

Jace's Origin: Absent Minds

Kelly Digges

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Vryn

Jace paused at the foot of the last flight of stairs.

His family lived most of the way up the mage-ring the locals called Silmot's Crossing, among the collection of apartments where the poorest mana miners on the ring made their home. He and his family had to pay to take the rickety lifts or trudge up twenty-three flights of stairs every time they returned home. Money was scarce, so Jace took the stairs.

Twenty-two flights of stairs behind him. One to go.



Art by Chase Stone

Now that he was this close, he hesitated. He was going to be in trouble, probably as soon as he opened the door, even though he still didn't think he'd done anything wrong.

Lack-witted idiot.

A big lug shoved past him from behind.

Jace couldn't help but agree with the sentiment.

I swear, that Beleren kid ...

Jace finally reached the top of the stairs. He took a deep breath and stepped into the apartment.

Home.

Sure enough, there was his father, sitting at the kitchen table, frowning. Gav Beleren, grubby and balding, regarded Jace with little more than weariness.

I wish he was normal.

His father's thoughts traced a familiar path.

"I got a sending from school."

Jace wasn't surprised the news had beaten him home. Illusions didn't have to climb stairs, and he hadn't exactly hurried. His father gestured for him to sit.

"Mind telling me what happened?"

Jace sat. He shrugged and stared at the table.

"You don't want to be expelled, do you? Education is your ticket out of here, to a better life."

A better life than mine . It always came back to that.

"I know," said Jace.

You don't act like it .

"I just need to know whether you did this. I want to hear it from you."

Jace kept staring at the table.

He'd taken a mana dynamics test full of questions he didn't know how to begin to answer. He thought he'd studied, thought he'd been prepared, but as he stared at the test, he drew a complete blank. Then the answers just...came to him. He knew the formulas. He showed his work. He answered perfectly, and he knew it.

Thing was, he'd been right the first time—he had been prepared for the test—but they were trick questions. He wasn't supposed to know the answers. He was supposed to get as close as he could, to show what he knew, but he knew too much.

"I don't know," he said.

"You *don't know*? What the hell does that mean? Did you cheat or not?"

"No," said Jace. "I just...knew the answers."

"They're saying you solved a six-node mana-pressure equation in your *head*. If that's true, you should be supervising a regulator team, not taking lessons."

Jace shrugged again. "Maybe I should be."

Too far. His father pounded the table with a fist.

"Go to your room. We'll talk about this when your mother gets home."

Jace stood and turned to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Why is it never easy with you?

"Out," said Jace. And he ran, before his father could stop him.

He ran up the stairs this time, around the curve of the ring, all the way to its apex, above even the monitoring station, pressing through the crowd. Their thoughts, loud and sullen, mingled with his own. He climbed a ladder to an access hatch—one that civilians on the ring weren't even supposed to know about—and stepped out onto the roof of the massive structure he called home.



Art by Jaime Jones

He stood hundreds of feet above the valley floor on the angled, rusty plates that made up the ring's outer shell. The wind whipped at his cloak, and he pulled his scarf up around his head. Here, far from the inhabited portions of the ring, he could think without interruption. Other peoples' thoughts were distant echoes; he couldn't hear anything but the whistling of the wind.

Towering above him was the hoop of the guide ring, easily forty feet across but miniscule in comparison to the ring itself. He walked carefully down the curved plating and sat near the edge on the windward side. Vertigo overtook him and he savored it, one feeling at least that he could be sure was his own. It happened, occasionally, that people fell, and usually somebody caught them. Usually.

The line of mage-rings stretched away into the distance, following a gentle curve. Three rings down, they joined with another and merged into one channel: Silmot's Crossing. The nearby rings had picked up the name as well. Past the Crossing, that gentle curve continued, cutting across the silvery ribbon of the Sparrow River, following a different set of currents entirely.

Behind him, somewhere, were the enormous mana collection stations that channeled energy into the ring network. And out there, ahead of him, past the horizon, were the Core States, sitting in the middle of the ring network, gathering all the energy of an entire continent for use by the mage elite—unless the Separatists had hijacked the stream again. The ringers theoretically owed their allegiance to the Ampryn League, but they never knew who was working the receivers at any given time, and they didn't really care. As long as the mana kept moving, nobody would bother them.

The guide ring above him began to crackle with flickers of energy—intermittently at first, then more vigorously. Jace was in luck. He smiled and reached into his pack, where he'd stashed some meat pies in anticipation of being sent to bed without eating. *Dinner and a show.*

Over the roar of the wind came the faint sound of bells ringing far below. It was about to begin. He took a bite of a lukewarm meat pie. Not bad.

