica and all its people, for justice and peace, *I will keep watch* . And after Bolas falls, when any new danger arises to threaten the Multiverse, I will be there with the Gatewatch beside me.”

I thought maybe they’d all have a common Oath, but Mister Beleren was briefer: “Never again. For the sake of the Multiverse, *I will keep watch* .”

Right. Variations on a theme. That keeps it more interesting, at least.

Miss Nalaar stepped forward and spoke: “Every world has its tyrants, following their own desires with no concern for the people they step on. So, I say, never again. If it means folks can live in freedom, *I will keep watch* . With all of you.”

Mister Teferi intoned: “From time out of mind, the strong have plagued the weak. Never again. For the lost and forgotten, *I will keep watch* .”

Then, smiling at the others, Mister Goldmane growled out: “I have seen tyrants whose ambitions knew no limits. Creatures who styled themselves gods or praetors or consuls but thought only of their own desires, not of those they ruled. Whole populations deceived. Civilizations plunged into war. People who were simply trying to live made to suffer. To die. Never again. Until all have found their place, *I will keep watch* .”

Finally, these five turned to look at Miss Revane. She seemed, as usual, reluctant to speak. Then she glanced at Miss Nalaar, who was biting her lip and looking back at her with trepidation.

The elf smiled then. It came and went in an instant, but I caught it. She took a step forward and spoke in a soft clear bell-like voice: “I have seen a world laid waste, the land reduced to dust and ash. Left unchecked, evil will consume everything in its path. Never again. For Zendikar and the life it nurtures, for Ravnica and the life of every plane, *I will keep watch* .”

Miss Nalaar smiled happily. And she wasn’t the only one. The six Oaths were more than a little inspiring.

Mister Jura looked across the crowd and asked, “Anyone else?”

Folks snuck glances at one another or looked at the ground. Miss Ballard smirked a little. Mister Karn crossed his massive silver arms. For a second it looked like Mistress Kaya was about to speak—before losing her nerve. No one stepped forward. No one spoke.

Teyo and I exchanged looks. I thought he’d make a great Gatewatcher, but he didn’t have the confidence to step up, not because he was afraid to fight for folks—but because he didn’t think he was qualified to do that fighting alongside these big-time heroes.

I whispered, “They’d be lucky to have you.”

“I don’t know,” he whispered back. “What about you?”

I laughed. “You can’t protect the Multiverse if you’re stuck on one plane and if your teammates can’t see or hear you, right?”

He nodded reluctantly and said, “Well, if they won’t take you, then I don’t want to join.”

I punched him for that one.

“Ow.”

II.

I spotted Mister Jura and Mister Beleren grabbing Miss Nalaar by the arm and guiding her away from the crowd. Curious, I followed them behind the stony corpse of Mistress Iperia to, you know, eavesdrop.

Look, it's just kinda my thing.

“What?” she demanded loudly.

Mister Beleren gestured with his hands for her to lower her voice.

She took a breath and asked, “What is it?” in a considerably lower tone.

Mister Jura said, “We have a special job for you. We want you to return to New Prahv and turn the Immortal Sun back on.”

“What?” she yelled again. “Do you know how hard it was to turn the damn thing off?”

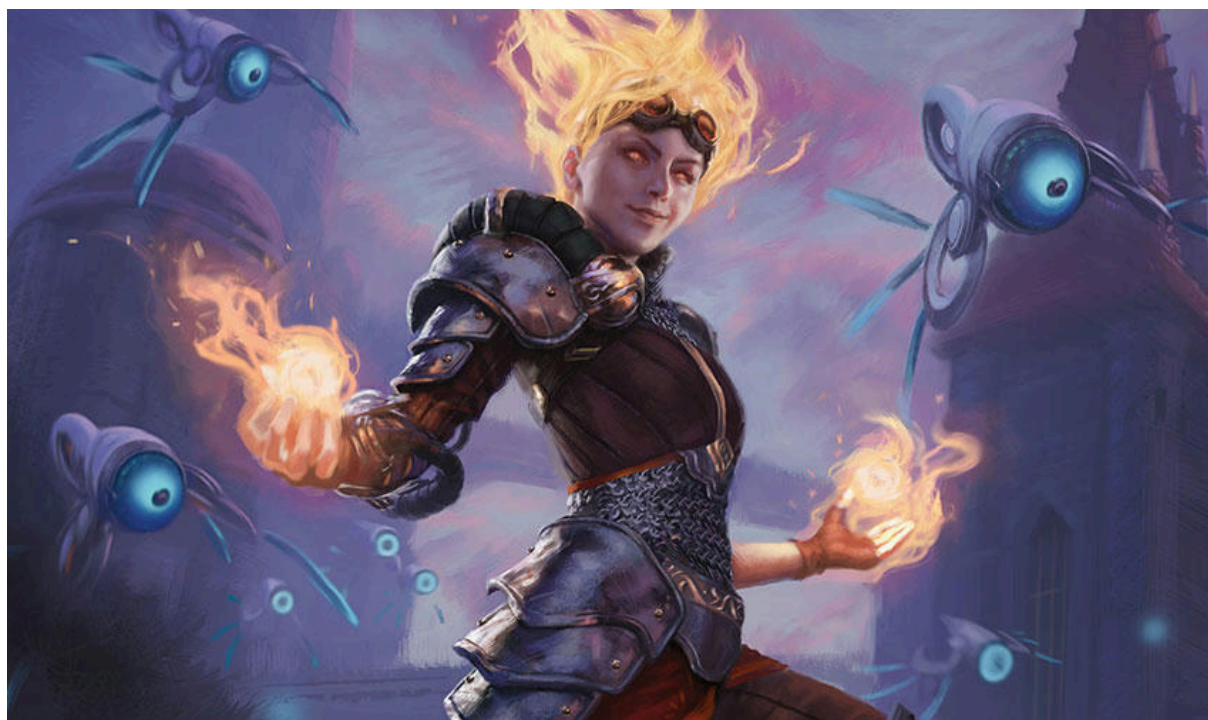
The three of them exchanged glances that stopped her outrage in its tracks.

