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GATECRASH



ALSO BY DOUG BEYER

A Planeswalker's Guide to Alara

Alara Unbroken

Path of the Planeswalker

Path of the Planeswalker, volume 2

Return to Ravnica: The Secretist, part 1

GATECRASH

The Secretist, Part Two

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GATECRASH

THE SECRETIST

PART TWO

DOUG BEYER



A WANTED MIND

Jace felt like a stringless marionette, heavy-limbed and uncoordinated, splayed out on damp stone deep under street level. The chamber around him, a high-ceilinged and cavelike space hidden down in the forgotten levels under Ravnica's Tenth District, echoed his quick, wheezing breaths. Jace had never thought of his life measured as a certain number of breaths before, but it struck him that that number was finite.

Emmara stood nearby, and though her healer's magic was practiced, every part of his body told him he still shouldn't move. He felt nothing but a unanimous ache, the kind of pain only the club of a Golgari troll could confer. The tissues were still knitting, fiber by fiber. His muscles felt like mashed pulp.

And then there was the problem of the Dimir vampire who had come to kill them. Mirko Vosk had chosen the perfect moment to appear out of the shadows; the marauding troll had fled, leaving Jace weakened; and Emmara had dismissed the massive elemental she had summoned. Vosk's muscles were taut, like carvings in cold, dense marble, and yet his

movements seemed incredibly light. His feet barely glanced against the ground as he strode forward—as if gravity was optional for him.

“My master only values what you have in your minds, mortals,” said Mirko Vosk. “So your bodies need not be intact for what’s about to happen to you.”

Jace lurched to his feet, wobbly as a calf. He felt something tear in his ribcage, and he winced. He knew he looked far from intimidating, and he knew the interloper would not take him for a threat. Still, Jace mustered all the menace he could. He drew himself up and assumed a battle stance.

“Touch her, and I’ll kill you,” he said.

Vosk grinned, flashing his fangs. He moved with unnatural speed, slamming into Emmara before Jace could react, sending her skidding across the chamber. She slid to a halt against the wall, crumpled and not moving. He turned to Jace.

Jace put up a hand and tried to muster a spell to incapacitate Vosk, but the effort was weak, and Vosk evaporated Jace’s halfhearted magic with a dismissive gesture.

Vosk did not spend words gloating. He grabbed Jace by the shoulders, swiveled him around with vampiric strength, and bit into the nape of Jace’s neck. Twin needles drove right through the base of his skull. Jace could feel more than pain, more than the awful sensation of his blood forcefully exiting his body. He felt an invasive stab into his thoughts, a probing hunger that groped around the inside of his skull.

Jace struggled and flailed, trying to land an elbow or kick an ankle, but Mirko Vosk held him fast as he made his psychic attack. Jace could feel the mental intrusion, like an insidious, predatory version of one of his own mind-reading spells. He had the sense that

the vampire was sampling his memories, tasting them one by one as he fed.

Jace craned his neck, his arms pinned. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Emmara, but she wasn't moving—unconscious, or worse. Jace would have to fend off the vampire himself, but he was outmatched in both speed and strength.

Jace needed mana in order to forge any kind of offense. He reached for his deepest bonds, those connections to distant planes whose lands flowed with mana, but the magical energy only trickled into him, replenishing drop by drop. His blood was being drained out of him far faster than the mana was filling him.

These are my last breaths, he thought.

But without warning, the vampire snarled and released him, sliding his fangs out of Jace's neck. As the two parted, their mental contact broke. Vosk staggered back, wiping Jace's blood from his mouth with disgust.

"Impossible," Vosk said. "You know nothing."

"You're too late," said Jace. "What you've come here to take is already gone."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Vosk. "Now it's going to be much worse for you. I could have taken the information, returned it to the Secretist, and left you both alone."