As he chewed, the guide ring—smaller and more sensitive than the primary—reacted to an incoming mana pulse. All the ringers on second shift scrambled to action far beneath him. In the monitoring

station, supervisors gauged the strength of the incoming pulse and assigned ring mages to points all around the ring to stabilize the mana stream.



Art by Jung Park

No doubt the coordinators in the monitoring station were furiously calculating mana pressure equations. Their ring had twelve mana control nodes, each crewed by half a dozen ring mages, and each mana pulse had its own pressure and spin and internal dynamics. Even with guidance tables, the math would be exponentially more difficult than what was on his test, but the supervisors knew how to do it.

Jace took another bite of his pie. What if someone asked *him* to solve it? Would he find that he somehow knew this too? He chewed, contemplating. Perhaps. Probably. It seemed so.

In a flash, the air below him filled with shimmering, white-blue energy. The mana stream arced through the center of the ring, fluctuating as the ring mages channeled magic into the mana nodes to achieve a consistent pressure.

It was a vision. A masterpiece.

The ring groaned and creaked as the stream locked into place, the raw power of the mana stream anchored to the physical structure of the ring.

There's the freak.

The biting thought was the only warning Jace got.

He scrambled to his feet and spun, but he was too late. Three of his schoolmates stood between him and the access hatch.



Art by Kieran Yanner

“Hey, Beleren,” said the largest of the three, his booming voice overpowering the wind. His name was Tuck. At fourteen, he was a year older than Jace, a head taller, and built like a loading dock.

The other two were Caden, a crater-faced kid who made Tuck look brilliant, and Jill, an angry young woman who had more sway over Caden and Tuck than either of the two toughs realized. Once, when they were in primary school, she’d shoved Jace down a flight of stairs.

“I was just leaving,” Jace said, moving to slip between Tuck and Jill.

Jill shoved him back into place.

“Don’t be rude,” said Tuck. “We just want to enjoy the view with you.”

“I need to get home,” said Jace. He moved to step around the trio entirely, but Tuck shot out a meaty arm and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Let’s chat,” said Tuck. “The instructor thinks you’re a cheater, but you aren’t, are you?”

Jace tried to shrug out of Tuck’s grip, but he didn’t dare lay a hand on the larger boy.

“You’re worse than a cheater,” said Tuck. “You’re a freak.”

The bones in Jace’s shoulder ground together under Tuck’s hand.

“A stuck-up, know-it-all freak.”

Tuck continued to squeeze. Jace stared at the ground, unable to move any farther.

“Fine,” said Jace. “Whatever.”

“Say it,” said Tuck. He was grinning.

“I’m a freak,” whispered Jace.

Tuck pulled him closer.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t quite hear you. Caden, could you hear him?”

"Not a peep," said Caden.

"I'm a freak," said Jace, louder this time.

"See, boys?" said Jill. "I told you the freak knew he was a freak."

"Well," said Tuck, "what do we do with a freak?"

He punched Jace in the stomach, hard. Jace sank to all fours...and peered inside the jagged, tangled corridors of Tuck's mind.

"It must have been very frightening," said Jace, speaking into the rusted plating.

"What did you say?" Tuck hauled Jace to his feet.

"I said that it must have been very frightening."

Tuck stopped grinning. "What?"

"Waiting for him to come home," said Jace.

"Who?" asked Jill.

"Knowing he was drunk," said Jace. "Knowing he was going to hit you again."

"Shut up," snarled Tuck. He grabbed Jace by the throat.

"You'd pretend to be asleep," wheezed Jace. "You had your little knife, tucked into bed with you. And every time..."

"Shut up!" yelled Tuck. He squeezed.

"Every time...y-you told yourself...you were going to fight back." Jace's vision began to dim. Through Tuck's eyes, he looked blurred.

"Tuck?" said Caden.

"But you never did," whispered Jace.

Shut up! Tuck shoved Jace, sending him skidding across the slick, cold plating of the mage-ring's roof—toward the edge.

Jace scrambled at the plating, trying to stop his momentum, but there was nothing to hang on to. Jace went over, caught one hand on the edge of the roof, and hung there. His feet dangled in empty air and his fingers went instantly numb.

Wind whistled.

Below him, the mana stream hummed. If he fell in, he didn't know what would happen. The mana potential of hundreds of acres of territory, captured and channeled into a single beam...he'd probably be vaporized.

His fingers trembled.

He got his other hand up, but the ledge was an overhang. He had no leverage. He was going to need help.

Tuck's face loomed above him, a mask of rage and pain.

"Nobody knows about that," he hissed. "*Nobody*. Not since the bastard died."

"Tuck, he's gonna fall," said Caden.

