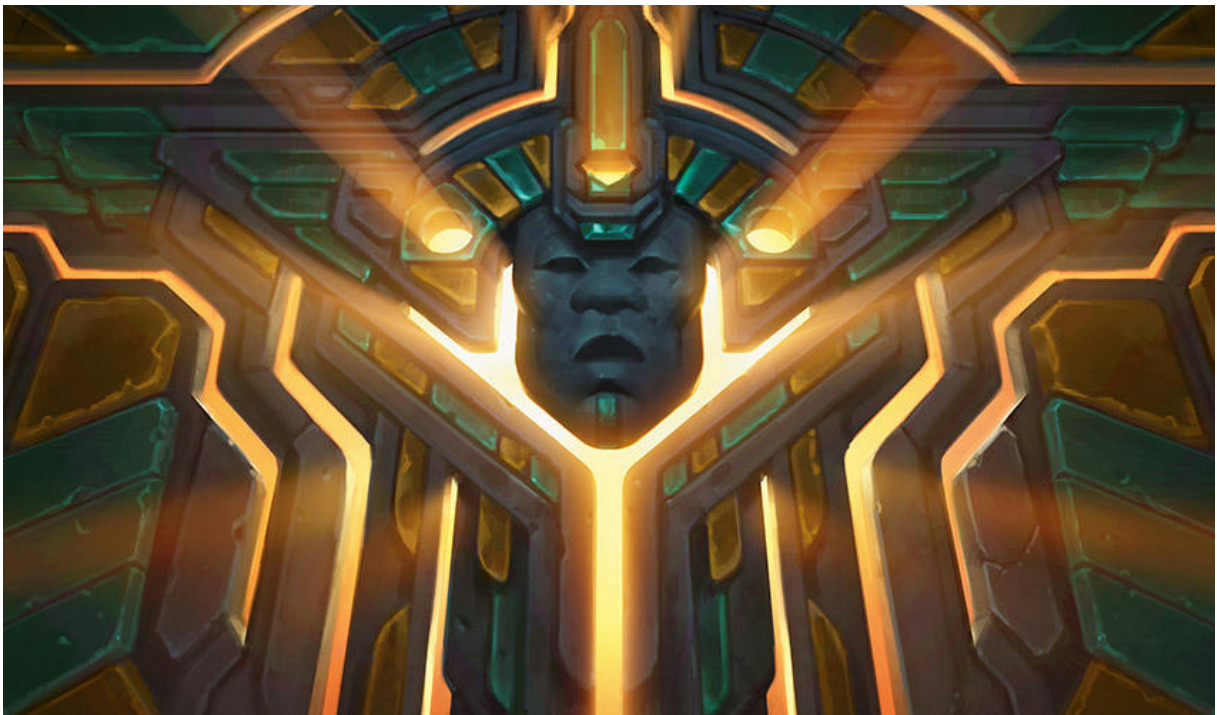


Glimpse the Far Side of the Sun

Alison Luhrs & Gregg Luben

From set *Rivals of Ixalan*

HUATLI



Radiant Destiny | Art by Emrah Elmasli

Huatli was eight.

Little motes drifted down in the afternoon sunlight and lit the sparring ground with an orange glow in the shadow of Tocatli. A dozen other children sat beside her on the stone tile, their little hands gripping wooden training weapons. She was young enough to feel compelled to ask thousands of questions, but old enough to know to wait until it was appropriate. And so she sat clutching her toes in her tiny hands, waiting for the Sun Empire priest to cease his monologue. He was lecturing the young warriors-to-be on the threefold aspect of the sun, and doing so in the most unimaginably boring drone Huatli had ever heard. She knew all these stories by heart. She loved stories.

“What’s on the far side of the sun?” she blurted out.

The priest blinked.

Huatli squeezed her feet in her hands and maintained determined eye contact.