She leaned in and whispered, “You don’t trust the other Planeswalkers not to run away.”

Mister Beleren shook his head. “That isn’t it. We need the Sun to do the job it was created for. To prevent Bolas from bolting.”

Mister Jura agreed: “One way or another, this ends today.”

“Well, then send someone else,” she said. “Because you’re crazy if you think I’m going to miss this fight.”



Chandra, Fire Artisan | Art by: Yongjae Choi

Mister Jura actually chuckled then. “Neither of us thought that for a moment.”

Mister Beleren said, “Take whomever you need. Get the Sun up and running, and leave a strong guard. Then we’ll welcome you to the battle.”

“I don’t know,” she grouched. “Bolas wants the Sun turned on. I’m not even sure this is a good idea.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me.” All four of us turned and looked up. Mister Dack Fayden was sitting on Mistress Isperia’s back, sporting a big grin. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

Miss Nalaar scoffed. “Look where you’re sitting. Of course you meant to eavesdrop.”

“Well, yeah. I see the mighty Gatewatch sequester themselves behind the dead sphinx, and I get a little curious.”

See, it’s not just me. Maybe it’s just a thieffy kinda thing.

“Just a little?” Mister Beleren asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Just a little,” Mister Fayden confirmed. “Look, I know I’m not part of this strategy session, but I’m gonna throw in my two zinos all the same. No one wants to go through this again. And if Bolas gets away, you know we’ll all have to. I’m with the big guy,” he nodded toward Mister Jura. “One way or another, this ends today.”

The other men turned to Miss Nalaar. Her shoulders sank. “Fine,” she said.

I watched her gather Miss Rai, Miss Revane, and a small squadron of the toughest rank-and-file guild-members she could find. They set off for New Prahv.

Mister Fayden and I watched them go. He nodded and spoke under his breath: “Good luck, ladies.”

Then he turned and walked away, saying, “There’s a humongous golden trinket a couple blocks away, and instead of going after it, *I’m* off to fight an Elder Dragon. Some thief “

III.

Our small army marched toward Tenth District Plaza in near silence.

I guess everyone was thinking her or his own grim thoughts. They all pretty much had more to lose than I did, I think. I mean, I had no Spark to harvest, and the Eternals couldn’t see or hear me. I was probably in way less danger than most.

On the other hand, I had only a handful of people in my life. If I lost even one—the way I thought I had lost Hekara that very morning—my world would shrink immeasurably. (It wasn’t likely anyone else I cared about could get resurrected.) But understanding that was half the battle, you know? If I was a little bit *invulnerable*, I’d use that to make sure my friends and family stayed alive and safe.

So maybe I was actually feeling a little more confident than the rest, as Teyo and Mistress Kaya and Hekara and everybody crossed the city. I saw Queen Vraska approach Mister Beleren from behind and wanted to test my theory about those two.

Besides, I’m on an eavesdropping roll

“Jace,” she said, choking out the word.

He turned, stopped, and smiled. He gently wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and leaned his forehead against hers. “Hello, Captain,” he whispered. Whispered it so quietly, in fact, that if I hadn’t completely invaded their personal space, I never would have heard it.

She whispered back, “You don’t know what I’ve done.”

He said, “I do, actually. But it’s not your fault. You didn’t have your full memories, and I arrived too late.”

She leaned her head away from his and whispered again: “You definitely arrived too late. But the truth is I *did* have all my memories. And it changed nothing.”

He shrugged. “Look,” he said, “I already tried to kill one ex today. Can we table the angst until Bolas is dead or we are?”

She smiled ruefully. “Oh, am I an ex now?”

I knew it!

“I hope not,” he said, looking panicked.

“Don’t we have to be an item before we can be exes?”

“I hope so,” he said. “Um, the first part, not the second.” He looked so vulnerable. Kinda brought Teyo to mind for some reason.

She said, “So tomorrow we give it a try after Bolas is dead or we are?”

“Either way?”

“Either way.”

He nodded. “Agreed. But again, I’m hoping for the first option, not the second.”

“Agreed.”

She took his hand, which caused Master Zarek to glare at them both. Mister Beleren smiled and offered him a little mocking wave. Then he and the queen walked off hand-in-hand toward whatever what awaited us all

IV.

It was so much worse than I had imagined.

We rushed toward the Citadel, most of our forces shouting battle cries. (Though not me. Not much point in shouting a battle cry that no one can hear.) My knives were still in their sheathes, as my mother had insisted I borrow a light battle axe from her. I’m not actually sure if it was an improvement. “Light” or not, it was still a heavier weapon than I was used to, and my arm strength probably isn’t what it should be for the daughter of Ari Shokta. But it made her feel better to see me better armed. And since she *could* see me and might worry, I complied.

Growing in power—and even stature—by the minute, the dragon still loomed atop his pyramid, his wings spread, that strange gem floating between his horns, still collecting stolen Sparks flying in from fallen Planeswalkers.

Newly fallen Planeswalkers.

Those Planeswalkers *not* fallen—or not *yet* fallen—were side by side with guild warriors, engaging the silent Dreadhorde.

