

Project Lightning Bug

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From set *Unknown set*

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The guilds of Ravnica have grudgingly accepted that Jace Beleren is now the living manifestation of the Guildpact. It has become apparent that whenever the guilds clash, it is Beleren who will adjudicate between them. What is not apparent is Beleren's true nature as a Planeswalker—except to an informed few. Izzet guildmage Ral Zarek has no love for the new Living Guildpact, but Ral is also secretly a Planeswalker, and that shared trait has suddenly become of critical importance.



Underworld Connections | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

The nameless Undercity street was open to the sky, and the same clouds hung over the Tenth that had hung there for weeks, dropping the same soft drizzle over the city. Ral Zarek led the way through the sunken street, the mind mage a step behind him.

“If you dare root around in my head, Beleren, I think you’ll find those clouds overhead are suddenly full of lightning bolts that are all, coincidentally, aimed at you,” said Ral Zarek in a low voice.

“Then can you just tell me where we’re going?” Beleren asked.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

“You realize, ‘You’ll see soon enough’ is exactly the kind of thing people say right before I immediately dive into their minds.”

Ral looked over his shoulder at the mind mage. “Did you know lightning strikes the Tenth more often than any other district? Do you know why that is?”

“You?”

Ral smirked. “Gold star.”

They passed a shopfront that smelled of greasy onions, and a musty alleyway where hooded elves shot them dirty looks.

“I was...surprised that you approached me, Ral,” Beleren said.

Ral shrugged. “Had no other options.”

Of all the potential confidants and intelligences on Ravnica, Ral had gone to the one mage he never thought he would have contacted. Jace Beleren was the so-called Living Guildpact, the arbitrator of all the guilds—the one who had swept into the position despite Ral’s efforts.

“From what you’ve been telling me,” Beleren continued, “you’ll only cause harm by letting this information spread any further.”

Ral glanced back at Beleren. The mind mage looked strange without his trademark cloak—plainer, but he actually blended in better this way. He looked like any other Ravnican, a nondescript citizen of the Tenth, instead of the famous Living Guildpact. Ral wondered if he was applying any extra illusions so as not to stand out. It didn’t really matter—Ral had found him easily enough, and that was exactly the problem.

“If this project goes the way it’s been going, the results are going to leak, and all hell is going to break loose,” Ral said.

Ral stopped at a door in the tunnel wall. He electrified the handle for a moment, and twisted it open. He led Beleren into a side passage, sealing the door behind him.

“How much does Niv-Mizzet suspect?” Beleren’s voice echoed.



Jace, Architect of Thought | Art by Jaime Jones

“If he has already grasped the pattern, he’s been quiet about it. And he’s never quiet about anything, so I think he hasn’t seen it yet. But he’s frustratingly brilliant, as you know, and he’s not one for patience. He’s beginning to suspect I’m not telling him everything.”

“Are you sabotaging results?”

“I’m Ral Zarek! I don’t know if you know this, Beleren, but Izzet mages don’t impede Izzet research. I’ve just...not used the full extent of my abilities. Besides, his Chamberlain follows me on every detection.”

“How many...detections...have you done of me?”

Ral paused. He looked back at Jace. “Enough. Enough that Niv-Mizzet might have guessed you’re a Planeswalker already.”

Project Lightning Bug had not been Niv-Mizzet’s idea, but that of Maree, the current Chamberlain to the Firemind. Maree was an elementalist who had impressed their guildmaster with her work on Melek. In the weeks following the Implicit Maze and the whole Living Guildpact fiasco, the dragon had noted that Beleren had gone missing for long periods, and Chamberlain Maree suggested they track his movements more closely.

Thus Ral had been appointed Head Researcher of a project to record and explain Beleren’s disappearances. Of course, he already knew why Beleren was disappearing—he was a fellow Planeswalker, and spent time outside Ravnica’s plane of existence.

The idea of Niv-Mizzet learning the truth made the muscles in Ral’s neck tense, and touched a dark, sore place in his youth. Ral had learned to hide his Planeswalker side under painful circumstances, and he did not want to relive that.

Besides, he knew the range of horrid things Niv-Mizzet would do in possession of that truth. Would he eagerly dissect all the Planeswalkers he could find in the spirit of curiosity, or simply eat them all to assert dominance and quell his existential jealousy? Would he track the comings and goings of every Planeswalker, and ruin all the work Ral had done to scrape his way through the ranks and achieve a position of respect among the Izzet?

And how would the *other* guilds react to this knowledge?

