

Catching Up

Kelly Digges

From set *Prologue to Battle for Zendikar*
22. 07. 2015

The mind mage Jace Beleren is many things to many people. Chief among his current responsibilities is that of the Living Guildpact, the magically empowered arbiter of inter-guild conflicts on the city-plane of Ravnica. But he has made many other promises and taken on many other problems—and each of those unfinished puzzles tugs at his mind.

Some, perhaps, more than others.

Jace smiled tightly as the Golgari delegation shambled out of the room. He muttered a quick spell to clear out the fungal-rot smell of the esteemed ambassadors and their zombie attendants.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Jace's smile dropped, and he sat down on the large wooden desk he'd finally gotten around to installing. The desk creaked, and he frowned. He still needed a nice big chair to collapse into. Leather. Something expensive.

"Tell me that was the last for the day," he said.

"I would never perjure myself, even at your order," said his bailiff, Lavinia—rather archly, he thought.



Jace, Telepath Unbound | Art by Jaime Jones

He groaned. It wasn't that the work was hard. Quite the opposite. It was a lot of work, and hardly any challenge.

"But," she continued, "as it happens, in this case I can say truthfully that that was the last of today's appointments. Of course, tomorrow's petitioners are already lining up."

No more sunlight streamed through the high windows of the Chamber of the Guildpact. When had he last eaten?

"They'll have to wait," he said. "Maybe I can solve all their problems, but I can't do it all in one day."

He turned toward her. She looked prim as ever. He scowled.

"You're not even tired, are you? People probably talk about Jace Beleren's illusory bailiff . . . What human could stand for twelve hours in full ceremonial armor and show no sign of it?"

She turned and looked him up and down.

"You'd have more endurance if you exercised once in a while, you know," she said. She was smiling, but that didn't mean she wasn't serious.

"Noted."

He turned to leave.

"Guildpact," said Lavinia. He turned. "Get some rest."



Lavinia of the Tenth | Art by Willian Murai

"Coffee," said Jace. "The Living Guildpact rules that coffee is an acceptable substitution for rest, as specified in subsection . . . whatever."

Lavinia had too much discipline to roll her eyes at him, but she did shake her head as he walked out of the room.

Down several twisting corridors, Jace ducked through a secret hallway to his personal apartments. No one knew about the secret hallway except him and Lavinia, and even Lavinia didn't know how to open it. There were stories on many planes of tyrants who, to preserve the secrets of their tombs and castles, killed architects or cut out their tongues. Jace had cleanly excised the knowledge from his builders' minds—far kinder, he told himself, though it didn't always feel that way.

His apartments were a mess of diagrams, projects in progress, and half-eaten meals. An illusionary depiction of a Zendikar hedron hovered, its runes tauntingly undeciphered. Globes and maps of various planes were marked with pins showing locations of import. The horn of an Onakke ogre rested on a draft copy of some dull piece of Azorius legislation.



Jace's Sanctum | Art by Adam Paquette

Jace didn't have servants—too much risk, and it made him uncomfortable besides—but he occasionally summoned a menial illusion to clean the place up, usually when he was expecting company. And he did, occasionally, entertain, despite the secrecy of the apartments. The door was actually an Izzet-made teleportal, and he changed the location of its other end regularly. He could come and go as he pleased, could even have guests, and the mystery of the Living Guildpact only deepened.

He blinked, bleary-eyed. What had he been doing?

Right. Coffee.

There was a knock at the door.

Well, not really. But there was a knock on a door somewhere in the Seventh District, carried to his ears by the portal that linked his door to that one. And that was every bit as odd.

He pulled his hood up around his face, gathered mana, and carefully approached the doorway, keeping a spell ready to dispel the portal if necessary. In the meantime, he cast a spell that would let him see what was on the other side.

All of this paranoid preparation was probably unnecessary. It was probably just some confused citizen knocking on the wrong door down in the Seventh. At worst, it might be—



Liliana, Defiant Necromancer | Art by Karla Ortiz

—Liliana?

He gaped.