It was chaos. True chaos. Still, both sides were more evenly matched than we could have hoped. There were fewer Eternals than there had been and—thanks to Mister Fayden, Miss Samut, and the rest—no more reinforcements arriving.

Borborygmus was sweeping the area ahead of him, using two large maces to shatter the creepies left and right. Mister Fayden fought in the cyclops's shadow, using a hex that magnetized the Eternals' lazotep coating, causing the creepies to crash into each other and, well, *stick*. In their attempts to free themselves, they usually tripped and fell, leaving themselves open to attack. Mister Fayden would then move in and finish the clump of Eternals off with his sword. It was extremely effective.

Miss Samut raced through the Eternal ranks at high speed, sheering off heads with her curved blades. I was too far away to hear her speak, but I knew that with each head removed, another Eternal had been "set free."



Samut, Tyrant Smasher | Art by: Aleksi Briclot

Mister Vorel crossed the battlefield at a steady and determined pace. He had once been a Gruul clan leader, and now, fighting at close quarters, his somewhat barbaric origins—which of course I shared—were on fierce display (though with a Simic twist), as he used a biomantic mace to seize the creepies by whatever remained of their flesh and turn them inside out. The resulting explosions of guts and lazotep were pretty spectacular.

I saw Mister Goldmane swinging a double-headed axe at Eternal after Eternal. And I saw Mister Karn crush an Eternal's head between his two metal hands.

Queen Vraska fought like a demon, using her cutlass like a surgical blade and her gorgon gaze to turn Eternals she didn't slice apart into stone statues. Sometimes, in the heat of things, she did both.

Mister Beleren, fighting by her side (I think), created multiple illusions of himself to lure Eternals into position for Mister Goldmane or Miss Ballard or Mister Karn to slaughter, while occasionally using his telekinesis to do the job himself.

A troop of Izzet mages were using flamethrowers on the Eternals—and came close to singeing Mister Beleren in the process. He shouted out a psychic warning that rang loudly in my brain.

Yikes. So that's what that feels like.

Nothing at all like my little psychic thing. Wouldn't even know how to do that.

Mister Teferi created bubbles of slowed time around the creepies, turning them off only when Spear-master Boruvo or Ari or Gan Shokta was in position to destroy them.

A vampire Planeswalker was tearing the heads off Eternals with fearsome strength, while a kor Planeswalker shaped spikes out of stone to impale three or four at a time.

Azorius Arresters—not usually my favorite Ravnican feature—were taking out still more Eternals under the leadership of Mistress Lavinia.

Dimir assassins and Rakdos cultists shredded an entire Eternal phalanx.

I mean *everybody* was out there, working together. It was kinda historic, you know?

But in a fight like this you don't always win.

An Eternal grabbed Mister Fayden from behind. (I was too busy killing my own creepies and too far away to help, but I saw pretty much everything.) He managed to hex his attacker's lazotep; its magnetized skull wrenched abruptly backward, snapping its neck, leaving its head hanging limply behind its shoulders.

But that was too little, too late. For a second, it almost looked as if Mister Fayden was disappearing from view, planeswalking away, I guess. But Miss Nalaar must have already succeeded in her mission to reactivate the Immortal Sun. He snapped back into place with the Eternal's fingers still digging into his arm.

He tried to raise his sword to cut off the Eternal's hand but apparently no longer had the strength, not even the strength to hold the sword. It slipped through his fingers and fell to the pavement at his feet.

And then he screamed—loud enough for me to hear it over the din, even from where I was fighting. The Eternal had reached into whatever what made Dack Fayden who he was, and the Eternal was stealing it away. As Dack's Spark was ripped from him, it looked as if his body was being drained of all fluids, all soft tissue, leaving him as nothing but skin and bones.

The Eternal caught fire and burned. The stolen Spark soared into the air to feed the dragon's gem and the dragon's power.

And Mister Fayden stopped screaming as his killer's corpse and his own collapsed to the ground together.

V.

I was more determined than ever to protect the people I loved. I figured my parents and godfather could pretty much take care of themselves. I mean, they're trained warriors—and having no Sparks, the Eternals couldn't kill them with a single touch. But Teyo and Mistress Kaya were a different story. They were insanely vulnerable.

As for Hekara she was deadly enough as a razorwitch, so in theory, she should have been exponentially more powerful as a blood witch. But the truth is, she was always more of an entertainer than a warrior. And on top of that, her resurrection had clearly changed her with regard to me. What if it changed her in other ways, too? What if she wasn't the same badass she used to be?

So I focused on protecting those three.

Surprisingly, I didn't have to worry too much about Teyo, who had really come into his own. Maybe he didn't have much in the way of offensive ability—beyond tossing an occasional mini-sphere of solid

light at an opponent—but he was alert and quick and ready with his shields to defend all among our ranks who found themselves in trouble.

And then suddenly the boy with little offensive ability discovered he could use his shields as a battering ram, smashing the creepies back and setting them up for Borborygmus or Mister Vorel or Miss, uh Miss Werewolf.

Mistress Kaya, meanwhile, already had some protection. Flanked by Chief Enforcer Bilagru and another Orzhov giant, I saw her plunge her two long ghost daggers into a couple of the creepies' brains.

But she was spending a lot of time in her ghost form, and that seemed to wear her down. She'd pass through an Eternal, materialize her hand and stab her ghost blade through its skull. Then she'd ghost her hand while materializing her feet, as she moved in on another of the creatures. But the urgency and the threat and the myriad distractions inherent to the battle made her reckless and, to my eye, increasingly exhausted. I tried to have her back, walking up to Eternal after Eternal and ending them with my borrowed axe without ever being noticed by anyone but her.