As dangerous as it was, he had agreed to lead the project immediately. Better to lead Project Lightning Bug and manage the direction of the research than let some second-rate chemister follow Beleren around, prove the existence of other planes, and ruin everything.

Ral had to admit, he was the right man for the job—his methods were brilliant. He couldn't help himself once Niv-Mizzet handed him the project—his mind spun, crackling with ideas on how to track the Guildpact. He helped design a subtle enchantment that would deliver a small energetic pulse whenever it experienced a discontinuity, such as a planeswalk. An Izzet underling had planted the enchantment on Beleren's cloak. Then Ral conjured a dynamic amplification field above the Tenth—which the district's denizens had experienced as the last month of annoyingly-persistent drizzly weather. The drizzle field would magnify the tracking enchantment's small pulses into detectable cracks of lightning overhead, while not being blatant enough to raise suspicion.



Blast of Genius | Art by Terese Nielsen

It was a perfect system. Other Izzet guildmages began watching for the telltale lightning. Only at the last minute did Ral remember to tweak his persistent storm to weaken its precision, so that Project Lightning Bug wouldn't immediately prove the existence of Planeswalkers.

The data began rolling in, and things immediately got worse.

“Why not just tell him?” Beleren asked as Ral led him through the dank tunnel. “During the Maze, you challenged me to tell Emmara everything. Now you’re hiding Planeswalkers from Niv-Mizzet?”

Ral stopped walking, but didn’t look at Beleren. “You wouldn’t understand,” he said flatly.

“I *could*,” said Jace, shrugging with one palm, “but I think I’d be risking electrocution.”

Ral ran his hand along the mossy curve of the tunnel wall. “Do you know how I became part of the Izzet, Beleren? Do you know what I went through to find a place where I belonged? I grew up in a tiny district. Small district full of small people. Did they encourage my storm magic? No. Everybody picked on the ‘rain mage.’” Ral absently pulled on a strap on his forearm gauntlet. “I learned quick what to keep to myself. I came to the Tenth on my own, learned the accent, learned the district—where to eat, where not to sleep. I studied every guild’s history backwards and forwards. I found the Izzet, and learned everything about them—I studied storm magic based on Niv-Mizzet’s own equations, worked my way through the guild. The happiest day of my life was becoming part of the Izzet, becoming a guildmage.”

“But you’re not just a guildmage. You’re a Planeswalker.”

“My spark just gave me another way to lose all I had worked for. I’m a storm mage of the Tenth. I’m Ravnican to the core.”

Ral turned to Beleren, and poked a finger at his chest. “And then Niv-Mizzet announces the Maze, and who becomes the Guildpact? After all I had done to get to this place? An outsider, who had done no work at all. An invader from some other place. You breeze in and solve a riddle, and now you’re in position to control the destiny of my world. You know how that makes me feel?”

Ral saw Jace’s brow furrow in the dim light of the tunnel, the mind mage’s eyes darting in calculation. Ral had the urge to storm off, to leave this invader to his thoughts, but he saw Beleren’s face change.

“You wanted to punish me,” Beleren said. “You wanted to destroy what I had with Emmara, as payback for my solving the Maze before you.”

Ral sighed, and his shoulders fell slightly. Beleren looked somehow both young and old—boyish with his drizzle-frizzed tangle of hair; but also too gaunt in places, creased with lines of worry.

“I didn’t want to ruin things with your friend, Beleren,” Ral said.

“It’s fine,” Jace said. “It’s the way it has to be. She’s safer, too, now.”

Ral looked down at fiddled with his gauntlet. “She doesn’t remember?”

Beleren scratched at his arm. A patch of smooth skin on his forehead crinkled, and he said nothing.

“Well, I don’t blame you,” Ral said. “It is the way it has to be. You asked before why I didn’t just tell him. I wanted to, at first. I wanted my world to understand—understand what I am, and what they’re a part of. What else is our guild for, if not understanding strange truths? But you don’t know Niv-Mizzet. It would crack him. It would turn him inside-out. And then he would turn *us* inside-out, and...” Ral shrugged. He leaned forward, gesturing with his hands for emphasis. “Think about what it would mean if Niv-Mizzet—if the whole plane—knew exactly when the Living Guildpact was *outside of this dimension*, Beleren. Just think about that.”

Beleren’s eyes fell to the side for a moment. He rubbed his temple. “Can’t you end the project?”

“Not the way things have gone, no. The dragon put me in charge.” Ral continued down the tunnel. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

Beleren was a wall of non-budging skepticism. “Can you please just tell me where you are taking me?”