Jace hadn't seen Liliana Vess since the day he'd realized she was playing him, and he'd skipped out on their rendezvous—after enduring mortal danger, the deaths of friends, and literal torture, all at least partially on her account. She was an amoral, self-serving death mage who'd sought him out on the orders of the dragon Planeswalker, Nicol Bolas. She was also the first real lover he'd ever had, and he'd tried, in the time since, not to pine for her. He knew better.

The necromancer stood before an unmarked door miles away, unattended as far as he could tell. She held herself proudly, but she glanced from side to side occasionally, as though she was nervous. Or wary.

Or betraying him. Again.

An illusion? Through the portal, it was difficult to tell. If so, it was entirely convincing, right down to an irritated tapping of her left foot.

He shouldn't answer it. Whether it was really her or not, it was almost certainly a trap—and even if she didn't have plans to betray him, again, life with Liliana had a way of turning to rot in a hurry. He knew better.

He sighed, rendered himself invisible, and summoned an illusionary duplicate. The duplicate opened the door, with a telekinetic nudge from him.

"Liliana?" he said, out of the duplicate's mouth, painting a surprised look on its face. "What are—"

She casually walked right through the illusionary Jace.

“Can I come in?” she said over her shoulder.

Jace frowned, shoved the door shut, and dispelled his invisibility, his confused-looking illusionary double, and the teleportal for good measure. He hurried after her.

“What if I said no?”

“You didn’t,” she said.

He walked around her and got in her way. She looked past him, surveying the apartment.

“Lovely place. Shame what you’ve done with it.”

She looked *exactly* the same. But then, she would, wouldn’t she? No less than four demonic contracts saw to that, etched in fell runes on her perfect skin. He’d always hated those etchings, tried not to—not to touch them.

Finally, she looked him in the eye.

“Hello, Jace.”

Jace was not accustomed to noticing people’s eyes. He didn’t need them to read intentions, and while he’d learned to look at people’s eyes when he talked to them, he’d never really learned to pay attention to them. But Liliana’s eyes he remembered, old and violet-gray and full of the promise of danger. He tried to hold her gaze now, but found he couldn’t stand the memories that stirred up. His eyes finally settled on her nose, the only place he could find that didn’t make him some manner of uncomfortable.

“Nothing you can say will make me trust you,” he said. “Not after you betrayed me.”

She rolled her eyes. Her scent hit him, lilac and cinnamon masking the barest hint of something rotten and strange.

“You’re the one who stood me up,” she said.

“Yes, after you betrayed me!”

“That’s ancient history,” she said, picking up the Onakke horn and toying with it. “I’m not working for Bolas anymore, and I never meant you any harm.”

“And shall I verify that?” he asked, taking the horn from her and setting it down. “Or do you still have your little protective measures?”

He had thought he’d read her mind when they first met, but she’d spoofed his telepathic abilities somehow. He had his suspicions, and the fact that she’d been secretly working for a millennia-old dragon archmage at the time was chief among them.

She said nothing, but reached out, slowly, toward his face. Part of him wanted to flinch from her touch. Part of him wanted to do very much the opposite. He settled for holding still. But she did not touch him, only took the edge of his hood between two fingers and pushed it back. She appraised him for a moment.



Jace, Architect of Thought | Art by Jaime Jones

“You look older,” she said.

“I’m not sure how to take that.”

“At your age, dear, it’s an unambiguous compliment.” She cocked her head. “Have you started combing your hair?”

He smoothed his hair self-consciously, just for a moment, then withdrew his hand. He had, in fact, started combing it. Not that his hair was any of her business. He scowled.

“I’m guessing,” he said, “that you didn’t go to the considerable trouble of finding me just to critique my appearance. So let’s get to business. How did you find me, and who else knows?”

She sighed theatrically.

“I hired a very good spy at a very high price,” she said. “And nobody else knows, because his corpse is currently shambling around the Seventh trying to find me.”

“Damn it!” he said. “You’re talking about a Ravnican citizen.”

“Don’t fret. I made sure he deserved it, just for you,” she said. “He’s got a file at New Prahv as long as your arm: murder, arson, theft, extortion—and plenty of awful stuff the Azorius don’t even know about. I did your friends at the Senate a favor.”

“A warrant is supposed to lead to a trial,” he snapped. “Not a summary execution! I have to think about that kind of thing now. I am the law—I *literally* am the Law. I—Damn it, why are you smiling?”