"Well," I shouted over the din, "growing up among the Gruul oughta count for something! And growing up with my particular condition occasionally counts for a lot more!"

I spent a good deal of time protecting Kaya—but a good deal more protecting Hekara. I kinda shadowed my girl, who actually held her own quite nicely for a dead woman and never really needed to know how many times I took out a creepy looking to attack her from behind.

So maybe she can't see me, but I can see her and see to it she's safe. It's something, you know? Or at least it's not nothing.

VI.

I felt a little like I was trapped in one of Mister Teferi's time bubbles. Everything happened so fast, and yet everything seemed to simultaneously take place in slow motion. The battle was flying by. The battle seemed endless. It was hard to keep track of the passing minutes, let alone the passing seconds.

I had no idea how long we'd already been fighting when a horn sounded, and I looked up to see the great Boros airship *Parhelion II* advancing across the sky. Angels descended from its decks. (Including one rare four-winged angel, leading multiple squadrons, and Milady Maladola, who was finally getting a chance to scratch that battle itch she had mentioned.) Boros skyknights and Selesnyan equenauts rode upon pegasi, griffins, and eagles. Izzet mages riding flight spheres of mizzium rocketed toward the fray alongside Izzet goblins on sky-scooters and Izzet faeries riding blazekites down. A single small hypersonic dragon flew in side by side with a drakewing, a steam drake, a sapphire drake, a wind drake, and a Simic skyswimmer, who'd normally be trying to eat the others. But not today.

Together they were routing what little remained of the Eternal sky cover. It was then that I spotted Mister Jura riding upon a pegasus. We all saw him, and we all cheered. He was wielding the sword that could bring an end to all this—by bringing an end to Nicol Bolas.

Trouble was we weren't the only ones paying attention.

I saw Miss Raven-Hair, who looked like she was pantomiming the movements of an archer, raise an imaginary bow, as her tattoos—or whatever they were—glowed with purple light. I looked over at the God-Eternal Oketra, who followed suit with her *all-too-real* giant bow. Miss Vess and Oketra took synchronized aim at Mister Jura. I called out a warning—that absolutely nobody heard, as together, necromancer and God-Eternal let loose a single javelin-sized arrow.

But Oketra's arrow didn't quite find a target in Mister Jura. Instead its six-foot length impaled his mount. The pierced pegasus tumbled out of the sky.

Mister Jura, still clutching Blackblade, plummeted along with the beast behind the Citadel and out of view.

VII.

When Mister Jura fell, there was a pause in the battle. A hiatus that affected not only our side, but the enemy's, as well. For a moment, the Eternals seemed to inexplicably hesitate. Could Miss Raven-Hair have also been caught off guard? No, that didn't make any sense. She's the one who made Oketra fire her arrow.

The moment didn't last, of course. The battle was rejoined on both sides.

And then someone shouted out, "LOOK! TO THE CITADEL! LOOK!"

I saw the smoke first. Then the flames. Then the massive winged demon with the crown of fire.

Hekara clapped her hands, jingled her bells, and cheered loudly for her unholy guildmaster: "Go get 'im, Boss!" She turned toward Master Zarek, Mistress Kaya, and Queen Vraska, shouting, "Toldja he was on board. He *loves* this plan!"

Lord Rakdos. Defiler. Demon. Guildmaster. Parun. Big as a dragon, with arms and legs muscled and proportioned like a gigantic wrestler. Two sets of horns, one arcing upward, outward, and backward like a steer's, the other arcing down and curving up like those of a humongous ram. Burning yellow eyes. Razor teeth, locked together in a rictus grin. A beard of bone spurs emerging from a wide jaw. Bat wings. Cloven hooves. Blood-red hide clothed in chains and skulls. And his brow, a wreath of flame. Here was an evil to match many another.

But can he match Nicol Bolas?

And then I spotted Mister Jura, riding atop the demon's head. *Rising up* within the very flames of Lord Rakdos's crown. Mister Jura's white aura of invulnerability must have been protecting him from the hellfire, but from where I stood, he seemed only to be at the white-hot center of a hellish blaze.



Unlikely Aid | Art by: Viktor Titov

He still had Blackblade drawn and at the ready, and I jumped up and down, cheering for the hero and the demon, as the latter soared up high and dived down sharply toward the Citadel and its master. The Defiler's roar echoed across the plaza.

The roar was a mistake.

It got Bolas's attention. The dragon turned in time and cast a crippling spell that blasted Lord Rakdos back. But Mister Jura leapt over the blast, using the demon's momentum to plunge toward Bolas with Blackblade poised to strike.

I held my breath as Mister Jura, two hands on the hilt, drove the sword down toward the crease between the Elder Dragon's eyes.

I'd been told that sword had already killed a major demon, a God-Eternal, and even an Elder Dragon like Nicol Bolas.

This is it. This will end it all.

The blow descended, Mister Jura thrusting the weapon down with all his might

Blackblade *shattered* against Nicol Bolas's invincible brow.

And shattering with Blackblade: the hopes of every living soul on Ravnica.

VIII.

While the dragon laughed, Mister Jura fell. He landed hard on the roof of the Citadel. I couldn't tell if he was alive or dead.

I just felt numb.

Miss Liliana Vess stood over his fallen body. I'd heard—or overheard—that Miss Vess and Mister Jura had been friends until very recently. I kinda wondered what she was thinking now. But she was too far away for me to read her thoughts or emotions, let alone her expression.

But I wasn't too far away to see her take a few steps forward as dark mana began to swirl around her. And as it swirled, the Eternals—once again—*stopped* fighting us. Instead, they stood at attention for a full five seconds before all the creepies and the two God-Creepies about-faced to march on Nicol Bolas.