Ral rubbed his fingertips on his forehead in a pantomime of Beleren's telepathy, and mouthed two words: "COME. ON."

Earlier that morning, Ral had stood in the Izzet guild headquarters, lying to a dragon's face.

Ral brought his palms close together, absently letting arcs of electricity dance between them. He edged to the side, to stay just out of the patch of shadow that Niv-Mizzet's great body cast on the floor, to get a better view of his detections. The dragon studied the results, the detections projected in the air like a cloud of randomly-placed, slowly rotating stars. Ral thought about narrating, tossing in some anecdote from the field to lend the report a touch of authenticity. He knew it would irritate the dragon, and hasten the inevitable disapproval, but he kind of wanted to do it anyway.

Beside him, Chamberlain Maree put her hand over her mouth in excitement. Ral raised his eyebrows—a faintly judging gesture, maybe, but interpretable as friendly—and glanced her up and down. He liked the Chamberlain, but he wondered what would happen to her charmed career when the dragon decided he was bored with her.

Niv-Mizzet grunted as he scanned over the diagrams with their scattered dots: flashes of lightning, recorded as data. They were not quite enough to form a pattern, if Ral had done his work right. But as Ral looked, he saw something strange in the data—there were too many points.

This was bad, he thought.

"This is good," said Niv-Mizzet. "You're starting to show consistent repetitions here, Zarek."



Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind | Art by Todd Lockwood

Ral gritted his teeth. He stared at the glimmering data hanging in the air, and as he understood, static electricity hopped down his spine. “Those aren’t all my detections,” said Ral. “Those aren’t all the Guildpact.”

“No, they’re new.” Maree’s lens waggled over her eye as she spoke. “The Izmagnus and I took a contingent of blastseekers and elementalists, and we replicated your technique.” She waved her hand, and the specks of light glowed.

Ral boiled. “How could you put out more detectors without consulting me?”

“It took some time, but Mizzix and I were able to calibrate your detector spell and improve its range.” Ral hadn’t meant ‘*explain how you did it*’, but that’s how the Chamberlain was taking it. “We’re now tracking hundreds of citizens, and we found two new signals—new Lightning Bugs. We’re tracking their discontinuities as we speak. Isn’t it grand?”

Two new signals. Ral could see their pinpoints in the glowing diagram: other Planeswalkers coming and going from Ravnica. They would discover the pattern in no time.

“Firemind,” said Ral. His mind raced. “This departure could jeopardize the validity of our results. It represents a danger to the entire project.”

“Perhaps your research needed a bit more danger, Zarek,” said Niv-Mizzet. “But even with the Chamberlain’s extension, it’s still not sharp enough. We need clearer data...as soon as you can.”

Ral looked up the scaly pillar of the dragon’s neck and into his eyes. They looked like glass beads, but with heat behind them. “Yes, Firemind.”

“We had some ideas about improving the accuracy of your storm amplifier,” said the Chamberlain, adjusting her lens. “We’d need your help, of course.”

“Improving the accuracy?”

“Yes. We installed a series of gyrostatic dynamos on the roof of Nivix, and used them to measure the conduction rates of your storm. I hope you don’t mind me saying, we found room for improvement.”

Ral shook his head. “Preposterous.”

“I—excuse me?”

“The static field relies on a narrow band of conduction,” Ral said. Was she trying to turn this into a further promotion? Was she intentionally trying to unseat him? “Additional dynamos will only muddle the sensitivity. Too much power and you’ll rupture the balance.”

Chamberlain Maree looked up to Niv-Mizzet. “Firemind, I’m afraid I disagree with the Head Researcher. I believe more power is required to derive the sensitivity we need.”

The dragon swung his head slowly between the two mages. Finally he looked at Maree. “Do it.”

Ral could tell they were both looking for his reaction. He said nothing.

“The adjustments to the dynamos will be done soon,” said the Chamberlain. “Could we meet with you tomorrow morning to implement the improvements to the storm?”

Ral looked up at Niv-Mizzet. The dragon showed his teeth, a gesture that was probably intended as an encouraging smile, but looked to Ral like a threat display. Ral could see saliva glimmering on the curving fangs.

“Of course,” Ral said. “Let’s hope it all goes well, and we learn the truth. Tomorrow.”

Ral and Beleren continued down the moss-draped tunnel. Rhythmic chants and marching footsteps echoed down to them. Ral reached a ladder that led up to a heavy iron grating. He put a finger to his lips—Beleren nodded—and he climbed up, pushing open the grating and hoisting himself up. Beleren followed quietly after.