“Lazlo Lipko.”

He sucked in a breath through gritted teeth.

“Ooh, yeah, he’s a real bastard.”

“Was,” she said, smirking.

He sighed.

“Fine. It’s not like I’ve never worked outside the law, even as the Guildpact.”

They were still standing, slightly too close to each other, in his messy front room.

“Well?” she said. “Is the inquisition over?”

“Not just yet,” he said. “What did you do to Garruk Wildspeaker?”



In Garruk’s Wake | Art by Chase Stone

“Oh,” she said. “That.”

“That.”

“Can I at least sit down?”

He shrugged and gestured to one of the high-backed chairs that surrounded his table, but she walked around the table and flopped onto his couch. He didn’t like looming over her, but he didn’t want to sit next to her, so he dragged a chair over from the table and sat. She stared at him expectantly.

“Garruk,” he prodded.

“Garruk.” She frowned. “Not much to tell.”

“So tell it.”

“He attacked me,” she said. “I won. I guess he’s carrying a grudge.”

“No.”

She blinked those ancient violet eyes.

“No?”

“Tell me about the Chain Veil,” said Jace.

“Oh,” she said, looking away. “*That*.”

He waited.

“It’ll be easier if you tell me what you already know,” she said.

“It’ll be more informative if I don’t.”

In fact he already knew a great deal about the Chain Veil, its properties, and Liliana’s run-ins with Garruk. But he was curious how much she’d be willing to tell him. And he did, if he was being perfectly honest, enjoy watching her squirm.

“Fine,” she said. “It’s a very powerful, very ancient artifact.”

“Evil, too,” he interjected.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, rolling her eyes. “One of my demonic creditors sent me after it, as part of my servitude. I decided to use it to earn my freedom. The hard way.”



Kothophed, Soul Hoarder | Art by Jakub Kasper

“You honestly think you can take on four demons—”

“Two,” she said.

“What?”

“Two down,” she said, holding up two fingers and grinning. “Two to go.”

“Oh,” he said. “That . . . changes things.”

“Doesn’t it?”

He’d intended, long ago, to help her find a way out of her contracts—to learn who she really was, beneath the desperation and the lies. Now she was halfway out without his help . . . and mired in something that might be worse.

“What did you do to Garruk?”

"The Veil is cursed," she said. "It was created to turn someone into a vessel for the resurrection of a long-dead race. But that's too much power for one soul to bear. It kills its users if they're not strong enough, I think."

"You *think*?"

"What can I say? I've been so busy with all this demon-slaying, I haven't exactly had time to visit the library."

"Fine," he said. "You don't seem dead."

"Nope," she said. Her eyes twinkled. "I'm too strong."

"You know what happens to the ones it doesn't kill, right?"

Her face fell—maybe the only honest emotion she'd shown since she walked in.

"Yes," she said. "Demons."

The Veil's power was overwhelming, transforming even its strongest wearers into monsters.

"And that's what Garruk is becoming. Has become, maybe. But not you."

"Not me," she said. "I don't know if it was my contracts or my necromancy. Or maybe I managed to pass the curse to him, right after I picked the thing up. Whatever the reason, he's the one turning into a monster. And I'm not. No more than I ever was, anyway."

"Alright," he said. "You're still alive, you're still human, and you're down two demons. So what's the problem?"

She arched an eyebrow.

"Who said there's a problem?"

"Lili, what are you doing here?"

She pouted.

"Can't I just drop by to see an old friend?"

"Stop it," he snapped. "We've been a lot of things, but we have *never* been friends."

Silence, then. Her eyes hardened.

"I—"

"Don't," she said.

He shut his mouth.

"You're right," she said. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what you went through. I'm even sorry for what's happening to Garruk, if that will make you feel better."

She flopped her head back on the pillow and sighed.

"I don't know, Jace. I guess I was hoping we could . . . start over."

She lifted her head. Her eyes held his.

"Starting over is the first trick I learned," he said, forcing a smile. He lifted one hand and set it glowing, like it often did when he worked his mind magic. When he erased memories. "Just say the word . . ."



Jace, the Living Guildpact | Art by Chase Stone

“No,” she said. “Not like that.”

