

The Believers' Pilgrimage

Doug Beyer

From set *Battle for Zendikar*

Gideon Jura brought Jace Beleren to Zendikar in hopes that the mind mage could crack what the merfolk scholars of Sea Gate called the “puzzle of leylines,” the mystery of the network of stone hedrons that float in the skies of Zendikar. The hedrons are tied intimately to the Eldrazi, serving as lures, bonds, and—the scholars hope—weapons.

But with Sea Gate fallen and the scholars’ records lost, there may be only one place on Zendikar where Jace can get what he needs . . . and only one guide who’s willing to help him get there.

Jace pressed his forehead against a hedron, running his hand over its runes. The structure jutted out from the grass at an angle, mostly submerged in the earth, a slouching iceberg of stone. Strwn across the rocky fields from here to the encampment, and to Sea Gate beyond that, were the bodies of slain Eldrazi, lying like jellyfish washed up on a beach.

He sensed someone approaching behind him, from the direction of the encampment. “Jori En, is it?” He turned to her.

“And you’re Jace,” she said. She was a tall merfolk, outfitted for the wilderness. She moved with the self-assured bearing of someone who had traveled Zendikar for years, but with the taut, careful look of someone who had witnessed devastation very recently. “I’m here to share what I know.”

“Good.” Jace poked at a dead Eldrazi creature with his foot. Its tissue deformed in colors of magenta and teal. He looked up at Jori En. “People used to worship them as gods, didn’t they?”

“Some still do. Can’t much blame them.”

“We need to stop the problem at its root.”

Jori nodded. “That’s what the researchers hoped to do, at Sea Gate. Extinguish them.”

“With the hedron network.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve had success using the hedrons?”

“I only saw some of their research. But I’ll tell you everything I can remember.”

Jace focused his glance on a space just between Jori’s eyes. “I have a better idea, if you’re amenable.”

Jace’s consciousness toured Jori’s mind, swimming through imagery of goblins strapping small hedrons to sticks, kor warriors painting their faces to mimic hedron runes, and merfolk researchers at Sea Gate plying their magic on hedrons. He focused in on one memory in particular—a team of Zendikari, led by a human woman, using the magic of the hedrons to guide the Eldrazi creatures’ movements. The puzzle of leylines. The woman, Kendrin, had been close to understanding something crucial about how the hedron’s magic could be used—and turned into a weapon against the Eldrazi.

Unfortunately, Jace also saw the memory of Jori putting her hand on Kendrin's forehead as the dead woman's body crumbled into brittle ribs of gray dust. She had died to the Eldrazi slaughter before she could pass on enough of what she knew.



Art by Cynthia Sheppard

Jace opened his eyes and sucked in a breath, emerging from Jori En's mind as if he were breaching the surface of an ocean.

Jori was squatting above him, on top of the hedron, looking down at him. "That was fascinating," she said, smirking with a twitch of her finned jawline. "I could almost feel the second presence in my mind."

"Sometimes I can sense the person perceiving my perception of them. It's like catching my own reflection in a mirror. Sort of."

"So do you know all my dark secrets now?"

"I know Kendrin was close to something." But Jace also knew he couldn't yet solve the puzzle he was brought here to solve. He needed more—and he knew where he needed to go.

Before he could explain, footsteps crunched toward them. "Hello, Gideon," Jace said.

Jace and Jori turned to see Gideon approach, sunlight pooling on the warrior's armor like liquid light. "Tell me you have a breakthrough," Gideon said gruffly.

"We're close," said Jace. "We have to go to the Eye."

Jori's facial fins spread in surprise. "The Eye of Ugin? You want to go all the way to Akoum?"

"It's the lynchpin to the hedron network. That's where we'll find the answer."

"No," said Gideon. "Absolutely not. We just established this encampment. We have injured. We can't go separating the group."

"We already have," said Jace. "Nissa left in the night."

Gideon was aghast. “What? Why?”

“I didn’t talk to her. Only got surface thoughts as she left. I gathered she had a mission that was important to her.”

“More important than solving the nature of the hedrons?” Jori snapped. “We have to focus on life and death here.”

“I tend to agree,” said Jace. “Come with us, Gideon.”

“I *am* focusing on life and death,” said Gideon stonily. “This place is life and death, every minute. I can’t—we can’t afford another refugee death. I’m not leaving to protect you on a cross-country mission.” Gideon nodded at the merfolk. “You have Jori’s account. Can’t you solve it here, together?”