Cramps shot up and down Jace's arm. His grip was giving out.

"You want him digging around in your head? Telling Jilly here the things you say about her when she's not around?"

"Excuse me?" said Jill.

"Shut *up*, Tuck!" said Caden.

"Now you know how I feel." Tuck looked down at Jace. His eyes were wild. "Never again, Beleren."

He raised a boot.

Help me.

Jace's perspective lurched. He was looking down at himself, down at Tuck, out of Caden's eyes.

Caden's hand moved. Jace moved it. He didn't know how or why or what Caden was seeing right now. He didn't really care.



Art by Kieran Yanner

With Caden under his control, Jace grabbed Tuck's shoulder and yanked him back from the edge, then stiffly offered himself a hand.

How small he looked, hanging desperately above the crackling stream of mana. How vulnerable he looked. He hated it.

Back in his own head, Jace grabbed Caden's hand and hauled himself up.

He stood there, shaking, the plating solid under his feet. He only half-believed he was still alive. He looked to his three schoolmates.

Caden swayed on his feet, his eyes crackling with blue energy. Tuck was red-faced, furious. Jill's eyes were wide.

The glow in Caden's eyes faded. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he hit the plating with a thud.

Jace ran past Jill and Tuck's horrified faces, past the void of Caden's mind, down the stairs, and away—anywhere, anywhere but here.

Jace had made up his mind.

All his belongings were packed into a small bag that sat beside him on the bed. There wasn't much in it—a few changes of clothes, a journal, some dried meat. Now all he was waiting for was nightfall.

There was a knock at the door of his room.

It had been a day and a half, and he'd ventured out only long enough to take care of necessities. His mother left food at his door occasionally, but so far she'd had the decency not to try to talk to him. His father had tried, at first, until Jace had worn him down.

"Go away," said Jace. "I said I don't want to talk about it."

From in his room, he could almost forget about the rest of the world. He brushed the edges of other minds—his parents, neighbors, the occasional wind mage—but from this distance he could only feel impressions, not fully formed thoughts.

"Jace," his mother said through the door. "I'm worried about you."

She was close, close enough that he could read her if he wanted. He didn't. He didn't want to see inside anyone's mind ever again. He didn't want to unearth their darkest secrets, didn't want to control them or manipulate them, and above all didn't want to see himself through their eyes—small, awkward, vulnerable.

"Fine," he said. "Come in."

She opened the door a crack and smiled at him. Without hearing her thoughts, he couldn't tell whether the smile was genuine or forced. He couldn't tell much of anything.

She sat down next to him on his bed, glancing at his packed bag but saying nothing. Ranna Beleren was a healer, on call for emergencies. She had the tender patience of one who had seen far worse, but understood that all pain is real.

"What did they tell you?" he asked.

"I'd rather hear it from you."

"Tuck tried to kill me," said Jace. "Did they mention that?"

She shook her head.

"They were beating me up again," he said. "I didn't know what to do so I...I don't know. I just...figured out a secret of Tuck's and started talking."

"He says you read his mind."

Jace hugged his knees. "I don't know how I do it," he said. "I...hear people thinking. Sometimes I don't even know if it's them or me thinking."

"You're a telepath?" said his mother. She sat up straight.

Jace could see the wheels turning. He wanted to know what she was thinking, but he held back. He could wait.

"You're a telepath." This time it was a statement rather than a question. "My son the quick learner, the boy who always knew when his mother needed a hug, needed his love. My son the telepath." She was smiling.

"You don't think I'm a freak?"

She shook her head. "I think you are perfect and I love you, no matter what."

Jace knew that was true, though whether by his abilities or not, he couldn't say.

"How's Caden?" asked Jace. "Have you heard?"

His mother's lips pursed. "He's still out," she said. "The healers aren't quite sure what to do."

"I didn't mean to hurt him," Jace said.

"I know."

Jace walked out into the common room, rubbing his eyes. His breakfast sat on the table, cold.

After the conversation with his mother, he'd decided to stay a little while longer and see if matters improved. Occasionally he ventured out of his room, sharing tense, quiet mealtimes with his parents. But he and his father hardly spoke to each other, and he didn't dare leave the apartment. It had been three days.

He wolfed down three greasy sausages and half a plate of cold eggs before he noticed that his parents were both standing in the common room waiting for him. His father radiated impatience, his mother concern.

Jace smoothed his hair self-consciously and turned. "What's going on?"

Jace's father opened his mouth, but his mother spoke first. "There's someone here to see you," she said. "Someone who can help."

Jace looked around.

"Out on the observation deck," said his father. "He can't fit in here."