She frowned and spread her hands in a helpless shrug. He had a hard time believing she was genuinely flustered, but she was putting on a convincing performance.

“Just . . . this conversation, at least?” she said. “Start over?”

“Well, it’s too late to start with you not barging into my home.”

“Fair,” she said. “So where do we start?”

“How about with you apologizing for barging into my home?”

Her demeanor shifted—demure and contrite, hands folded primly in her lap, expression carefully guarded. But her eyes were playful.

“I’m so sorry to barge in on you like this,” she said, with exaggerated propriety. “I was in town, and I just couldn’t resist dropping by. I deeply regret the unpleasantness of our last encounter, and I hope we can make a fresh start.”

It was a game. Everything was a game with her, and he was tired of playing. He knew better. But if he didn’t find out what she was up to, she would just get him into trouble some other way. And she wasn’t the only one who could play games.

“What a pleasant surprise!” he said. “It’s delightful to see you again—not at all suspicious or unwelcome. What sort of fresh start did you have in mind?”

She grinned wickedly.

“Buy me dinner?”

He snorted.

She smiled serenely.

“You’re serious,” he said.

She grinned.

“I’m always serious.”

More games. More deceptions.

He knew better.

The pair strolled through Ravnica’s fashionable Second District arm in arm. It was a warm night, and the streets were busy.

“So what’s it like?” asked Liliana. “Being the Guildpact?”

“Exhausting,” said Jace. “Everyone wants a piece of you. You’re pulled in ten different directions, all the time.”



Art by Dave Kendall

“Sounds terrible,” said Liliana. “Four was bad enough. Hells, being pulled in any directions is more than bad enough.”

“The guilds aren’t my masters,” said Jace. “More like . . . clients. I have more freedom now than I did when I was part of Tezzeret’s Consortium, that’s for sure.”

“But you’re not the king,” said Liliana. “You don’t make the law. You’re bound by it.”

He shrugged.

“I wouldn’t want to be a king,” he said. “But yes. It can be . . . confining.”

“Sir!” said a round little woman holding a basket of roses. “Sir! Buy a flower for your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my—”

“Say no more, sir!” said the woman with a wink. “But a flower’s always a fine gift for a lady.”

“She’s *not* a—”

Liliana elbowed him in the ribs.

“Of course,” said Jace. He handed the woman a zino, told her to keep the change, and presented the rose to Liliana with a flourish.

“Sir!” said the woman, already working the couple behind them. “Sir! A flower for your boyfriend there?”

Liliana took the flower delicately and stared at it. In moments, it withered and dried into a blackened husk. She tucked it in her raven hair and smiled at him.

“Do you ever get tired of being difficult?” he asked.

She flashed a dizzying grin.

“Never.”

They arrived.

Milena’s was one of the finest restaurants in the Second, seating by reservation only. Jace exchanged a few quiet words with the *maître d’*—an efficient, ratlike little man named Valko—and the Living Guildpact and his guest were escorted to a table for two out on the patio, complete with candles.

“Good to know you’re not above abusing your power,” said Liliana.

He pulled a chair out for her, and she sat.

“I spend ten hours a day listening to zoning disputes and damage claims,” said Jace, seating himself. “A table at a nice restaurant on short notice is the least this city can do in return.”

“And you have this kind of money?” asked Liliana, ogling the menu.

“They usually comp it,” he said. He tried to sound embarrassed, mainly because he was. But being the Guildpact wasn’t easy, and it wasn’t safe, and he wasn’t ashamed of taking advantage of the few perks of the office. Not very, anyway.

“Of course,” she said. “It’s the least they can do.”

They ordered, and Liliana didn’t hold back—nor had he expected her to. A bottle of an expensive red Kasarda, Decamillennial vintage, rounded things out, and Jace wove a quick spell of silence to give them some privacy.

“This is a far cry from the dives we used to hide out in,” said Liliana. “What was that awful little place called? The Bitter End?”

He raised a glass.

“To leaving the past . . . in the past.”

She took a sip, then set her glass down quickly.

“I heard about what you did,” she said. “Trying to stop Garruk.”

“Oh,” he said. “That.”

“It was risky,” she said. “I didn’t think you’d do that for me.”

"I didn't do it for you," said Jace. "Garruk's becoming a threat to every Planeswalker."