The priest sighed. “Huatli, one day you will fight with a blade in your hand and speak with the power of the sun. What is on the far side doesn’t *matter*.”

Huatli hated when they mentioned her future. She got special lessons with the priests and shamans because she was good at telling stories, but it annoyed her that she couldn't spend that time with the other warriors-to-be.

"But I want to know what is on the other side," she said, doing her best to disguise her complaint with genuine curiosity.

The other warriors-to-be were watching with annoyance. Huatli blushed.

"Huatli may be our future warrior-poet," said Inti, her cousin, in a voice that was bolder than an eight-year-old's had any right to be. "Aren't there stories about the other side of the sun she should know?"

The rest of the children nodded in agreement.

The priest looked a bit flustered. He looked to their martial instructor for assistance, but she merely shrugged. He furrowed his brow and looked Huatli in the eye.

"There are no stories about the other side of the sun."

The other young warriors *aww*-ed in a chorus of disappointment.

The priest sighed. "Name the things you *can* see. Glorify the things you have done, and don't waste time on the unknown."

Huatli was confused. "But what if I honestly want to know?"

The priest looked to the martial instructor with the type of defeat exclusive to tired adults surrounded by children.

The martial instructor clapped her hands with seasoned authority and spoke to the rest of the young warriors. "Trainees! Pair up and practice your forms. First one to get knocked down has clean-up duty."

The rest of the children scrambled to their feet and ran to the far side of the sparring arena, jabbering all the more excitedly for having been forced to remain silent throughout the lecture. Huatli remained, rooted where she sat, staring intently at the priest.

He sighed, and looked at her with vaguely parental exasperation. "We sense that you have a gift for words, Huatli. If you choose to become warrior-poet of the Sun Empire, then when you do so, your words become truth."

The girl frowned, confused. "Does that mean I make things up?"

"No. It means that when you tell stories, you are telling someone's truth. It is your duty to know their experiences, and to share them in such a way that our people will never forget your subject's actions."

The priest was adamant. "If you live a warrior's life for the good of the empire, you will see clearly. You must be the single voice shouting from the mountaintop. The voice of the empire, the voice of all that matters."

Huatli bit her lip. She wasn't sure if being a voice on a mountaintop was what she wanted. She thought of the priest and the martial instructor, of her auntie and uncle and Inti. She thought of all the people in the empire, and how one day they would listen to the truths she would tell.

The empire is what matters, she asserted to herself. *Not whatever exists beyond the sun.*



Blood Sun | Art by Emrah Elmasli

Angrath and Huatli stood in a clearing, crouching to maintain balance as the earth beneath them shook violently. They watched as the golden spires of Orazca climbed higher and higher above the canopy of the valley below. The spires seemed to pull the city up, snapping trees and shoving massive amounts of soil and rock aside as they rose.

Huatli's breath caught in her chest.

The city was more beautiful than she could possibly have imagined . . . and it looked nothing like the city she had seen in her vision.

The ground stopped shaking and she blinked away a tear. It was *there*. High arches and carvings as large as a house, a labyrinthian structure with more gold than she had ever laid eyes on. The place seemed to pulse with magic. It was still a significant distance away from where she stood, roughly a half-day's hike, but she was closer than any member of the Sun Empire had been to Orazca in centuries.

The minotaur to her left snorted in excitement. "About damn time." He started stomping downhill, determined and impatient.

Huatli remembered her mission, and ran to catch up.

Her mind was racing. She had found it, but did that mean she had to return? Shouldn't she explore inside to find the Immortal Sun herself? Huatli tried to contain her glee but failed—a dumb grin was stretched across her face.

"So you were told to find the Golden City like an errand girl?" Angrath sneered.

Huatli snapped back to reality. She stowed her smile. "My emperor tasked me with this. It is our ancestral home, and we are the rightful rulers of Ixalan."

The trees were closing in over them. Branches arced overhead and the sounds of insects and birds flooded Huatli's ears as they walked into the shadow of the jungle canopy.