Jace needed something simple, something that wouldn't demand more than a whiff of mana. He didn't bother putting up his normal safeguards, his shield of psychic spells. He would simply enter the vampire's mind and tear with abandon, biting into Vosk's thoughts as the vampire had bitten into his. Jace would use his consciousness as a blade, slashing at anything and everything he found, trying to ruin

the vampire's entire psyche if he could. But he wasn't ready.

Vosk backed away slowly, keeping his eyes on Jace, daring him to attack as he let the shadows envelop him. He was gone.

Jace sat cradling Emmara's head in his lap. She was breathing, but barely, and her body was limp. Blood seeped down her temple, next to her eye. Jace kept his senses alert, ready to lash out if anything happened upon them.

He tried to reach out with his telepathy, to contact someone for help, but they were still deep below ground. Who would he reach out to? He feared any presence he might discover in the undercity. It struck him how few people he really knew on this world, how few people he had relationships with even across the entire Multiverse.

He brushed a lock of hair out of Emmara's eyes. If there was a way to planeswalk away from here and carry Emmara with him, he would do that. They could flee Ravnica and live in peace somewhere beyond the boundaries of this plane, somewhere without guilds or monsters to stalk them. But she was not a planeswalker. Her nature did not permit her to leave.

For a fleeting moment, Jace considered leaving on his own, and he stifled that thought with shame. He had the power to travel to every dimension he could find, but she was the anchor. She tied him to this life on Ravnica.

He barely knew anything about her. For being able to peer inside others' minds at will, he knew very little about people.

"Jace," mumbled Emmara.

"Emmara." He held her gently, supporting her head. She craned her neck to look around the chamber,

and winced. She lay back again and looked up at Jace through slits. “Tell me you killed him.”

“He almost killed me, but he fled. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Your head is bleeding.”

“I’m fine, I said. You look worse than I do.”

“Well, I’m awfully good at giving you something to heal.”

Jace looked for a smile on Emmara’s face, but none came. She didn’t seem to have it in her. They went through the motions of recovery in silence: healing magic, the patching up of torn cloaks, and an assessment of their surroundings.

“Let’s get these bodies buried,” Emmara said. “They’ll draw attention.”

Jace and Emmara dragged the bodies of the Rakdos warriors into the sludgy puddles of the chamber. Emmara used nature magic to encourage moss and fungus to grow over the corpses. The slain cultists became a decomposing garden.

“Let’s get you back to the Conclave,” said Jace.

She nodded. There wasn’t much hope in her.

Jace looked into a passage that led away into darkness. “We’ll take the low tunnels for a while. It might actually be safer down here. I think a lot of people up there are looking for us.”



When Ral Zarek entered the aerie of his guildmaster, the dragon was looming over his blueprint, a three-dimensional model of Ravnica’s Tenth District that was made of streaks of pulsing light. The model was tiny compared to Niv-Mizzet’s bulk, and it made Ral

think of a child peering into a dollhouse, the dragon's great eye sweeping through the miniature streets, his face lit in purples and pinks by the thin edges of light that defined the space.

"You sent for me, Great Firemind?" said Ral Zarek, in lieu of clearing his throat.

The dragon didn't budge from the model. His eye twitched, obsessively following threads of light through the map, tracing and retracing route after route.

"Well, I can tell you our status," said Ral. "The Implicit Maze project is coming along well. We've succeeded in tracking down all but a few guildgates, and have even established some reliable connections between them. We only need to delve into the Orzhov territory, and then plumb the grottoes of the Simic. Then we should have performed enough experiments to discern the exact maze route. But we lost many soldiers, and I may have got a cyclops killed. So if I could have another regimen of mages and strongarms . . ."

The dragon looked up, lifted his mighty neck and spread his wings, but his eyes kept flicking back to the model.

"Guildmage Zarek," said Niv-Mizzet, a flicker of flame escaping his teeth at the start of Zarek's name. "You've been hard at work on our maze project, yes?"