"Listen to yourself," she said, shaking her head. "Jace Beleren, defender of the Multiverse. You can't admit you're worried about me without pretending to be worried about literally everyone."

"Should I be worried about you?"

Anger clouded her face. She reached into the folds of skirt at her hip, and Jace spent a panicked half-second preparing a counterspell before he saw what she was doing.



The Chain Veil | Art by Volkan Baga

The thing she withdrew could only be the Chain Veil. A cacaphony of unintelligible whispers filled his head, just for a moment, until he tuned it out—whatever that was, it was her business, not his. Its links were a burnished gold and exquisitely crafted, so fine it appeared to have the texture of silk. It looked heavy, and it took on an unnatural gleam in the dim light of the restaurant. It was beautiful, and enticing, and dangerous.

His hand reached out, almost reflexively. She jerked the Veil back, out of his reach, a sudden and undignified movement.

"Afraid I'll take it from you?" he asked with bemusement.

She met his gaze, and for a fleeting moment he saw pain and fear and pleading in those ancient eyes.

"Afraid of what it might do to you," she said quietly. "And anyway, you can't take it, even if I wanted you to. Do you understand yet? What it is?"

Can't? Was it bonded to her somehow? Or did it just have its hooks into her that badly? He'd believe it, in either case.

"I'm starting to," he said.

The way the candlelight flickered off the thing was somehow sinister.

"If you're not going to let me look at it, put it away," he said. "It makes my skin crawl."

She tucked it away again.

“Mine too,” she whispered.

The candles flickered.

“It sounds like maybe things aren’t quite under control.”

He understood, now, why she’d come. Play on his emotions and his curiosity all at once. Herself in need, and a puzzle to be solved—two things she knew he’d have a hard time resisting. And maybe, just maybe, she was right.

But he was going to make her ask.

Her eyes were pools of darkness.

“Jace, I . . .”

There was a commotion at the front of the restaurant, where the patio opened onto the street. Jace turned sharply, ready to cast any of half a dozen protective spells.

A tall, broad-shouldered man stood in the street, arguing with Valko. He wore armor, hard-used but well-maintained, and he was covered in blood and dirt and some unidentifiable muck. He pointed toward Jace. He was toward the edge of Jace’s easy telepathic range, but a combination of lip-reading and surface thoughts told Jace what the man was saying: *I need to speak to the Guildpact*.

He flashed a Boros insignia, pushed past the flustered maître d’, and walked up to their table. He was quite a bit taller than Jace, with tawny skin but strikingly bright eyes.

“Jace Beleren,” he said. “I need your help.”

The man matched the description of a Planeswalker Jace had heard about, one who was planeswalking on and off of Ravnica with unusual regularity.



Gideon, Champion of Justice | Art by David Rapoza

Valko hurried up behind the man.

“Guildpact,” said Valko. “I’m so sorry. He says it’s guild business—”

“No I didn’t,” said the man. “I just showed you my badge.”

“I’m off-duty,” said Jace. Planeswalker or no, this man’s troubles weren’t Jace’s to solve. “Come to the Hall of the Guildpact in the morning and get on the docket, and in a few days—”

“It’s about a place called Zendikar,” said the man.

Liliana looked like she’d swallowed a nail.

“Sir,” said Valko. “Whatever your business, your attire is entirely unacceptable. I must insist—”

“He can stay,” said Jace. “If you’re worried about appearances, I’ll slip an invisibility spell over this whole table.”

“That,” said Valko, “will make it exceedingly difficult to bring you your dinner.”

“It won’t cover the smell, either,” said Liliana.

“I’ll make it up to you,” said Jace, and shooed Valko away.

“What about me?” said Liliana.

“My name is Gideon,” said the man. He glanced at Liliana.

“She knows,” said Jace. “Have a seat.”

“I’d rather stand,” said Gideon.

Jace stood up. It was an error. He still had to crane his neck to look Gideon in the eye, and now the size difference between them was glaringly obvious. He hated feeling small. Hated it.

“Now that you’ve thoroughly ruined my evening,” said Jace, “how about you get to the point?”

Gideon’s eyes narrowed.

“Have you actually been to Zendikar?”

“Yes,” said Jace. “It didn’t go well.”