Angrath was eyeing Huatli. "What do *you* get out of it?"

"I get my rightful title," Huatli said. "I've been training to become the warrior-poet since I was a child."

Angrath snorted.

Huatli frowned. "What?"

"A title doesn't give you freedom."

He whipped out a chain to yank a branch from their path. Huatli was annoyed. "You wouldn't understand. It will be my duty to tell the victories of my people."

Angrath looked at her over his shoulder. "You need a title to do that? You think like an *ant*."

Huatli was more than insulted, but clamped her mouth shut. She knew firsthand how flimsy the man's temper was, and she dared not provoke this new, strange ally into another attack.

"What do you mean 'You think like an ant'?" she asked with deliberate calm.

Angrath rolled his shoulders, bull head tipping side to side with a pop. "You just want to get to the top of the anthill and congratulate yourself on the view."

"Are you calling the Sun Empire an anthill?"

The minotaur laughed. It was a low, throaty noise that reminded Huatli of a braying longneck. "The Sun Empire are ants on an anthill, and so are the River Heralds and so is Torrezon and so is every other group of idiots on this plane."

"Well, at least you're insulting all of us at once."

Angrath reached ahead and pulled the stalk of a massive flower to one side to let Huatli pass through underneath. "My people value freedom above all else. We'd kill for it, Planeswalker, and everyone understands why." He gave her a serious look. "You've tied yourself a noose over nothing but half-remembered stories."

"Stories?" she barked. "You're talking about my history. You're talking about everything I live for. My life has been dedicated to finding the right words, expressing our collective emotions, preserving the Sun Empire's history with truth and pride."

The minotaur was *chuckling*. Huatli bit her tongue. He smiled at her as much as a minotaur could. "And what of the River Heralds? Doesn't their history deserve to be remembered?"

"Well . . . yes. I suppose it does. But the warrior-poet doesn't study theirs . . ."

"You're killing each other over who is powerful enough to decide what history *is*. You argue and spit to decide who will rule, but no one is truly free. Who are you to say that you are right, fool?"

Huatli felt conflicted.

She wondered who Angrath thought he was to speak to her so bluntly. He was crude and terse, but if he was telling the truth, he knew things Huatli had never conceived of. If he came from a different world, perhaps things worked differently where he was from. Huatli felt like a child, insistent and impetuous, boldly proclaiming her own importance. She disliked the implication that she ought to know better, because truthfully, how could she? The path she had walked in life was lined with walls far taller than she could see over.

A shudder traversed her shoulders.

Angrath paused in front. He looked back at Huatli.

"Did you feel that, too?"

She nodded. A little tingle ran down her neck and she shivered in spite of the heat of the jungle.

Angrath's ear twitched. "Follow me," he said.

Sun above, he is rude, Huatli thought with irritation.

The minotaur stilled, and Huatli felt a sudden bloom of heat in front of her. The minotaur was casting a spell. *No, something different*. As a glow like that of warm coals began to illuminate Angrath's body from within, she realized he meant for her to follow in a way she had only tried once before.

Huatli concentrated. She tried to remember how to look on the other side of the sun.

It hit her all at once, and the feeling sent shivers down her skin and tugged at her chest. It was frightening and familiar, like attempting a back handspring, or swimming without touching the bottom, and Huatli watched as her skin began to shine with the brilliant light of mid-afternoon. Her perception wavered, and she leaned forward into a separate realm. It was familiar now, a bright storm of color and light, and Angrath was there ahead of her. He was walking forward, reaching for an exit.

Huatli's feet left the jungle floor and stepped onto nothing. Her body was supported, but matter here had no weight or purpose. She saw currents of blue on either side, and each footstep vibrated with an energy she had never sensed before. Time was irrelevant here.

Angrath motioned for her to look through a portal in front of him. The minotaur still had the magical affect of an hours-old hearth, and Huatli realized she must be too bright for him to look at directly.