They emerged in a side street next to a Boros garrison, facing a main thoroughfare lit by lamps in the evening gloom. Ral and Beleren kept hidden in a sunken doorway of the garrison building, watching Boros Legion soldiers march past in a training exercise, their boots splashing in the shallow puddles that dotted the street. Ral glanced up at the drizzle field overhead and verified the time from a nearby clock tower.



Boros Guildgate | Art by Noah Bradley

“Watch that spot,” Ral said, nodding toward the alleyway directly across the thoroughfare. “It’s just about time.”

The two men waited, listening to the Boros drillmasters leading chants. A shimmer of not-quite-rain fell softly from the persistent clouds overhead. Ral checked the clock again.

“I don’t remember home,” Beleren said quietly, unbidden.

“What?”

“You talked about growing up in Ravnica. A lot of my memories from my childhood are gone. Chopped up in my head into a few impressions. Most of what I remember begins here, on Ravnica. I’ll never have roots here the way you do, and I admit I’m off to other planes a lot. But I think of myself as Ravnican to the core, too.”

A prickly, dense emotion rose in Ral, and he squeezed his lips together to keep it from spilling over. “Damn it, Jace, it’s not the same,” he said. He turned back to his vigil of the opposite alleyway, but he put a hand on Beleren’s wrist and squeezed.

“Ral?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s the first time you’ve called me anything but ‘Beleren.’”

“Hm.” Ral checked the tower again and watched the alleyway.

After another minute, Jace spoke up. “Lightning or no, I’m about to scour your head if you don’t tell me what we’re watching for.”

Ral frowned. “It should have happened by now.” The clouds above were silent—no telltale pop of thunder, no indication of a planeswalk. “It’s a Planeswalker I’ve been tracking. One that the others in Project Lightning Bug haven’t discovered yet. He usually appears here every evening.”

“Every evening?”

“Like clockwork. He arrives, does some visiting around the city, and planeswalks away again before morning.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know. Human. Tall. Broad. Striking eyes. Seems to have some contacts among the Boros. I haven’t had a chance to get in contact with him.”

Jace pulled on his lip. “Why did you want to show me this person?”

“Because unfortunately, he’s the perfect pattern. The clearest data of all. He travels so systematically, it would be nothing at all for Chamberlain Maree and the others to extrapolate from his discontinuities and learn the truth about Planeswalkers. He’s the secret we have to keep from Niv-Mizzet.” Ral knitted his hands together, and little arcs of lightning jumped from finger to finger. “I’ve ended the enchantment that tracks him, but I’m afraid the others will discover him.”

“Well, then, we have to think about this logically. We need to come up with a plan to throw them off somehow, to conjure some way to...”

“—Tomorrow,” Ral interrupted. “They’re going to discover him tomorrow.”

Ral hadn’t slept much.

“Head Researcher Zarek,” said Chamberlain Maree, helping him up onto the rooftop of the guildhall Nivix. “Are you—prepared for the alteration today?”

“Yes,” Ral yawned. “I’ll prepare the augmentation spell. Give me a moment—I’ll need to summon up a lot of power for this.”

“All taken care of,” said the Chamberlain, handing him two flexible, humming cables. “You can socket directly into Nivix’s supply.” She tried to find his eyes. “And Zarek—about the extension we did. I didn’t mean to overstep my bounds. It’s your project. I should have consulted you.”



Izzet Charm | Art by Zoltan Boros

Ral just attached the cables to his gauntlet. His skin prickled and his hair stuck out straighter. Ral couldn't help but feel exhilarated as energy flowed through him. He just hoped the plan he and Jace had come up with worked.

"At any rate, as soon as you amplify your storm, we'll get far better focus in on all the promising targets we've selected," Maree said. She slid her lens down over one eye. "We'll know with certainty what's causing their spatial discontinuities."

Ral turned toward the city. He let the cables channel mana into him as he willed a spell into being. His vision crackled and bleached to white, but he could feel the storm above him stir and ripple. He drew in a breath and exhaled hard, shooting his arms into the air.

"That's it!" he could hear Maree saying. "It's amplifying!"

Ral heard the storm jostle and swirl, like a great beast stirring awake. It pushed against him, but he pushed harder, surging mana into the storm, bidding it to grow and strengthen.

"I'm getting something," said Maree. "Keep going!"

Ral completed the spell, and felt power leave his arms and pulse into the storm above. His vision cleared. He saw the epic storm all around him, crackling with potential. His hair stood on end, popping with static electricity. Dynamo devices all around the rooftop whirled.