Jace resisted the urge to peek into his father's mind, to learn what sort of helper they'd found who couldn't fit inside their apartment. He still caught glimpses into his parents' thoughts without meaning to, and the ghosts of impressions from passersby. But he hadn't done anything on purpose since the accident, and he tried not to do anything at all.

"Who is he?"

"He's an arbiter," Jace's father said. "His job is to negotiate an end to the war. But he's also a...a mage, um, like you. He knows how to..."

"He knows how to help you control your abilities," said Jace's mother.

The other kids were in school, at least, so they weren't there to stare at him as Jace and his parents made their way to the observation deck. But by now everyone in Silmot's Crossing had probably heard about what happened. As they climbed, people stared at him, or hurried away, or whispered to each other behind their hands.

As though that would stop me.

They didn't hate him. They were afraid of him. And they should be, shouldn't they? He'd dug around in Tuck's memories just to find a way to hurt him, and when Jace's life was on the line he'd rammed his way into Caden's head without hesitation.

He and his parents climbed the final set of steps to the observation deck, a section of ring with one open wall and a set of railings. Standing there, resting on its haunches, was a sphinx.



Art by Slawomir Maniak

He towered above Jace with a regal, bearded face, enormous paws, and an elaborate mantle of gold and mirrored silver, his feathered wings folded behind him.

“My name is Alhammarret. And you, Jace Beleren, are a mind mage of unusual talent.”

This thought, Jace knew with certainty, was not his own.

“How did you...?”

“Respond in kind, please, if you can,” said the booming voice in his head.

“Like this?” thought Jace.

“Precisely.”

“A ‘mind mage?’” thought Jace. *“But doesn’t a mage cast spells? I don’t know any spells.”*

“What you do is spellcasting,” said Alhammarret. *“You intuited the spells involved, rather than being taught.”*

“So if I’m casting spells, then ...you’re here to make me stop?”

Alhammarret smiled. *“No. I want to train you, so you do not have to.”*

“Train me where?” Jace glanced back at his parents. *“Here?”*

“No,” said Alhammarret. *“The chance to train a promising mind mage is rare, but not so rare that I can abandon my other duties. You would come with me, as my apprentice.”*

“For how long?”

“Years.”

The suspicious looks, the whispers, the fear. He could leave it all behind—along with his parents’ love and support.

“Do they know what you’re proposing?” he asked.

"I've spoken with them about it, yes. They want what's best for you. And in this case, what's best is to get you out of this provincial backwater so you can grow to your true potential. Yours is a rare gift. Don't squander it here."

Jace looked back at his parents again. His mother nodded encouragement. His father at least must be relieved. *Education is your ticket out of here.*

Jace didn't bother turning back to Alhammarret.

"I'm ready," he said.

After Jace had gathered his things and said his goodbyes, Alhammarret settled down and nodded for Jace to climb onto his back. Jace climbed up and braced his legs against the silver mantle, hoping that was what it was for.

Jace looked down at his parents and the gathered crowd. Tuck and Jill were there, hard-eyed. Already, the people of Silmot's Crossing looked small and distant.

"I'll come back," he said to his parents. "I promise."

He looked Tuck in the eyes. *"And if you harm my family, I'll take your mind apart, one squalid little memory at a time."*

Tuck flinched.

Jace's parents waved. Alhammarret stood, stretched, and launched himself from the observation deck.

Flight! He'd taken a few tumbles in the clutches of a wind mage, but this was nothing like that. They soared above the landscape, heading away from the trail of mage-rings in a direction Jace had never bothered to think about. His home of thirteen years receded, became a speck, and vanished into the distance.

"That was unkind," said Alhammarret.

Jace winced.

"You...?" He stopped. Alhammarret hadn't given him leave to speak normally and, in any case, the wind made spoken conversation impossible. *"You heard that?"*

"Of course," said Alhammarret. *"This is something you must adjust to. Up to now, you have been, in effect, the only mind mage in existence. You've never had to consider the implications of dealing with another telepath."*

"I'll keep that in mind," said Jace.

"I will train you to control your powers. I will help you hone them, to accomplish feats of telepathy you never dreamed possible, to glean deeply hidden information...and to do all this without hurting anyone. If you use these abilities to inflict intentional harm, that will be the end of your training...and possibly, depending on the severity of the harm, your life. Do you understand?"

"Fully," said Jace. *"I was just trying to scare him."*

"Tread that path carefully," said the sphinx. *"In time, you will become more terrifying than you can imagine. And fear, once inspired, can seldom be eased."*

They flew on in silence for a time. The landscape beneath them had shifted, high steppe giving way to rolling fields and broad, shallow marshes. Only the trails of mage-rings, dozens of miles apart, seemed familiar.