I knew then that Miss Raven-Hair had switched sides. No way to know why—any more than I understood why she had been fighting *for* the dragon in the first place. But Miss Vess controlled the Eternals, and the Eternals had clearly turned on their master, at their mistress's command.

With nothing left to fight, I kinda just stood there stupidly. Watching

I thought maybe I saw Miss Vess shout something at Bolas, but I couldn't make out any words. Whatever she said, I could feel the dragon's stunned confusion waft across my consciousness. Confusion followed by contempt.

I studied Miss Raven-Hair. Something else was going on with her, and at first I couldn't quite figure out whatever what it was. Then it seemed to me like she was glowing from within. Glowing and dissolving.

Yes, that was it. There was less of her; black flecks and purple sparks were being carried off by the wind. I was watching her flake apart, disintegrate, one little bit at a time.

That does not seem like a pleasant way to go

Oketra and Bontu—the two surviving God-Eternals—were still trying to get at Bolas, but the dragon radiated pure unadulterated magical energy that kept both at bay.

I glanced back at Miss Raven-Hair, who already had less hair period: it was burning off her scalp in clumps.

And then Mister Jura was there, behind her, placing a hand on Miss Vess's shoulder. He was glowing white, and that white glow began to extend to her, over her, around her.

As Miss Vess glowed with his pure white light, her form began to bind itself back together. The long black hair flowed down her back again. She was becoming whole.

But, but

In exchange, her black death was transferring over to him. Now, he sparked and flaked apart, as she had been doing mere seconds ago. He raised his head and, I'm pretty sure I heard him howl, before bursting into black flame and disintegrating entirely before everyone's eyes. All that remained was a bit of armor that fell at Miss Raven-Hair's feet. Armor and ashes, the latter quickly blowing away on the wind.

Mister Jura's dead. But, but he's supposed to be the hero who saves us all, isn't he?

We all looked to Bolas. Even from ground level, he looked smug.

This time I distinctly heard Miss Raven-Hair cry out in fury as she made a pushing gesture with both arms. Oketra and Bontu advanced in response, approaching Bolas from two sides, while struggling against the rush of power that the Elder Dragon unleashed. Each God-Eternal took a single step toward Bolas—before his power pushed both back *two* steps.

I pretty much thought we were all doomed.

Then from somewhere, Mister Goldmane called out, "*Look!*"

IX.

The two-pronged Spear of Hazoret was sticking out through the dragon's chest, blood and viscera clearly dripping from each tine. *His* blood and viscera. Somehow, that was not enough to kill him, not after all the power, all the Sparks he had absorbed, but it was obvious the injury was significant, and it proved he could still be hurt. So for a second, I felt something like hope again, you know?

The Elder Dragon looked back. Hovering behind him and holding the spear was Master Niv-Mizzet, who thrust the spear farther into Bolas's back; his groan echoed across the plaza.

With a flick of a wing, the Elder Dragon sent the resurrected Firemind flying. He crashed to the ground some miles away.

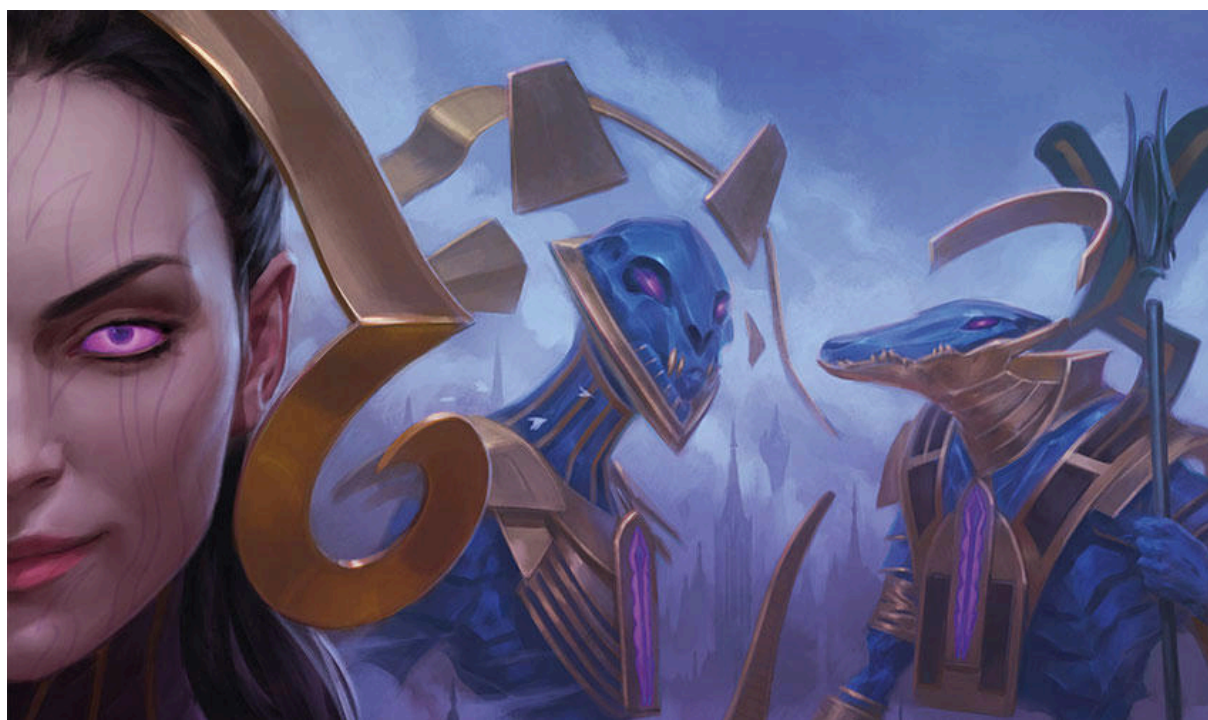
So much for hope

Time stood still. And then too late the dragon realized he had forgotten about Miss Vess, had given her an opportunity to strike with her own two-pronged weapon.