She looked through the window sliced in the air.



Skybreen | Art by Wayne England

It was cold there in a way she had never felt before. Mountains reached for the churning clouds, and bits of white fell quietly from a heavy sky.

Huatli was riveted. She leaned forward, and was immediately—violently—yanked back.

Huatli tore through space and color and back through the fabric of existence, falling backward into the clammy humidity and damp-soil stink of the jungle and landing flat on her back.

The now-familiar circle within a triangle shimmered above her head.

Angrath was standing near her. More accustomed to the magical expulsion, he had braced for the impact. He looked down at her with an illuminated triangle of his own hovering above his head and an I-told-you-so look in his bovine eyes.

“We must be near whatever is keeping us locked on this plane,” he grunted.

Huatli let out a shaking breath. “Where was that place?”

“Kaldheim,” Angrath said forcefully. “Another plane. Do you understand what I mean, now?”

Huatli shook her head.

Angrath snorted. “Freedom starts with knowing when you’re trapped.”

Afternoon bled into early evening, and Huatli and Angrath walked side by side. Their pace was quick, as Huatli knew how to navigate the rainforest with ease. The closer they came to the city, the more the environment around them changed. The leaves of the trees glittered with gold, and fractures in the earth created deep chasms that led to deeper golden passageways.

Huatli was concerned by the intensity of her chills. Angrath mumbled something about the Immortal Sun possibly dealing with the magic of Planeswalkers, and Huatli sighed. So many groups thought the Immortal Sun did so many different things. There was no way all of them could be true. At one point, Huatli asked where Angrath wanted to go first when he could leave the plane. “I want to see my daughters” was his terse response.

Huatli was touched by his vulnerability. “How long has it been since you’ve seen them?”

“Fourteen years,” Angrath growled. For a moment Huatli was moved. She was about to express her condolences, but was interrupted by Angrath’s addendum: “They’d drink the blood of your emperor with glee, idiot.”

If anything could have catapulted Huatli out of this world, Angrath’s personality would have done it.

They reached a structure emerging from the ground, a modest-size temple. A broad design embellished the front—a bat, its frightening face carved out of folds of rock. The deterioration of the structure suggested to Huatli that this was not part of Orazca, but was instead a tomb built near it. The tomb felt out of time, oddly displaced within the jungle. It was striking. Unsettling.

Huatli slowed to a stop.

She remembered an old story, one long forgotten by most, but not by her. Not by the warrior-poet of the Sun Empire.

“The Bat of the East,” she whispered.

Angrath’s ear twitched. “What bat?”

Huatli pointed at the structure in front of them. It was covered in vines and weathered with time, and the door in front had been jumbled ajar. “There’s a legend that says the bat of the East met Aclazotz . . .”

The minotaur grunted. “How was the bat stopped in the legend?”

“She put herself into an enchanted sleep.”

Huatli walked toward the entrance, entranced by the prospect of investigating the temple. If Orazca had awakened, perhaps this place had, too . . .

“What are you doing?!” Angrath yelled.

I’m seeing what is on the other side of the sun , Huatli thought to herself with a grin.

She approached the opening of the temple, but suddenly recoiled in shock as a pale white hand reached out from the interior. Huatli froze as the other, feminine hand gently grabbed the side of the golden slab.

Huatli immediately, silently cast a spell to summon the nearest dinosaur. Her heart pounded as her call went out, and she watched as the hand lifted the slab up and away from the entrance to the temple.

Huatli's panic vanished as the figure walked into the light, and her jaw dropped in awe.



Elenda, the Dusk Rose | Art by Chris Rahn

She was a vampire, without a doubt, with long curling locks and a youthful face that belied the deadly nature of her kind. She was of average height, perhaps slightly shorter than Huatli herself, but carried herself with the posture of royalty.