Art by Eric Deschamps

“I only have what they accomplished, not why it worked,” Jace said. “Look. You’re not seeing the bigger picture here. This was what I came here to do. Let me do it.”

“If you leave the encampment, these people will die, and so will you.”

Jace spread his hands wide, embracing the whole horizon. “If I don’t get to the Eye, *everyone* on this plane will die.”

“Have you ever—changed things?” Jori asked, holding reins in her hands. “While you were in there?”

Jace sat next to her on a small coach pulled by a single hurda. It was the best the encampment could spare. They rode out from the encampment—without Gideon.

Jace paused. “Sometimes that becomes necessary.”

“You could have removed my memory of her, for example. Of Kendrin. Of her death.”

Jace thought of Jori's hand touching the dead woman's forehead. It felt like his own hand, in his memory. He could feel Kendrin's skin, how it was too cool and too thin, and dry to the touch. "You didn't want that."

"But you could have."

"Yes."

"How do I know you didn't alter anything else?" Jori asked. Then she added, "There is nothing you can say that will prove it to you either way, is there?"

"I'm told I am not an easy person to be friends with."

"Did you think about—you know—changing his mind?" Jori asked. "You could have *made* him a believer in the mission, couldn't you?"

He had thought about it, yes. One quick spell, and he could have "convinced" Gideon to come. "I consider every possibility," said Jace.

"Not sure I'd have the same restraint you do," she said. "Seems like there'd always be possibilities *he* would never consider."



Mind Sculpt | Art by Michael C. Hayes

"He's hard to budge, in more ways than one. A difference between us, I suppose."

"And yet you chose not to meddle with his mind. Maybe you're more alike than you think."

Jace looked at the horizon beyond the packbeast that pulled the coach. "If we were alike, he'd see the importance of the Eye. He'd have devoted all his resources into making sure we understand the hedrons. He'd be here, with us."

Jori flicked the reins as the land trailed by. "You ever wonder what you'd be able to accomplish if there were just more of yourself around?"

Jace shook off thoughts of Gideon, and let himself chuckle. He cast a quick illusion spell, and three other Jaces appeared. The duplicate Jaces perched at odd angles on the hurda's back, all identical in their blue cloaks. "We wonder that frequently," they said in unison, and disappeared.

Jori gave him a skeptical smile, and shook her head.

It was days until they encountered any Eldrazi. They rambled past hedron-studded pastures, with knobby stone islands casting shadows down on them from the air above. They spoke little, and Jace struggled to piece together what he knew. He tried to find a reason they should turn back, a reason why their knowledge of the hedrons was somehow sufficient. He was probably even familiar enough with Sea Gate that he could planeswalk back there safely, via some other plane. But that would strand Jori En out here alone.

When the swarm of Eldrazi spawn crested the hill and scrambled toward the two travelers, the sun was behind them, and light glinted off all the angular elbows and framed the blank cranial faces.



Art by Todd Lockwood

"Drive!" said Jace.

Jori saw them, but cover was almost nonexistent. "Where?"

"Anywhere!"

Jori yanked diagonally on the reins—too hard. The hurda snorted in revolt and threw its weight in the opposite direction, snapping the reins out of Jori's hands. Jace and Jori clung on as the coach jackknifed and tilted, and something cracked down by the wheels. The coach righted itself, but now it was being pulled at the hurda's whims.

"New plan!" said Jace. "Stop!"

"*You* stop it!"

Before Jace could explain the folly of trying to mind-alter the beast, the hurda slapped the ground with its paws and shifted its weight again, now turning directly toward the wave of advancing Eldrazi.

That halted it. Jace and Jori lurched with the stopping coach.

Seeing the creatures moving toward it, the hurda slowly started backing up, pushing back into its own rigging, pushing back against the coach. The coach began to tilt, and something wooden was breaking —

A kor woman dashed past the coach, seemingly out of nowhere, holding sharp, curving grappling hooks. She leapt onto the rigging, ran up the hurda's back, and jumped onto the ground between the packbeast and the scrambling Eldrazi. Jace could see that her skin was smudged with symbols in black grease—like hedron runes, but perhaps slightly different.

Jori was incredulous. “Where the hell did she come from?”