Her two God-Eternals moved in for the kill and were now right on top of Bolas. The dragon managed to *obliterate* Oketra.

But perhaps weakened by the effort—or by the spear still sticking out of his chest—he was too slow to stop Bontu, who bit its former master on the wrist.

At once and automatically, Bontu began harvesting all the Sparks the Elderspell had granted the dragon. All of them, all at once. Bontu absorbed these Sparks but could not contain them. She ruptured into shards, exploding in a light so bright, I had to screw shut my eyes.



Liliana's Triumph | Art by: Kieran Yanner

When I opened them again, the first thing I saw was the army of Eternals marching up the steps of the Citadel pyramid toward the dragon. And right behind them a second army of Ravnicans and Planeswalkers. I had to run to catch up.

A vortex of stolen Sparks swirled above Bolas's head. And then, they simply evaporated, each and every Spark dissipating into nothingness.

I was only on maybe the third step by that point, and I watched as Bolas began to dissolve, much as Mister Jura had dissolved moments ago. And also like Mister Jura, the dragon *howled* as he disintegrated, atom by atom, the particles blowing away with the wind.

X.

It was over. Bolas was simply gone. Only the gem from between his horns remained. I saw it drop to the roof of the Citadel, bounce a couple of times, and roll to a stop not far from Miss Raven-Hair's feet.

The unnatural storm clouds parted and dispersed, giving way to late-afternoon sunlight.

We all stood still, unsure whether we could afford to believe—whether we could *trust* to believe—that the nightmare was over.

Then, spontaneously, a massive cheer went up from the combatants in the plaza, myself included. Spiraling streamers of celebratory green magic flew into the air. All sorts of folks—grown men and women of multiple species—were climbing onto the ruins of the Bolas statue, as if it were a playground for children. Actual children, appearing out of nowhere, were climbing upon the fallen and dormant Vitu-Ghazi (despite my godfather's *hopeless* attempts to chase them off).



Planewide Celebration | Art by: Wisnu Tan

Miss Vess stood alone atop the Citadel now, a veritable wall of unmoving, deactivated Eternals separating her from the Ravnicans and Planeswalkers on the pyramid's steps. Then the crowd snapped out of its collective stupor and, led by Borborygmus and Mister Grumpy-Minotaur, got busy cutting down the Dreadhorde from behind. Hacking them to pieces. Little pieces. The creepies made no attempt to defend themselves as we smashed and chopped them to bits. (I found myself doing it, too.) I kept one eye on Miss Raven-Hair. I knew she could control the Eternals, and I wanted advanced warning if she decided to bring them back to bear—if only to protect herself.

She kneeled. I couldn't see what she was doing. Then she stood up again and, in a cloud of black, planeswalked away.

I couldn't understand this. I had been so sure the Immortal Sun had been reactivated. Wasn't that why Mister Fayden couldn't escape his fate? But I suppose, with the dragon gone, it must have been shut down all over again.

A Planeswalker in white left next. I saw Miss Yanling and Mister Yanggu depart with their three-tailed dog (who seemed to turn to stone just before all three vanished). Others, too, whose names I didn't know.

I heard Miss Samut called out, "This is not the way! These are my people. They must be destroyed, I know. But not like this. Grant them some dignity."

"That's why we're here," Miss Ballard said and with a nod toward Miss Nalaar, they began. Under the watchful eyes of the minotaur, the cyclops and the child of Amonkhet, the two pyromancers moved through what was left of the inert Dreadhorde and meticulously burned every last one—every last fragment—down to ashes.

I didn't stay to watch it all. I spent a few minutes searching for my parents. I found them together, in a somewhat embarrassing embrace. I got Ari's attention. She pointed me out to Gan Shokta. We all hugged. I gave mom her axe. Then I went looking for my friends.

By this time, the sun was sinking behind Ravnica's towers, the ones that were still standing, anyway. Twilight was falling. And not the artificial night of the Elderspell, but the real thing. Twilight. Dusk. With night to follow. And another morning and day after that.

We'd survived.

Or most of us

All around me, folks were celebrating. And those not celebrating were carrying away the wounded and the dying.

And the dead.

XI.

I don't know where she got the puppets.

Hekara was sitting on a piece of cracked masonry, occupied in the solitary pursuit of celebrating our momentous victory with two uncannily realistic hand puppets: versions of herself and Master Zarek. It was a wonderful show being provided for an audience made up entirely of herself and her Rat.

"You're my Rat."

"I'm your Rat."

Of course, she wasn't particularly aware of my presence. But I still really enjoyed the performance. She provided the voices for both her hands.

"We beat the evil dragon, didn't we, Hekara?" Puppet Zarek said in a fairly successful, if slightly high-pitched impression of the Izzet guildmaster.

"Course we did," replied the Hekara puppet, in a strangely affected baritone that sounded nothing whatsoever like Hekara, which was frankly hilarious.

"And all it took was for you to die horribly."

"Sure. But only once. I don't mind dying once. Not every once in a while. You know, for a good cause. Or for the entertainment value."

I could have watched this show for hours, but Teyo cut it short. I don't know how long he'd been standing behind me, but he stepped up to Hekara and said, "Emissary, do you remember your friend Rat? Araithia?"