Huatli's breath caught in her chest. She glanced at Angrath, expecting him to charge in for the kill, but he was as still and frozen as she was.

"You are Saint Elenda," Angrath said distantly. "You're the one the vampires never shut up about."

Huatli was briefly perturbed that Angrath knew a legend she did not.

The woman moved deliberately, slowly, and looked from Angrath to Huatli with a smile on her lips.

"Orazca has awoken at last."

Her voice was light and quiet. A bell breaking silence.

Huatli stowed her awe and gripped her blade. A low growl came from several yards away, and Huatli urged her newly summoned dinosaur to crouch in preparation for an attack. She knew how legends worked; she knew better than any other how stories are begun and how they evolve. Nearly all tales spring from truth, and Huatli reasoned quickly that the legend of the Bat of the East began with this very real vampire centuries before.

The vampire remained relaxed. She locked eyes with Huatli, her face the very soul of serenity.

"Why do you take up arms?" she asked with plain curiosity.

Huatli scowled. “I refuse to allow the Legion of Dusk to take the city. You invaders deserve a fate worse than death!”

The vampire’s brow creased. Her lips were parted, her demeanor hurt. Her voice was hushed and otherworldly. “We are invaders now?”

“I know all of my people’s stories about you and your Legion of Dusk,” Huatli hissed. “Would you like to hear them?”

Huatli’s rage erupted. She recited a poem that she had written only two years before, relishing the bitter phrasing.

“Draped in the shadow of the East they came In search of a treasure lost to time The prickled rose, crusted blood smeared ‘Adanto’ on our south Drinkers of life, devourers of names.”

Angrath was quivering with anger and impatience. “We don’t have time for chitchat, Huatli. We need to take the Immortal Sun so we can *leave*.”

Elenda did not pay any attention to Angrath. Her air of calm was replaced by a quiet fury. She was visibly tense, her golden eyes darting back and forth between Huatli and Angrath. “What did the Legion of Dusk come here for?”

Huatli spat her words with vitriol. “To take what is not theirs. What did you *think* they came here for?”

“To retrieve the one thing that *is* ours,” Elenda replied in a measured but angry tone. “And to leave all else in peace. That was our most holy mission.”

Angrath growled. “You ought to tell the rest of your cronies that. Huatli, let’s go.”

Huatli ignored Angrath and tightened her grip on her blade. Saint Elenda stood tense as a jungle cat, as though at any moment she might attack with liquid grace and stiletto-sharp claws.

The vampire bared her teeth. “I left the Church with the knowledge of the ritual to take on my burden, and they used that to become *invaders*?”

Huatli glared. “What were they meant to do with your gift?”

“They were meant to learn *humility*.”

Huatli’s jaw fell open. The Legion of Dusk? *Humble*?

“They were meant to search for salvation for us *all*,” Elenda continued. “I see I must teach them what they forgot.”

Elenda straightened, and a great shadow fell across her face. She stepped forward, past Huatli and Angrath, and vanished into a dark slice in the air.

A moment later, the sunlight returned, amber and dappled through the leaves above, and the vampire was gone.

Huatli blinked, looking around for a sign of where she went. “Oh, come on!” she sighed, exasperated.

“Can we go now?!” Angrath roared with displeasure and struck a nearby tree with one of his chains. It cracked from the impact and crashed to the earth, dozens of small animals and insects scattering in its wake.

Huatli scowled at the minotaur. “What was that for?! You’ll just draw attention to us!”

“You are too easily distracted! We lost time by talking to the vampire!”

“She’s a living *saint* who I wanted to give a *piece of my mind*!”

“You swapping stories is not worth me wasting any more time!”

Angrath launched a chain at Huatli’s face that she just barely dodged, its heat searing her cheek.

Though her reflexes and training allowed her to vault backward, right herself, and draw her blade with incredible speed, by the time she was able to focus her attention on Angrath to counterattack, he had already turned and run a surprisingly long distance toward the spires of Orazca.