The kor woman looked at Jace and Jori, and without breaking eye contact with them, sliced through the hurda's neck with one of the sharp hooks. With a bellow, the hurda fell to the ground. She stood there, blood dripping from her hook, looking at them.

Jace checked Jori's face to see his own mental state reflected back at him: extreme alarm.

“Come with me!” the kor woman said sternly. “Hurry! They'll eat the animal first.”

With that, she bolted past them, heading toward a low hill.

Jace and Jori leapt down from the coach and ran after her, Jori grabbing a halberd from the coach and Jace grabbing—nothing, as usual. The kor woman disappeared over the ridge, and they followed her to the lip of a narrow chasm.

The kor woman had already deployed her lines and was rappelling down into the fissure. “Down here! Quickly!”



Art by Eric Deschamps

Jace looked back. Sure enough, the hurda was already being overwhelmed and torn to shreds by the Eldrazi creatures.

"I'm with her," said Jori En. She threw the halberd onto a strap on her back and lurched herself down the ropes, heading down into the chasm.

Jace had eight or nine distinct bad feelings about this. But he took hold of one of the lines and pulled himself down. He had a strange brainstorm of creating illusions of himself to climb alongside him. He imagined them losing their grip on the ropes and falling, and for some reason the thought was strangely comforting. Better them than him.

The kor woman helped him to the ground as Jori dusted herself off. "I am Ayli," she said. "We must get you to the sanctuary. Hurry, please!"

Jace and Jori En exchanged another look—the facial equivalent of a desperate shrug. Ayli dashed through the narrow chasm, and they followed. They squeezed through the walls on either side of them; some were defined by the flat surfaces of great hedrons, other sections bare rock. They tried to hurry, which became increasingly difficult as they descended into shadow. Jace tried to keep close to Jori's back, his mind racing with fallback options as they got farther and farther from the coach.

The chasm widened, and the sky opened overhead.

Jace's gaze arced up from Jori, who had stopped dead in her tracks—to the kor woman, Ayli, who stood serenely before them, her hands folded—to the wide swath *hewn* in the land ahead of them, edged with brittle gray dust—to the towering horror, the titan poised on a skirt of sinewy tentacles, the eyeless-skulled deity with its great bifurcated limbs.

Ulamog.



Art by Michael Komarck

Jace could barely move. The air felt wrong. He felt drawn forward somehow, as if gravity had shifted away from the earth and toward this thing. He felt like krill drawn toward a whale's maw, sucked inevitably toward its consuming bristles.

"Welcome, offerings, to the sanctuary," said Ayli, raising her arms. "The presence of the god Mangeni, whose second name is Ula, whose voice sings the Song of Devouring, will be your final sanctuary."

Jace turned to retreat, but he and Jori were surrounded. A dozen other priests stood between them and the gap in the chasm. They were all dressed alike, painted with dark, greasy streaks like Ayli, and they all bore weapons. Two of them held lengths of thick iron chain.

"We are the Eternal Pilgrims," Ayli intoned. "We shall forever roam!"

"WE SHALL FOREVER ROAM!" chanted the other priests.

"We present these world-gifts in Ula's name!"

"IN ULA'S NAME!"

Ulamog reached out with its tentacled bulk, grasped a quantity of earth, and then, horribly, began to drag itself forward. The sound of Ulamog's locomotion chilled Jace's soul—it was the sound of living earth having all its essence leeches out of it, of fierce and wild mana being silenced forever, of rich terrain turning to desiccated bone.

It was only for a moment, but Jace imagined his own body dissolving under Ulamog's mass, his tissues separating from each other, his flesh floating away from him like the floating islands of Zendikar—

This was what was going to happen to the entire world. The Eldrazi titan was consuming every flicker of energy on the plane, from the mana of the land to individual lives, slowly and inexorably.

In a flash, Jace perceived the pattern that would develop. The peoples of Zendikar would flee from the wasted lands, gathering together in the places that could still support life, concentrating their number around defensive locations and landmarks. And in turn, Ulamog would drag his towering form toward those concentrations. And those trusted landmarks would become—tombs.

Sea Gate .

That's why Sea Gate was being attacked by the scions of the Eldrazi. They were the farthest tendrils of Ulamog's spread, reaching out, sensing for the concentrations of population, sensing concentrations of energy.



Art by Slawomir Maniak

No, not sensing, he thought. *Tasting* .