Despite everything that had happened, it was times like this that made him certain he was in the right guild.



Ral Zarek | Art by Eric Deschamps

A mighty gust swirled the air, and Niv-Mizzet himself rose to the top of the building. He came to roost on the rooftop next to the two mages with a flourish of his wings, like a peacock coming around to have his plumage appreciated. “Your conclusions, researchers,” he said.

Chamberlain Maree consulted a measuring device. “We’re getting pinpoints at much greater accuracy.”

Ral breathed heavily, detaching the cables from his gauntlet. This was the moment when the plan succeeded or failed—and in either case, when Niv-Mizzet would react. Overhead, lightning forked across the sky, accompanied by a snap-rumble of thunder.

Maree’s face changed from glee to concern. “There’s something wrong,” she said. “The detections. There’s something erratic about them.”

“What is it?” Ral asked. “Let me see.”

Maree showed him the measuring device. “The storm registered a discontinuity—it was the Living Guildpact. But...it also shows him as having been in the Tenth the entire time.”

Ral made a display of studying the dots on the device with a critical eye. “Hmm. Beleren had some kind of mana condition applied to him...that the storm recorded as an electrostatic discontinuity.”

“But that could just be an illusion spell,” she said.

“Or some other ordinary fluctuation,” Ral added.

“Has the storm been recording those as Lightning Bugs all this time?”

“Without sufficient amplitude, it appears the storm lacked the resolution to discern the difference.”

The Chamberlain cranked a dial on the measuring device and read it again, exasperated. “But that’s what all our data is based on. The subjects weren’t actually disappearing—they were just becoming invisible to the storm.”



Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind | Art by Svetlin Velinov

Niv-Mizzet spoke, and his voice was thunder. “This method,” he boomed, in the manner of a judge condemning a defendant to death, “is *demonstrably unreliable*.”

Ral nodded. “I’m sorry, Firemind. I shouldn’t have allowed other team members to adjust the detections. It was my responsibility.”

“Project terminated,” snarled the dragon, spreading his wings and chopping at the air, his great body ascending. “You’ll have to rethink this entirely, if you ever want to prove something of merit.”

“Yes, Firemind,” said Chamberlain Maree.

Niv-Mizzet hesitated, his eyes lingering for a brief, curious moment on the two of them, then he swiveled in the air and shot into the clouds. His wings tore a hole in the storm, dissipating it with a rumble.

“Sorry, Head Researcher Zarek,” said the Chamberlain. “Or should I say, Guildmage Zarek.”

Ral cocked his head to the side, like a tiny shrug. He thought about responding that the Chamberlain might be joining him as guildmage soon, but he decided informing her of that was probably the dragon’s job.

The previous evening, a Planeswalker hid in on the second floor of a Boros garrison, listening. He had staked out this position for its protection wards against detection, and for its clean line of sight down at

the side street below, where two men hid and spoke to one another in low tones. One of the men wore Izzet garb and a copper arm gauntlet. The other he recognized as the Living Guildpact of Ravnica. The Planeswalker watched with grim interest, as his two marks were clearly surveilling his usual arrival point. From his post, he could just make out their conversation.

“I’ve ended the enchantment that tracks him, but I’m afraid the others will discover him,” the Izzet mage said.

“Well, then, we have to think about this logically. We need to come up with a plan to throw them off somehow,” the Guildpact said.

The two mages discussed a plan, a risky but clever deception involving the dragon guildmaster and complicated Izzet storm magics he wasn’t familiar with.

“We’ll have the extra detector set to monitor your illusion,” the Izzet mage said. “Once I have amplified the storm, you will planeswalk to your sanctum, but your double will already have been there. The storm will contradict itself—a discontinuity registering the same as a mundane spell condition. That should be enough to prove the entire project is flawed.”

The Living Guildpact nodded, concluding their conversation—and he didn’t leave on foot. Instead he concentrated for a moment, then vanished with a very particular ripple.

The Living Guildpact was a Planeswalker. That much was certain.

The Izzet mage, for his part, crawled down into a sewer grate and disappeared out of sight.

The Planeswalker stroked the cropped stubble on his chin. He was no longer being tracked, so that was a positive. And he had learned a critical new piece of information about the arbiter of the guilds—a productive stakeout, well worth altering his usual schedule. He inspected a dent in his armor as the last strains of the Boros infantry chant faded away, and abandoned his position.



Art by Richard Wright