Angrath (rude, incorrigible, frustrating Angrath) was going to get there before she did.

And Huatli would not allow that to happen.

JACE

Jace’s insides had been drowned in emotion, squeezed with suffocating force, pinned to a line, and strung out in the wind. Exhaustion did not begin to describe how wrung out he felt.

He deliberately placed each foot ahead of the other as he ascended the stairs to Orazca, overly aware of the presence of Vraska behind him. Jace was too tired to feel ashamed for being unable to control himself. Ailments of the body manifested in uncontrollable fevers. It only made sense that ailments of a telepath’s mind would manifest as . . . that. An expulsion. A violent outpouring of mental magic.

The majority of his thoughts were working furiously to catalogue and dissect the flood of memories still pouring in. The well of his mind was immeasurably deep now, with textures as varied and endless as those in the world around him. He had to focus on something. If he didn’t, he was certain he’d be overcome with grief once again.

(A flash of memory: himself at twelve, sitting in the corner of his bedroom, wrapped in a wool blanket, wiping away a tear after the family pet died.)

The memories were still coming, but he could contain them now. No more psychic spillage. Nothing else for Vraska to see (thank goodness). He was embarrassed at how much she’d seen, but realized with mounting comfort how much she could relate to.

She’d been tortured, too, after all. She knew.

Jace was thankful he had a moment of mindless repetition to allow himself to focus on mental organization. One step after another after another as he ascended toward the city. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot.

The long stair of solid gold crawled up the side of the newly exposed bedrock, snaking in switchback after switchback up its face. As Jace climbed upward with Vraska close behind, he could see thick veins of gold shining through the rock. He felt increasingly awkward with each step he took, as if each footstep were the equivalent of him wiping his feet on a stranger’s treasure. Gold was malleable and soft, and he wondered if the city possessed some way to magically counter the wear and tear of centuries.

The idea of gold brought back vague hints of awful memories still waiting to be uncovered.

(Gold scales. Sandstone. Heat. Rough sand on his lips and in his eyes and in his throat. Broken, doomed friends. He was trying to break into a dragon’s mind. Sense what the dragon’s plan was, stop him from doing harm, and for a brief moment, *he had done it*, he saw the goal, the endgame—)

That memory was trickier to parse. Jace tried to see if he could recall the details.

(The dragon noticed his presence, and tried to retaliate by reading his own mind. But something intervened as the dragon tried to intrude, and everything went dark.)

No luck. Jace frowned, frustrated. He wanted to remember the bits in between. He wanted to know the golden dragon's name. He itched to put it together again so it would all make sense.

But the thought of one dragon reminded him of another.

(Ugin was unfurling himself inside a great cavern. "Good fortune, Jace Beleren," he said in farewell, curling his immense silvery tail around himself.)

Jace blinked. Ugin. That name came to him easily, but the texture of this memory was strange. He felt for the conversation in his mind and thumbed around its edges, inspecting its sides with the same care he had when Alhammarret had meddled with his memory years before. *Never trust your memory around anything older than yourself.* Jace grimaced to realize he never would have thought to investigate if he hadn't remembered learning that the hard way.

There. A hair trigger. A line waiting to be tripped, a clever bit of obfuscating mental magic that the spirit dragon must have implanted without him noticing. The spell left behind was a simple command. *If someone were to try and read my mind and find this encounter with Ugin, the memory would be shrouded, and I would be compelled to instantly planeswalk away. To here. To Ixalan.*

Jace became worried. *Why did Ugin need to hide my memory of him? Why command me to come here, of all places? Was I meant to be a lure?*

... And what did I find in the golden dragon's mind before he erased my own?

He put the memory of both the spirit dragon and the golden dragon aside and resolved to ruminate on them when time allowed.