"Yes, Guildmaster." Ral stifled a sigh. "By your request, I've had teams of Izzet mages canvass the entire district and beyond. We've found braids of mana that flow in unusual patterns throughout the Tenth, which has helped us to establish the path between the ancient guildgates. And we've recovered a series of artifacts that will help us discern the exact ordering of gates. It won't be long before we'll have the answer. We will solve this maze for you."

I will solve this maze for you, Ral thought.

But Niv-Mizzet had already become distracted. He coiled his tail around the glowing model of the district. "Time grows short," said the dragon. "I have a new experiment for you to perform. A new venture of personal interest to me."

"You're taking me off the maze project?"

"In a sense."

"But Guildmaster . . . we're so close. I'm about to uncover the answer. And it's so crucial to Izzet power."

"Until it is solved, the maze remains my top priority. But a mind has opened itself up to me. I believe he can be of use."

Someone else would intrude on his research, and on Niv-Mizzet's attention. Ral shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I'm spending all day every day researching them. I will know the maze route in a matter of days, or weeks at the outside."

"No, you will *not* know. For you cannot see the *patterns*. You are blind to the maze's true nature, and that is why you have not already succeeded in this project. That is understandable, I suppose, as your mind is tiny. But it does make me want to devour you."

Ral fiddled with one of the cables on his gauntlet. He breathed hard through his nose.

"I do not know his whereabouts, nor his name. But our minds touched briefly, and I know the look of his face. I want you to find him for me." The dragon twitched his claw, and an illusion of a man appeared, crafted from light in the same manner as the glowing model, looming over Ral with exaggerated size. The illusionary young man wore a blue hooded cloak and had a keen stare, and his eyes seemed almost to move. Though the image was a shimmering trick of the light,

Ral had the impression that somehow it was the living one, and that he was the one who was insubstantial and transparent. He stormed out, leaving behind an unintentional flourish of electricity.



The blood-witch Exava dragged a carcass down a banner-draped hallway, humming a helter-skelter tune. Rabid masked cultists, spike-collared imps, and other Rakdos freaks lined the hallway on either side of her, snapping at her and straining at the clinking chains that bound them to the walls. The large dead body, Exava's burden, squeaked as it slid along the floor, leaking fluids like a sack of rotten vegetables, and Exava matched the haphazard squeaking with her humming. The line of gibbering marauders licked their chops, smelling the body. She could have ordered any one of them to carry the load for her, but she preferred to transport the offering herself. She felt that her master, the demon lord Rakdos after whom her guild was named, preferred his tributes that way. The trail of blood gave the halls of the palace of Rix Maadi that personal touch.

The corpse offering was necessary. The mage in the blue cloak, an insolent illusionist who had called himself Berrim, had escaped her, and that could not stand. The young mind mage would have been such a joy to eviscerate on stage, mewling in such pretty anguish before the cheering degenerates at the Rough Crowd ripped him to scraps—but instead, he had bested her. He had read her mind, tricked her minions, and fled into the Tenth. And worst of all, he had cut short the show without so much as a gory wound or a showy scream of agony. Exava was a blood-witch,

the equivalent of a ranking priest among the thrill-killers of the Rakdos guild, and she knew leaving an audience hanging without a satisfyingly lethal finale was the ultimate sin. She needed to put things right. She needed this Berrim to die.

But there was an unfortunate wrinkle. Exava was shrewd enough to know that the mind mage had been able to pierce into her mind, and had stolen information from her. The mind mage had learned of Exava's connection to the abduction of the Selesnya elf woman, the irritatingly-named Emmara. The lord Rakdos would not be pleased about that.

The body was that of the spike-wearing ogre who had served as the bouncer at the Rough Crowd. The squeaks of his corpse announced her as she entered the sulfurous haze of Rakdos's throne room.

The demon lord's face hung in the cavernous room, his eyes and sweeping horns lit by the hellfire of his burning scythe. Nothing else was visible in the smoke.

"The Cult of Rakdos is restless, Exava, and so am I." The voice was like gravel under a blade, hoarse from long centuries, but with a seductive music all its own.

"I bring an offering, my lord," said Exava. "We took glee in his anguish."