"This is Separatist territory, isn't it?" asked Jace.

"These lands are claimed by the Trovians, yes. 'Separatist' is a politically charged term."

"And you're an arbiter?"

"I am," said Alhammarret. *"So why is the war still going?"*

Jace flushed. That was going to be his next question. Mind mage!

"The war is a generation old," said Alhammarret. *"The arbiters negotiate a peace every few years, when both sides are exhausted enough to want it. Then one side breaks the truce, and the war continues. We don't even bother with permanent peace anymore—it's simpler, and fairer, if both sides know from the outset when hostilities will resume."*

"Why not let one side win?" asked Jace.

"The Ampryn and the Trovians fight for control of the Core," the sphinx said. *"But only one of them holds it at any given time, and that side reaps the benefits of the mage-ring network. So why are the mage-rings unharmed? Why, when the Ampryn hold the Core, do the Trovians not destroy the mage-rings to deny the Ampryn their power source?"*

Jace had never thought about that. *"Because...Because they think they can take the Core, and they want the mage-rings intact for their own use when they do."*

"Precisely," said Alhammarret. *"And as long as each side thinks it can win, that balance holds, and the mage-rings stand. Cities are abandoned intact rather than leveled. Roads and bridges are given up, to be recaptured later. If that ever changes—if either side finds itself in existential danger—then it will destroy everything as it retreats, to deny it to the other. Civilization on Vryn might take centuries to recover—if it ever did."*

Jace felt a sudden rush of vertigo.

"That," said Alhammarret, *"not mere loss of life, is what the arbiters seek to prevent. As usual, matters are not as simple as they seem."*

They stopped at night, and Alhammarret arranged lodgings in the effectively neutral confines of a mage-ring. It was different than Jace's home ring—bigger, and recently repaired. Neither side wanted to harm the rings, but collateral damage was inevitable.

After a few days, they reached their destination, a wall of rock that rose above the rolling plain. Alhammarret flew higher, his powerful wings pumping. He alighted on a broad landing platform, shook his wings, and knelt so Jace could dismount.

"Welcome home, Jace Beleren."

Home. Jace hoped this could be home.

Jace paused at the foot of the last flight of stairs.

He'd spent two years as the sphinx's apprentice, learning the full abilities—and limitations—of his own mind. At fifteen, he was taller, and smarter, and more powerful than he had been before. He could peel the military secrets from a sleeping guard's mind without learning anything about the man's family, could cloud thoughts and change minds without causing any damage at all. He hoped his parents would be proud. Although honing his telepathy had been the primary focus of his training, Alhammarret hadn't neglected other disciplines of magic, and Jace had grown into a talented illusionist.

He'd expected, at first, that his training would consist mainly of going to negotiations and learning what he could from the ambassadors' minds. And he did accompany Alhammarret to talks, and the

sphinx did ask him, afterward, what he'd learned from the negotiators' thoughts—which was never anything interesting. Jace asked early in his training why either side even consented to parley with a telepath.

"To keep each other honest," the sphinx explained with a twinkle in his eye. *"They learned long ago not to send anyone who knew anything they didn't want spoken aloud."*

There were long hours studying magical theory in the sphinx's library; mental sparring sessions out on the landing pad; and a constant battery of questions, challenges, quizzes, and tests. There were puzzle boxes and ciphers, visitors real and illusionary, even the occasional trap. And Jace could not read Alhammarret in the slightest. For the first time in his life, Jace was truly challenged by his studies. He'd even blacked out during illusion training at one point, his own illusions overwhelming his mind with their insistence of reality.



Art by Yohann Schepacz

A few months ago, Alhammarret had started sending Jace out to gather information. Alhammarret called them "training missions," but they were quite real. Under cover of darkness and cloaked by illusions, Jace would sneak into a camp of one of the opposing sides. There, whether through telepathy or mundane sleuthing, he would learn about the army's battle plans, and return to report to Alhammarret. He'd protested at first, but the information they learned from these missions helped Alhammarret keep the peace. Often, just mentioning battle plans at a joint meeting was enough to keep the front quiet for a month or two.

Finally, with Alhammarret's guidance, Jace was using his abilities to help people. And his most recent mission had gone particularly well.

He climbed up the steps and entered Alhammarret's study.

Alhammarret gazed out the great circular window. He didn't turn when Jace entered. They seldom bothered with eye contact, and sometimes spoke to each other from different rooms, though Jace's range was still much more limited than the sphinx's.

"Welcome back," said Alhammarret. *"What have you learned?"*

Jace could not read Alhammarret's mind, and, out of courtesy, Alhammarret did not read his without invitation, except when they were practicing mental defenses. Jace was no longer helpless, but his mentor could still blast through his mental blocks without effort.