He and Vraska reached the top of the stairs, thighs burning and hearts pounding with effort from the seemingly endless climb. Vraska stretched out her hamstrings, holding on to a golden pillar for support.

They stood at the edge of a vast plaza, and at the other end was a massive tower. They were surrounded on all sides by passageway after golden passageway, a glittering labyrinth.

"We would have been stuck in there if we came through any other way," she said, taking a swig of water from her hip flask. "Thanks for falling down that waterfall."

"No problem," Jace replied dryly. "Let me know if I need to heave myself over the side of another."

A central tower dominated their view. Vraska pulled out the thaumatic compass. It was pointing dead ahead. She put the compass away and looked to Jace. "What we need is in there. Can you send up an illusion to let the crew know where we are?"

Jace wasn't listening. A mental presence had caught his attention. He tilted his head in the direction of the psychic noise.

"What is it?" Vraska whispered.

"It's big."

Jace pulled a wave of illusion over the two of them. It came easily now, somehow even more so than before he had come to Ixalan.

(Another memory: hours and hours spent memorizing text and technique, his teenage self staying up late in bed with a lamp to study by. The hum of a mage ring outside. Millard's Procedure. Circumstantial Manipulations. Tricien's Law. Over and over until the names, techniques, and executions of psychic maneuvers came as easily as breathing.)

Vraska looked toward the staircase they had just climbed and gasped.

An immense dinosaur's head towered over the city.



Zetalpa, Primal Dawn | Art by Chris Rallis

It stretched its wings and launched itself into the air. Each flap of its wings rustled the trees, and Jace marveled at how such a massive creature could fly. The creature sailed upward, predatory and alert, but Jace remained still. He and Vraska were safe beneath his illusion.

In that moment, Jace noticed a change within himself. The Jace of Zendikar and Innistrad and Ravnica had a nervous energy about him, persistently bored and disastrously introspective, constantly aware of the chasm of absent memory that was always on his mind's horizon. The Jace without a past was present, alert, comfortable no matter the circumstance and ready to face whatever might come his way. He remembered what it was like to be both, but recognized how much more natural it was to be the latter. In the span of a moment, Jace was surprised at himself, and then realized his earnestness of late, of Ixalan, was not manufactured, nor was his mindfulness something he could only access in a state of amnesia. That was who he had always been. He had just forgotten.

(A memory: his mother, arriving home from a day at work, dressed in her healer's smock, looking out the open window at a storm in the distance with a cup of coffee nestled in her hands and a little smile on her tired face. He heard fat raindrops rattling the tin roof. The air smelled like wet concrete and home.)

Jace smiled. He liked being able to remember his mother.

I hope she is alive, he thought to himself.

"It's gone," Vraska said, breaking the spell.

Jace remembered where he was and released his hold on his illusion.

"You cast that illusion more quickly than I've seen you do it before," she said.

Jace nodded with a tight smile. "I can remember the skills my mentor taught me, now. I learned more from him by the time I was a teenager than I ever did teaching myself."

"So teenage you had more refined technique than adult you?"

“And now current me has the knowledge of both. It’s . . . weird.”

Vraska looked him in the eye. “You’re incredible. You know that, right?”

Jace returned her smile and felt his cheeks warming. “I do my best.”

“Well, your best is incredible,” Vraska said, turning toward the central tower and approaching a large gate on what appeared to be its back side.

Liliana never told Jace he was incredible.

Liliana would have scoffed. She would have made a dismissive joke, rolled her eyes, and called him a show-off. She would not bother to talk to him for days. She would consume the body of a demon with a crocodile’s jaws and laugh over the sound of its flesh tearing off. She would do all sorts of things, but she would never call him incredible.

Jace caught up with Vraska as she walked, and they approached the central tower. She pulled out the thaumatic compass—its point was focused directly on the back door to the tower in front of them.

The sky above was turning an alarming black, and smoke swirled around the top of the tower above them. Jace and Vraska shared a worried look.