"Yes. I can smell it. Bring it here."

Exava dragged the body and let it come to rest between two lava-filled pits.

"Closer," came the voice.

Exava hesitated, but she moved it closer, toward the voice and the blazing scythe.

Without warning, an enormous clawed hand seized the body and snatched it away into the smoky gloom. In the red glow of the chamber, Exava saw the demon lord lift the body high above his head, crush it in his

claw, and consume the essence that trickled out.

Rakdos tossed the remains into a lava vat, and they sizzled into nothing. “I smell something else on you,” he said. “A scream in your soul. A longing for action.”

“Yes, Lord Rakdos. Things have become . . . complicated.”

“How do we uncomplicated them?”

“A man must die.”

“Finally some good news.”

“He is formidable.”

“You wield the power of the cult. You wield a shred of my own power. And yet you ask for more than that?”

“For this man to suffer as he must, I need more.”

Rakdos’s face faded back into shadow, so only the tips of his horns and his chin glowed in the light as he spoke. “I like what this man brings out in you, Exava. Your fire burns brightly, more than my other servants.”

“I will honor you with blood and chaos, my lord,” said Exava.

Rakdos’s great claw emerged from the gloom again, and Exava flinched. But the claw handed to her two shining, serrated swords. His face appeared above her, grinning by lava-light.

Exava took them in wonder, trying to appreciate the purpose of this gift. “They must slice through flesh like no other blades ever forged,” said Exava.

“Not at all,” boomed Rakdos.

Exava stuck out her lip and regarded the blades. “Then . . . they must be enchanted to cause searing pain at the slightest touch.”

“Nothing of the kind.”

“Then . . . what?”

“Have you no use for swords that cut chains?” asked

Rakdos. He waited for an answer.

Exava's reaction was slow. But then a zigzag smile spread across her face. "Oh, thank you, Master," she said gaily, and spun on her heels, a sword in each hand.

She appeared in the hallway, and the freaks snapped at her, links of heavy iron chain securing them to the wall.

"Time we start a riot," she said.

One by one, she sliced through the shackles, releasing the slaving spikers and cultists. One by one, the imps and warriors formed up behind her, grabbing weapons and snarling in sadistic delight. One by one, she enlisted her soldiers of chaos, and their howls sang Berrim's name.



Jace walked through the tunnels ahead of Emmara, listening to the way her footsteps made little splashes on the dank floor and the wet sound bounced around him.

"I'm sorry," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

"For what?"

"When you sought me out, I know you weren't looking to get in the middle of all this. Trouble just seems to follow me around."

"Yes, it does," she said. "You are a vortex of trouble. Always have been, as long as I've known you. But it's not just you. Things are bad up there. I've been around for a long time, and the guilds have never been this tense. Kidnappings. Territorial attacks. Killings. And it's going to get worse."

"And through it all, you've kept me safe."

"I'm glad you're safe," she said. "It was worth it."

"If I hadn't ruined my own memories, I could be of more help."

"No. You were doing the same thing I was. You were taking steps that you thought would keep us safe. Paying the cost."

"Once we get you back to the Conclave, once Trostani knows you're alive, maybe we can put an end to all this. Defuse these guild tensions. You'll be an example for peace. We'll show them how the Selesnya don't retaliate, even against the Rakdos."

Emmara smiled. "That sounds nice."

They walked through the undercity, climbing staircases when they came upon them, making their way toward sunlight.

"Hey, Emmara?"

"Yes?"

"Remember that carved leaf you gave me? The artifact, to use to contact you?"

"Yes."

"Did it work?" he asked. He wanted to ask: *Did you hear the words, "I need you?"*

"Yes. I heard it. I was preoccupied with my Rakdos captors at the time, but I heard it."

"All right, good," said Jace. "Just making sure."

He was walking ahead of her, and he didn't look back to see her face, to know what, if anything, those words meant to her. But he felt a warmth in his chest, just knowing that she had heard them.