By way of answer, Jace opened up a particular set of memories to Alhammarret's scrutiny. Jace had learned from a high-ranking Separatist officer of Trovian designs for a surprise springtime offensive. They planned to cross the Rime Marshes before the thaw and drive for the Ampryn Core. It would be a brutal campaign for both sides, bringing the fighting to previously untouched civilian territories and potentially breaking the Ampryn stranglehold on the Core States. And Jace had learned of it without letting the Trovians know who he was or what he had gleaned from them.



Art by Cynthia Sheppard

"Excellent work," said Alhammarret. *"I expect the look on the Trovian ambassador's face when I mention this at the next negotiation will be...gratifying."*

The sphinx turned and padded down the curved steps, past Jace. *"Come,"* he said. *"I want to review the maps while your memory is fresh, and mark their exact routes."*

The room looked nothing like the paltry library in Silmot's Crossing, with its collection of dog-eared mana dynamics manuals, outdated history books, and the occasional work of badly written fiction. There were no books here, but racks of crystalline spheres. Alhammarret's great paws couldn't turn pages, and his library contained more information than could be held in an entire mage-ring full of books.

Alhammarret worked several great pedals, like a pipe-organ's, and aligned one of the data-spheres with the projector. A map of the Rime Marshes sprang into being in the center of the library.

Jace painted illusions onto the map, showing the planned troop movements. As he did so, his mind wandered.

Unquestionably, he was growing more powerful. He'd had to fight his way out of the Trovian camp, but he'd cleaned up after himself. He'd gotten everything he went for, nobody who'd seen him was going to remember him, and he hadn't done any permanent damage. Even a few months ago, that kind of operation would have been beyond him. Soon enough, he'd be a better mind mage than....

The sphinx was distracted, pulling up more maps and plotting Jace's information on them, following the Trovian army's path into the heartland.

Jace had not tested Alhammarret's defenses in a long time.

He'd be caught, of course. Alhammarret always knew when Jace tried to read him. Jace could argue, reasonably, that it was part of his training—judging when a target's defenses were down.

He looked inside Alhammarret's mind.

The sphinx's thoughts were immense and powerful, a buffeting cyclone of mental force. Jace's brief explorations had always run up against it like a wall. This time, though, with effort, he was able to slip into the wind....

A flood of sensations, of memories, overtook him.

He was looking down at himself, practicing illusions, concentrating hard to control a few wisps of light and sound. He looked so young.

Something was wrong. Blue-white energy crackled in his eyes. The illusions swirled around him faster and faster.

And then

he began

to fade....

Within the swirling illusions, Jace vanished entirely.



Art by Ryan Barger

Alhammarret reached out with a tendril of Æther, into the void between worlds (plural!), and pulled the boy back.

Planeswalker.

Jace stirred. He sat up. He asked what had happened.

And Alhammarret wiped the incident from the young man's mind.

The library. His own eyes. The real Alhammarret regarded him, eyes shrewd.

"Jace?"

"There," said Jace, illuminating a section of the map. "Sorry."

"You're exhausted," said Alhammarret. "No more bravado. Rest."

Jace went to his room and shut the door with no intention of opening it. Alhammarret would know. If he didn't already. How long until he wiped Jace's memory again? Had this happened before? Was there any way to know?

Planeswalker.

Whatever that was, Alhammarret seemed to think Jace was one. That there were worlds beyond Vryn. That Jace could travel to them.

He tried. Nothing happened.

He'd awakened as a planeswalker, drifted out into the Æther. But if he couldn't remember it...how could he do it again?

Alhammarret had his best interests at heart. Someday the old sphinx surely planned to tell him, to apologize for the deception, to explain that Jace simply hadn't been ready. Even purely out of self-interest, Alhammarret had to covet a planeswalker apprentice.

As long as this information was in Jace's head, Alhammarret could read it. And if Alhammarret could read it, he would wipe Jace's mind again, and Jace would lose his chance of ever learning the truth. He had to defend his mind. But any departure from his usual behavior would draw suspicion, and suspicion would draw scrutiny, and scrutiny would reveal his secret.

He pulled a piece of paper out of his desk and began to write—in a small, cramped hand that the sphinx might not be able to read even if he found it—what he had seen, and how he had seen it. He included as many details as he could, and warned himself what would happen if Alhammarret found out. When he was done, he wrote the date on the top, folded the paper carefully, and hid it in his desk drawer.

Then, slowly and very, very carefully, Jace made himself forget what he had seen, forget writing it down, forget forgetting.

He had a headache.