Ayli and the circle of Eternal Pilgrims closed in on them. They raised the iron chains, and moved closer to Jace and Jori. Jori brandished her halberd, whipping it back and forth.

It was not a time for subtlety. Jace walked straight up to one of the Pilgrims who was in his way, a human with gray stubble.

"In Ula's name—" the man began, reaching forward to wrap Jace in chains.

"Stop," said Jace, and the man burst into flames.

The man screamed. He dropped the chains and flailed, pawing at his body, trying to slap at the fire that suddenly engulfed him. It wouldn't go out. He dropped to the ground and rolled against the grass, but it still wouldn't go out. He moaned in agony.

Jace looked around at all the Eternal Pilgrims, and they, too, erupted in flames.

They shrieked in unison, all of them grabbing at themselves, trying to shed their flame-consumed robes, writhing on the ground or running in random directions.

Jace and Jori were no longer surrounded.

"Which way out of here?" asked Jace.

Jori's mouth hung open. "Uh—back into the chasm. We can climb back up the other face."

As they raced back into the narrow fissure, Jori whispered at him. "How—? You're not a pyromancer."

"The important thing is," said Jace, "*they* don't know that."

Jori looked back. Over their shoulder, the Pilgrims weren't on fire at all. They patted at their perfectly whole bodies, thrashing around in the grass for no reason. Jace saw her shoot him a look, and they ran on.

Jace and Jori caught their breath. In the distance, Ulamog hauled itself forward in the direction of Sea Gate, carving its way through the landscape. The Pilgrims hadn't strayed far from their object of worship.

"I had never seen a titan before," said Jori.

"Neither had I."

It had become clear to Jace what needed to happen, and he didn't like it. Now he had to break the news to Jori, and hope she agreed.

"Well, we lost all our provisions in the coach. . ." Jori said.

"Jori," said Jace softly.

". . . So I can hunt for us for the next few days. I should be able to get us to the Eye on foot. We'll have to ask for help with the crossing, and then there's the Teeth of Akoum. But I have friends among the Tuktuk goblins who may be able to help. . ."

"Jori, someone has to warn them."

"Warn who?"

"The others, back at Sea Gate. Ulamog is headed right for them. Gideon has to know what's coming."

"And abandon our expedition to the Eye? You can't just . . . tell him? From here?"

"It's too far for telepathy."

"You could just . . . return. Right now. You're one of those."

"I'm not doing that."

"So, what? We just—head back?" Jori's neck-fins wrinkled. She turned away for a moment, toward the horizon, but then faced him again. "All right. Yes. We'll turn around. Head back as fast as we can. And we'll prepare for a fight at the encampment."

"You go," said Jace.

"What?"

"Go back and warn them. I'm going to the Eye."

"You're going on alone? Jace, no."

"It's what has to happen."

"But you'll never make it!"

"I have to."

"But then there's only *one* of you! I won't let you go alone, unprovisioned, unprepared."

"I'll have my illusions to keep me company."

"Not funny. Come on. You're coming back to Sea Gate with me."

Jace wondered if she knew her hand had involuntarily touched her halberd. "You're going to drag me back with you?"

"If I have to!"

"I thought you might say something like that." Jace backed away. He had to consider every possibility.

"Goodbye, Jori."

"Wait," she found herself saying. "Jace. Wait. No. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Jori shook her head and looked around. The encampment wasn't far now—another day's hike would have her back there to warn them. She had made good time without the tenderfoot mind mage to slow her down. It had only been a few days since she had convinced Jace—

—*Right? —Yes?*

She furrowed her brow.

. . . *Yes.*

—since she had convinced him to go on to the Eye without her. It had been the smartest option. He just needed to see the bigger picture.

She stopped hiking. What had she just been saying to herself?

"*Wait, Jace, no?*"



Art by Adam Paquette

She scanned around, feeling like she needed to get her bearings. The sky above her was much as it had been for the past several days—broad and blue, and peppered with clouds and the occasional floating hedron, limitless and familiar and yet somehow odd. She felt an unsettling sensation, as if the dome of sky had just somehow bent into a new shape, suddenly and just outside her field of vision. She swiveled her head around. The grass and stones and distant trees all looked as they should. She looked at a stone on the ground. She kicked it.

“Goddamn it, Jace.”

She heaved a breath and shook her head.

She adjusted a strap on her armor and walked on, on toward Sea Gate.