Hekara said, "Of course, I remember Rat! I love Rat! Where is she?"

It made me so happy, I thought I might cry.

Teyo pointed me out to her. I guess I thought she'd try to focus on me and then maybe learn to see me again.

But she merely looked confused. So Teyo took Hekara's Hekara-puppeted hand in his, and attempted to guide, lead, Hekara over to me.

She hesitated, resisted. She sounded nervous and uncomfortable in a way I'd never heard from her before as she said, "You know, I can't quite remember what Rat looks like. That's sorta strange, isn't it?"

Teyo didn't know what to say. But this wasn't new to me. Even the people who could see me tended to forget me if I stayed away too long. Even my mother—though she'd never admit this—started to forget she ever had a daughter, if I stayed away too long. I guess I hadn't expected it this soon from Hekara. But that's not the same as it coming as a surprise, you know?

So I was grateful when the conversation was interrupted by the leathery sound of wings and the stench of sulfur. Lord Rakdos himself was descending to find his Emissary.

"COME, WOMAN," he said in his booming sepulchral voice, "RAVNICA IS OURS AGAIN. THE LONG BATTLE HAS BROUGHT THE PEOPLE LOW, AND THE CIRCUS MACABRE MUST PLAY TO THE CROWD AND LIGHTEN ALL HEARTS. WE HAVE PERFORMERS TO GATHER, ACTS TO PREPARE, AND A READY-MADE AUDIENCE YEARNING TO FORGET THE DAY'S HORRORS—BY BURNING. BLEEDING AND BURNING."

"Oh, goody," Hekara said, as she allowed herself to be taken up in the demon's hand like a life-sized Hekara puppet ready to mouth her master's words. They flew off together, with Hekara squealing, "Burn! Bleed! Burn!"

Okay, yeah, she hadn't given me a second thought.

It hurts, all right? It hurts. Is that what you want to hear?

But then I looked up and saw Teyo looking so stricken. For his sake, I tried to put on a good face. I smiled, shrugged, and said, "I've lost her." But I couldn't maintain the smile. My shoulders fell. My head sank. "I've never lost anyone before. Plenty of people I never had. But she's the first who could see me who I've lost."

As if to add insult to injury, Miss Rai chose that moment to nearly walk right into me; I had to sidestep out of her way as she passed.

Teyo looked even more stricken, if that was possible. He spotted Mistress Kaya approaching us and said, "Don't forget, you still have the two of us."

I nodded. I wanted to make him feel better, but I just couldn't bring it off. I said, "Except you're both Planeswalkers. You'll leave Ravnica eventually."

I instantly regretted saying it.

How does it help to make them both feel bad? Who does it help? Not me, that's for sure. I'd rather my friends be happy, you know?

We started walking, past the revelers and the bereaved. The War of the Spark was over. All that remained was to pick up the pieces and find a way to start anew.

Eventually, we joined a clutch of Planeswalkers and Ravnicans in the midst of a debate over what to do with the Immortal Sun.

“Destroy the damn thing,” said Mister Grumpy-Minotaur.

Miss Rai protested, “But it’s an amazing piece of—”

“It’s an amazing mousetrap for Planeswalkers. One I’ve been trapped by twice. And let me make this clear, I’ve no intention of ever being trapped by it again.”

Queen Vraska, her right hand entwined in Mister Beleren’s left, said, “Destroying it may be easier said than done. It’s made of extremely powerful magics, reinforced by Azor’s own Spark.”

Mister Beleren rubbed his stubbly chin. “Besides, the thing might come in handy someday for hunting down and trapping Tezzeret.”

“Or Dovin Baan,” Miss Nalaar added.

“Or Ob Nixilis,” Mister Karn volunteered.

“Or,” said Miss Longbow, “Liliana Vess.”

Both Mister Beleren and Miss Nalaar flinched when Miss Raven-Hair’s name was mentioned. Queen Vraska looked at Mister Beleren with some concern. Miss Ballard and Mister Teferi exchanged glances. All of them clearly had a complicated history with the necromancer. It took my mind off my troubles, wondering what that history might be or what would come of it, in the end.

Nothing had really been decided by the time the rest of the Gatewatch—Miss Revane and Mister Goldmane—arrived on the heels of Mistress Aurelia, who was carrying Mister Jura’s scorched breastplate like a holy relic.

Miss Nalaar said, “We should bury that on Theros. I think Gids’d like that.”

“What he’d like,” Mister Goldmane said, “is to know that it’s not over.”

“It’s not over?” Teyo asked, horrified.

Mister Goldmane chuckled and placed a reassuring paw on Teyo’s shoulder. “I do believe the threat of Nicol Bolas has passed. But we cannot pretend Bolas will be the last threat to face the Multiverse. If we truly wish to honor our friend Gideon, we need to confirm that the next time a threat rises, the Gatewatch will be there.”

Miss Nalaar looked over at the demolished Embassy of the Guildpact and said, “We lost our clubhouse.”

“We don’t need a clubhouse. We just need to renew our Oaths.”

“Ajani, we all renewed them earlier today.” Mister Beleren sighed, sounding a little exhausted—or perhaps exasperated. “Don’t you think once a day is plenty?”

Mister Goldmane scowled. The paw on Teyo’s shoulder involuntarily tightened its grip. The leonine didn’t actually draw any blood, but Teyo winced.

Mistress Kaya noticed and delicately removed the paw, allowing Teyo to breathe a small sigh of relief.

I couldn’t help giggling a little. Teyo and I exchanged smiles.

He has a very nice smile

Mistress Kaya spoke: “Perhaps perhaps *I* could take the Oath.”