He found the paper several times over the next few weeks. Each time, he was furious. Each time, he wondered what to do. And each time, to keep it from Alhammarret, he removed his memory of finding it.

It was the Ampryn camp this time.

They stood on ceremony. Avoiding soldiers on drill was like sneaking past a statue. Peek in one mind, learn the patrol schedule, and you could walk right in.

There were more soldiers than he expected—too many for a lowly command post. Someone important was visiting.

That meant more risk. He should return to Alhammarret at once, and try another time.

But it also meant more information, didn't it?

He peered into a few more soldiers' minds until he found his new quarry. A general was visiting the front, a grizzled and decorated veteran of the war. The general had brought two squads of elite guards with him, and two of them guarded the door of the general's tent at all times.

Under cover of darkness, while the lamps in the tent were still lit, Jace stepped over the sleeping forms of the two door guards.



Art by Cynthia Sheppard

There were three people in the tent. Jace sent two into the arms of sleep and turned to the general, who opened his mouth to yell for guards. No sound came out.

"Hello, General," said Jace. "This will only take a moment."

He dove in.

The general was a strong-willed man, resistant to Jace's probing to some degree, but he was not a mind mage, nor any kind of magic-user. Jace broke through his natural defenses and saw...

The entire Trovian battle plan for the coming campaign hovered before him, an illusory map that matched the contours of the land to the smallest detail. Their plan was audacious...and without proper countermeasures, it was going to work.

"You're sure this is genuine?" the general asked.

"Positive," said the hooded figure. "Has our source ever misled you before?"

"No," he said. "Nor the renegades, I'm sure."

"Of course," said the figure. "When your business is information, reputation is everything."

"Of course," he said.

The hooded man—boy, really, lanky and cocksure—knew much more than he was willing to tell...like the identity of this source. For the good of the Ampryn, he ought to seize the young man, torture the name of this source out of him, and....

"It wouldn't do any good," said the kid. "He doesn't tell me much." The boy's eyes glinted beneath the hood.

"Fine," he said. "Take your payment and go. And tell your source there's more where that came from, any time he has intel."

"I'll tell him," said the kid. He pocketed the money and turned, and the general caught a glimpse of his face....

Dimly, from the outside world, Jace heard yelling. He'd taken too long.

He was trapped. Trapped in a mind, trapped in a memory, frozen, staring at his own face behind that damned hood, in a conversation whose entire context was a mystery to him.

He *pulled...*

...and he was out.

The general slumped in front of him, eyes vacant.

Running footsteps. The tent flap opened. Jace turned.

Three guards. He waved a hand, and illusions swarmed around them.

The general was breathing, but his mind was blank.

I'm sorry.

Jace dove out of the tent and ran into the night, and kept running until he could go no farther.

When Jace returned to Alhammarret's lair, he went straight to his room and packed his things. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't care.

While he was packing, he found a note, in his own handwriting, warning him of Alhammarret's duplicity, revealing his own nature.

One more outrage. One more lie.

Jace scribbled another few lines on the paper, crammed it in his pocket, and wiped his memory of it again. Maybe he'd get to keep that one.

He kept his thoughts locked up as tightly as he could. If Alhammarret wanted to know what was on his mind, the sphinx would have to break it open.

He checked the library and the study. Empty.

He could leave. He wanted no part of the sphinx's games anymore.

But he had to know.

He headed up to the landing pad. Alhammarret was there, sitting on his haunches, waiting for him.

"Welcome back," said Alhammarret. "What have you learned?"

"You tell me," said Jace. He spoke, having no desire to give the sphinx the slightest opening. He raised every mental defense he knew of.

"Ah," said Alhammarret. *"I take it you've learned something that displeased you."* The sphinx's voice in his head was louder now, insistent.

"Not at all," said Jace. "But it's been a while since we practiced mental combat, hasn't it?"

"It has. You are more powerful now. You could hurt yourself."

"Hurt you, you mean?"

"Unlikely," said the sphinx.

"And what if I fell into the hands of an enemy mind mage? We can't be the only ones, can we? Test me. Help me find my limits. Pry the information out of me."

Alhammarret stood up, and the full force of his mind hit Jace like a storm front.



Art by Yan Li

Jace had expected it to feel like an invasion, an alien force. But it was an overwhelming presence, a rush of thought and sensation enveloping his own. Alhammarret could rip Jace's mind apart. But to do that, he had to read it, and when he read it, Jace could do the same. Finally, he saw the true shape of the last two years, saw the perilous edge he'd been dangling from all this time.

Alhammarret had played him. He'd used Jace as a go-between, to gather information, deliver it, and learn more just in the delivery. And every time, he'd wiped Jace's memory of it, taken the money for himself, and kept the war going. If your business was negotiating peace, where was the profit in actually achieving it?