“Did the vampires get here first?” Vraska asked.

The rolling, inky clouds above gave them their answer.

Vraska tried to shove the gate open, but it was locked shut. She stood back and eyeballed the pattern on the front of the door.

“It’s a maze,” Vraska said at the same time as Jace. They glanced at each other briefly, awkwardly.

Vraska gestured toward Jace. “Have at it,” she said. “You’re the maze guy.”

Jace started to trace the solution to the maze, a line of blue magically trailing his fingers as they moved. The churning black in the sky above inspired him to hasten his pace.

“That’s me,” he said with amusement. “Jace Beleren: Living Guildpact, telepath, illusionist, maze guy.”

“Rolls right off the tongue.”



Azor's Gateway | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

His fingers found the end of the maze in the center of the door. Jace's gut dropped to his knees. He extended his senses to see who was on the other side of the door and threw up a mental shield around himself and Vraska.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Jace realized his jaw was hanging open. He pointed to the symbol on the door.

"That's the symbol that appeared over our heads every time we tried to planeswalk," he said. "It's the symbol of the Azorius."

Vraska furrowed her brow. "The Azorius are on Ravnica."

Jace's gut flip-flopped. With a brief mental scan, he sensed someone was in the room. He looked at Vraska with only a hint of panic. "Were there any famous Azorius Planeswalkers?"

Vraska's brow furrowed. "I don't know. There isn't exactly an index."

"It would have to be someone high up in the organization. Someone who saw that symbol as their own personal identity," he said, punctuating his statement by pointing at the door in front of them.

"The parun of the Azorius was Azor."

Jace scanned the room again and froze. He did not know who was inside, but he instantly knew *what* was inside. This person's mind was familiar, labyrinthine, a mind like only one he had ever encountered before.

Was Azor a sphinx? he asked Vraska in her mind with hushed terror.

She looked back at him with concern. She knew what sphinxes meant to him. She tapped a finger to the side of her head, and Jace mentally listened.

You'll never be hurt by a sphinx ever again, she said with resolution. A cruel hint of amber flashed in her eyes.

Jace could have hugged her there and then. He remembered her preferences, and settled for a thankful smile.

I'll start charging to petrify, Vraska said. *Give me the word and he's dead.*

Jace nodded. Anxiety ate at his nerves, and his mouth tasted of dull metallic fear.

He pushed the door and watched it creak open, sifting dust down as it revealed the chamber inside.

The room was long and covered in vines. An immense throne was at the far end, and a massive glowing disc was embedded in the ceiling above. Dried grass and cloth was littered at the base of the throne, and as Jace and Vraska opened the door, they saw a massive figure lift its bearded head.



Azor, the Lawbringer | Art by Ryan Pancoast

“Who approaches?” said the sphinx. His voice was scratchy with disuse, more animal growl than human speech.

Vraska stepped forward, confident and calm, every ounce the captain that she was. “Two strangers to this world. Tell us your name, step out of the way, and give us the Immortal Sun if you do not wish to die.”

The sphinx glowered at them both. He was immense, and held himself with a predatory tension that contrasted the wisdom of his gaze.

“I am Azor, the Lawbringer,” he growled, tipping his head as he stared at Vraska. “And you will be a prisoner for the third time in your life, *gorgon*.”

Jace slammed a psychic ward between the sphinx and Vraska. She had gone still with surprise at the sphinx’s mental intrusion, shocked he would dip into her mind without a second thought.

He is so much like Alhammarret, Jace thought, his chest tightening with the ache of memory. He stowed his fear. He was not ruled by a sphinx. Not anymore.

“You will refer to her as *Captain*,” Jace said in a measured tone.

The sphinx growled and looked past Vraska at Jace. “And what does that make you?”

“I am Jace Beleren, the Living Guildpact,” he said with confidence.
The sphinx’s wings flinched. “The fail-safe?!”
“The pirate.”