Miss Nalaar looked at her hopefully and said, “Really?”

Master Zarek looked at her dubiously and echoed, “Really?”

“I’m not a perfect person “ Kaya began.

“Trust me, none of us are,” Mister Beleren interjected ruefully.

Queen Vraska snorted teasingly.

But Mistress Kaya basically ignored them both. “I’ve been an assassin and a thief. I’ve had my own moral code, but the first tenet of it was always, ‘Watch your own ass.’ I have the ability to ghost my way through life, to allow nothing to touch me. That’s the literal truth of my powers, but it somehow became my emotional truth, as well. But my time on Ravnica as assassin, thief, reluctant guildmaster, and perhaps even more reluctant warrior hasn’t left me unaffected. Fighting beside you people has been an honor. The scariest and yet the *best* thing I’ve ever done with my somewhat bizarre life. What the Gatewatch has done here today—” She glanced down at the armor in Mistress Aurelia’s hands. “—What you *sacrificed* here today well this’ll sound corny, but it has been truly inspirational. If you’ll have me, I’d like to be a part of this. I’d like you all to know that if there’s trouble, you can summon me, and I will stand beside you.”

“We’d like that,” Miss Nalaar said.

“Aye, girl,” said Mister Goldmane, grinning his leonine grin.

Miss Revane, Mister Teferi, and Mister Beleren all smiled and nodded their assent.

Mistress Kaya took a deep breath and raised her right hand. Perhaps as a symbol of what she had to offer, she turned that hand spectral, so that it became transparent, flowing with a soft violet light. She said, “I have crossed the Multiverse, helping the dead, um move on, in service of the living. But what I’ve witnessed here on Ravnica these last few months—these last few hours—has changed everything I thought I knew. Never again. For the living and the dead, *I will keep watch*.” She turned and smiled at Teyo and me.



Oath of Kaya | Art by: Wesley Burt

I could feel Teyo wondering if he should take the Oath, if any of the others would think him worthy. I was about to tell him that *they* should feel honored to include him.

But we were both distracted by the arrival of Master Niv-Mizzet, who landed in a somewhat showy manner and grinned. “You’re out of a job, Beleren. The Firemind is the new Living Guildpact. As it was always meant to be.”

Mister Beleren chuckled, “And yet somehow I don’t seem sorry to be giving up that particular responsibility.”

Ignoring the dragon completely, Miss Revane leaned her head over one of the many cracks in the plaza’s pavement. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. From between the battle-broken cobbles, a seed sprouted and rapidly grew into a plant with large green leaves.

She nodded to Miss Nalaar, who somehow instinctively knew what the elf wanted her to do. The pyromancer carefully plucked three of the bigger leaves from the plant.

Then we all watched as the two women and Mistress Aurelia lovingly, *tenderly*, wrapped Mister Jura’s armor in the leaves.

Aurelia handed the armor to Miss Nalaar, who—flanked by Mister Beleren and Miss Revane—led a solemn procession toward the celebrating (and mourning) crowd. A forlorn Mistress Aurelia watched them go but did not follow—while most of the other Planeswalkers did.

Master Zarek touched Mistress Kaya on the shoulder and gestured for her to wait. Mister Vrona did the same to Queen Vraska, who nodded and called out to Mister Beleren that she would catch up to him.

Teyo stood there confused, and I was curious enough to wait alongside him. Mistresses Lavinia and Aurelia, Miss Rai, and the dragon waited, also. We were soon joined by Mister Vorel, Dame Exava, Gan Shokta, and Boruvo. (The latter smiled at me, though my father, as usual, wasn’t aware of my presence.) As soon as the procession of the Gatewatch had safely gotten out of earshot, Miss Rai morphed into Master Lazav, which made me wonder where the real Miss Rai was at that moment.

The Firemind spoke first: “As the new Living Guildpact, I have consulted with representatives of every guild.”

Mistress Kaya raised an eyebrow at Mister Vrona, who nodded.

The dragon continued: “We have agreed that certain individuals, those who collaborated with Nicol Bolas, must be punished.”

Queen Vraska bristled, her eyes brightening with magic: “I won’t be judged by the likes of you.”

“You *have* been judged,” Mistress Lavinia said, sternly but without threat. “And your actions on this day have mitigated that judgment.”

Master Zarek said, “You are not the only one Bolas misled and used. Kaya and I share that particular guilt. We may have realized our error sooner than you did, but we have no desire to quibble with an ally. Not with an ally willing to prove her allegiance to Ravnica and her own guild.”

Queen Vraska looked no less suspicious—no less on guard—but her eyes ceased to glow. “I’m listening.”

Mistress Aurelia said, “Hundreds, maybe thousands of sentient beings died on Ravnica today.”

“With untold property damage,” added Mister Vrona.

Ignoring him, Mistress Aurelia went on, “Such acts of terror must not go unpunished. There are three who did everything in their power to aid and abet the dragon: Tezzeret, Dovin Baan, and Liliana Vess.”

Teyo said, “But didn’t Liliana—”

Mister Vorel interrupted him: “Vess changed sides too late. Only after being the direct cause of most of the carnage.”

“What exactly are you asking?” Mistress Kaya said, unhappily.

“All three are Planeswalkers,” Master Lazav stated. “They are out of our reach. But not out of yours.”

The Firemind brought the point home, “Ral Zarek has already agreed to hunt Tezzeret. Vraska, as penance for past sins, we assign you Dovin Baan. And Kaya, the ten guilds wish to hire you to assassinate Liliana Vess.”

I guess maybe the War of the Spark isn't quite as “over” as I'd figured, you know?