“Sea Gate has fallen.”

“What?” said Jace. “When? How?”

“Hours ago,” said Gideon. “Maybe less. I left before it was over, but the place was doomed. And as for how . . . What do you know of the Eldrazi?”

“They’d just emerged when I was last there. I saw one, shortly before I left,” said Jace. ‘Saw one,’ that was one way to put it. ‘Inadvertently released them from millennia of imprisonment to terrorize Zendikar,’ that was another. Jace wondered if Gideon knew. “I know some scholars at Sea Gate. Any word of them?”

“Their archives were lost,” said Gideon. “That’s why I came to find you. They were close to some kind of breakthrough with the hedrons, something that could fight the Eldrazi. And you have a reputation for solving puzzles.”



Talent of the Telepath | Art by Peter Mohrbacher

A quick dive into the man’s mind confirmed that he was telling the truth.

“The hedron network?” said Jace. “What kind of breakthrough?”

“I don’t know,” said Gideon. “They called it the ‘puzzle of leylines,’ and they believe it’s connected to the Eldrazi. Will you come with me and solve it?”

“Leylines!” said Jace. His first instinct was to reach for his notes, but of course they were back at his apartments. “I’d never tied the hedrons to leylines. That has . . . implications.”

He rubbed his forehead. The Eldrazi were his responsibility, in a way. He'd spent some time since then researching them, researching the hedrons. But he had so many other responsibilities!

"If you know Zendikar, and you've seen the Eldrazi, then you know how serious this is," said Gideon. "I know you'll do the right thing."

Liliana drained her glass, shoved her chair back, and walked past Jace.

"Lili, wait—"

She kept walking.

"Give me a minute," he said to Gideon.

He ran after her, matched her pace. He knew better than to try to grab her arm—that was a good way to end up at the healer's.

"Liliana!"

She stopped and faced him, eyes bright with rage.

"I seek you out after all this time," she said. "I open up to you. And now, after all we've been through together, you're ready to walk off with some undercooked side of beef from Sunhome, just because he *asked*?"

"What's happening on Zendikar . . ." he said. "It's my fault. Sort of. It was unintentional, and I suspect I was manipulated, but the fact remains, those Eldrazi things are loose because I walked into something without understanding it."

"So now you're going to dive right back in," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

"You could come with us," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Come with us," said Jace. "Put your skills to use fighting some actual monsters. Maybe you can make an ally of this Gideon guy."

"No," said Liliana. "Some of us don't go borrowing trouble when we already have more than enough."

"I'm not leaving until morning," said Jace. "Think it over. Come to the Hall if you change your mind."

"No."

"You could wait for me on Ravnica, then," said Jace. "Whatever research he needs me to do, it won't take long. I'll come back. We can continue our conversation. And if you ever get around to telling me why you're here, we can talk about what happens next."

"You're out of your mind," she said. "I've got demons to kill."

"Fine," said Jace. "Good luck with that. And Liliana?"

She waited.

"He *asked*."

She plucked the dead rose out of her hair and tossed it at his feet, then turned on her heel and walked away.

Jace bent to pick up the withered flower as Gideon's heavy footfalls approached behind him.

"Finished?" said Gideon.

Jace turned, ready to snap at him, but Gideon's face was so earnest, and so haggard, that Jace couldn't muster the anger. Liliana was bad news anyway. He knew better.



Art by Michael Komarck

"Finished," said Jace. "Come on. I know a good healer who can patch you up."

"No time," said Gideon. "We have to go."

"I'm not leaving the plane until morning," said Jace. "I need to make arrangements, and I need to get my notes. And you! You can't help Zendikar if you drop dead of exhaustion. You need to get some rest."

Gideon stared down at him for a long moment.

"Fine," Gideon said at last. "Take me to this healer."

"Tell me about the Eldrazi," said Jace.

He took a step, but Gideon stopped him with one hand on Jace's shoulder. Jace reached up and deliberately pushed Gideon's hand off of him.

Gideon glanced at the withered rose that Jace was still playing through his fingers. "Do I have your full attention?"

"Of course," said Jace. "Tell me everything you know."

He dropped the dead rose on the cobblestones and fell in beside Gideon.

He knew better.