Now Alhammarret knew everything, and settled into the recesses of Jace's mind to wipe out the offending memories, to salvage this useful asset if he could. And destroy it if he couldn't.

Jace struck first.

The sphinx was more powerful. But here, in Jace's head, he was also vulnerable, provided Jace was willing to damage his own mind in the process. And Alhammarret was too arrogant and too cowardly to consider that possibility.

Jace felt himself falling backward, upward, outward. He could not remember his home, his mother's face, or the sound of his own name. But the sphinx had it worse.

Alhammarret had forgotten how to breathe.

He slumped forward, gasping for breath, and the outline of his head was the last thing the planeswalker saw before he broke

into

pieces

and

walked...



Art by Eric Deschamps

Ravnica

He hit the ground, hard, on his back. It was bright. And loud. And busy.

He had a headache.

The shapes moving around him resolved themselves into people, and the sounds into voices, and the headache into thoughts that were not his own.

“Watch it,” said a voice, as its owner stepped around him.

Ought to report you to the Boros for reckless teleportation.

Boros?

“Outta the way!” yelled another voice, and he looked up just in time to roll out of the path of a cart pulled by some kind of woolly, hooved beast with wide, sweeping horns.

Came out of nowhere. Some poor Izzet experimental subject, probably.

He scrambled to his feet. People were staring at him. He looked as bad as he felt, sweaty and pale and filthy. He pulled his scarf up around his face and dashed to the side of the road.

I'm not an experimental subject. I'm...I'm...

I'm in trouble.

Fine. Table that.

He walked as fast as he could without seeming to hurry. He reached out, carefully, into the minds around him. It was a cacophony, a mad tangle of voices, and half of them weren't even human.

Vagrant. Thief. Poor kid. Wretch.

His headache was getting worse.

Still, he was able to snatch scraps of meaning from the din. This was the garment district, and his clothes—*ringer garb*, some buried part of him said—looked like rags by comparison. Some holiday called Rauck-Chauv was coming up soon. A group known as “Orzhov” seemed to own this area, or politically control it, or somewhere in between. Hundreds of minds, and not one of them was thinking about anything outside the city. Was that strange? Maybe city folk were like that.

He spotted at least two distinct law enforcement agencies, and stayed out of their sight as much as possible. He needed to get somewhere where he'd draw less attention. He seized on the seediest, grimmest thoughts, the minds that wore the clothes that looked most like his, and followed them like a thread.

In ten minutes he was somewhere else, a district where the alleys were narrower and the shadows darker, and everyone was focused on their own business.

He walked on, mindful of ambush, reaching out to the minds around him for any scrap of information that could help him.

At last, cradled like a treasure within the mind of a filthy, hungry girl, he found it:

Emmara Tandris.

She took in strays. But where?

Ovitzia.

Good enough.

The door swung open to reveal a statuesque woman with long, pointed ears, elegant garb, and milk-white eyes. Her thoughts were labyrinthine, hidden deep beneath the surface.

She's beautiful.

“If you've come only to admire me,” she said, “I'm afraid I haven't the time.”

“You're a mind reader?” he said. He immediately regretted it.

The elf smiled. “No. You're a teenager.”

He flushed, and just for a moment, he saw himself through her eyes: filthy, awkward, bleary-eyed, and readable as a book.

“I'm from...” *out of town*, he almost said, but he still had no idea what that meant here, “another district. I need a place to stay. I heard you take in people like me.”

“Sometimes. What's your name?”

He flickered through the thoughts around him, digging for a local name that wouldn't sound conspicuous.

"Berrim," he said, after just slightly too long, plucking the name from the mind of a passing servant. "My name is Berrim."

It seemed a harmless lie, and far better than admitting the truth. For all he knew, it was true.

"Come in...Berrim," said Emmara. "Let's see about getting you some new clothes."

He was safe. He was clean. He was fed. He finally had some time to think. Could he remember anything at all?

He traced illusions in the air, random shapes to help him think. Blobs, and lines, and rings.

Silmot's Crossing .

The thought bubbled up from nowhere, accompanied by the image of a towering, ring-shaped construction. The only way he was sure it was his own was that there wasn't anybody else around to have it.

A shape coalesced in front of him—an elongated ring, open at the bottom, with a circle floating in the middle. He had no idea what it meant, if it meant anything at all.

Jace.

My name is Jace Beleren.

So there was something in there, waiting for him to dig it out.

And who is Jace Beleren? Is he a good man? Is he kind?

He willed away the shape and sat, alone, farther from home than he'd even known was possible.

He'd have to wait and see.



Art by Jaime Jones