



**MAGIC**  
The Gathering®

RETURN TO  
**RAVNICA**

## RETURN TO RAVNICA

### The Secretist, Part One

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## **KNOCKING ON DOORS**

Jace Beleren held a sheet of parchment up to the window. Huddled between much taller towers of Ravnica's Tenth District, the building only reached a few floors up from street level, but a cold, evening light reflected off brick and stone through the glass. Smudged with ink and magically marked with his own unique mage seal, the parchment was covered in notes about the code he'd found. His handwriting had gotten progressively less sane-looking lately. The walls of the sanctum were papered with pages like this. Jace wondered when he had last washed his hair or had a full night's sleep. He hoped the other researcher, a vedalken man named Kavin, hadn't noticed that he had been staying at the sanctum building, sleeping only when unable to keep his eyes open any longer, not even walking outside to the marketplaces or street vendors in the surrounding district. His bed was a stacked pile of notes, his furniture was odd pieces of broken architecture collected from around the Tenth, and his main nourishment was the gnawed end of his ink pen.

The discovery—Jace's current obsession—had come gradually. He hadn't recognized it as a code when he saw

it initially, and in fact had not even recognized any connection at all until he saw it manifest itself a few times around the district.

He had almost tripped over it, the first time. It was not out of the ordinary to see a group of Izzet guildmages unearthing a layer of cobblestone from the street. Their guild was tasked with the maintenance of much of the city's magical infrastructure, and when he happened past them working along a road in the Tenth, Jace had all but ignored their work. But Jace saw that the Izzet mages had dismantled an ancient chunk of stone from the curb, and as they toiled away at a length of exposed steam pipes and elemental conduits, Jace noticed that the discarded piece of stone had a pattern carved into its underside. It had been worn from age and half-covered with cobwebs, but Jace could see a series of curved impressions running along its length, like a procession of geometrically perfect parentheses.

It struck Jace as curious that such care had been taken to carve a pattern on the underside of the stonework, the side that wouldn't even be visible from the street. But he didn't think of it again until the code returned in a new form.

An old and battered neighborhood of the Tenth was being excavated. Jace stopped and watched one day as a burly cyclops in crackling mizzium gauntlets demolished the remains of a textile factory. The cyclops lifted great slabs of stone and hurled them onto a rubble heap, presumably making room for some new Izzet experiment. Jace saw that the discarded stone was carved with a sequence of triangles.

Recognizing it as the code, Jace had kept the details from Kavin, his confidant and fellow scholar who had been of great help in tracking down other instances of the geometric patterns, taking rubbings, mapping the

locations of their sightings, and occasionally covering for Jace as he snuck into guild-restricted territories to fetch more pieces of the code. But Kavin was a logical, practical man—not given to obsessive impulses. If Jace let on how much this code had seeped into every moment of his waking consciousness, Kavin would abandon the project.

Jace's eyes stung. He squeezed them shut for a moment and rubbed his eyelids. They had plenty of samples, but no answers. The pieces didn't fit. There were regularities and patterns within the sinuous shapes set in stone, but no sequence, no message. Something was missing.

There was a knock at the door downstairs.



In a forgotten chamber of the undercity, several hours' journey below street level, an ancient brick wall began to glow. Blue lightning danced along the edges of the bricks. The old mortar smoked and sizzled. The wall exploded into the chamber, bricks tumbling into a heap, leaving a rough, oval-shaped hole.

The planeswalker Ral Zarek stepped through the hole he had just made. Dust curled in the sodden, rotting air as the instruments on his gauntlet twittered and spun, the remaining mana from his spell flickering out.

Ral winced and put a hand over his nose. He kicked a brick with his boot and snorted. "Ugh. Skreeg, tell me this isn't the place."

A goblin in Izzet armor hopped into the chamber, looking around with his hands clasped. The goblin rummaged through his pack and produced a newly-constructed Izzet mana-sensing device that he waved around the chamber.

"Yes!" replied Skreeg. "The concentrations are higher

in here! This must be it.”

A group of Izzet mages followed Ral and Skreeg into the chamber, where they began scrutinizing their surroundings with analytical spells and alchemical devices, lighting the chamber as magical energies shone through the damp haze.

Ral moved through the chamber, pushing aside curtains of hanging mosses and stepping over ancient, fallen columns. He knelt down to investigate something covered over with sickly roots. He pried a mossy tendrill away from the lump and started backward. The gray face of a skull smiled through the foliage with a smattering of jagged teeth. Ral took a breath and let the fight-or-flight impulse fade.

He turned back to the others. “Are we ready?” he asked. “Skreeg, the mana coil. Charge it up, already.”

Skreeg placed a sculpture of spiraling bronze on the floor. The other Izzet wizard researchers surrounded the alchemical device and fussed over its operation. Gems of crimson and turquoise lit up along the artifact’s edge, and it began to hum quietly.

“Ready soon, sir,” said the goblin.

“Soon? Do you think the Great Firemind would be satisfied with soon?”

“I’m sorry, my colleague, but it takes some time for the coils to—”

“Connect it to a richer source,” Ral snapped. “If this chamber has one of the ley lines running through it, then there must be a font of mana underneath—an old source, probably unused for centuries.”

“There is indeed a deep source here,” said one of the other Izzet mages, her eyes closed.

“But the coils will overheat,” said Skreeg. “They’ll be plugged directly into the mana well. That much power—”

“Direct all of the mana into me,” said Ral. “I’ll be able to tell instantly if this is the line we’re meant to follow.”

An insectile chittering sound echoed from one of the ancient corridors that led into the chamber. The Izzet mages froze.

“Who’s there?” Ral called into the corridor.

He strained to see, but the light from their instruments couldn’t penetrate the dark. There was a sound of scraping, like eggshell against porcelain—and more chittering, this time accompanied by footsteps. Many footsteps.

“End your unnatural experiments,” hissed a voice from the gloom. “Forsake this place. The Guildmaster Jarad claims this territory for the Golgari Swarm.”

A small crowd of pale, dreadlocked elves and humans stepped into the light. Bits of bone and detritus woven into their matted hair clicked lightly. Their chitinous armor swarmed with tiny, riotous insects that moved in and out of the sheen of moss growing on their shoulders—a bed for sprouting fungi. Whether it was the Golgari themselves who had made the chittering sound or their bugs, Ral could not be sure. A few of them bore short blades, but most of them were unarmed: spellcasters.

The speaker, an elf woman, held forth a gnarled staff. She pointed the tip, which was decorated with a large rat skull, directly at Ral Zarek. “You. Vacate now.”

Ral swept his palm around him. “This is nothing but ruined, abandoned tunnel. No one owns this.”

“All that civilization discards, we own,” sneered the Golgari elf.

“Well, you’re going to have to scurry away to whatever crevices you crawled out of. The dragon Niv-Mizzet claims this area now—and any other scrap of unused turf he sees fit for the Izzet League.”

The Golgari’s complaints were subverbal, guttural.

Ral thought he heard something that was almost a snarl.

“This kind of trespass would have been illegal under the Guildpact,” said the elf.

“Well, there’s no Guildpact now, is there? Run along. The dragon doesn’t like to wait for his discoveries.”

The elf shaman sneered again, but her face lowered, and she backed away. And with her, the rest of the Golgari retreated into the shadows. There was a final rattling sound as the shaman shook her rat-skull staff, then all was still.

Skreeg heaved a sigh into the silence. “Glad that’s over.”

Just as he said this, dark shapes jerked to life all around the Izzet expedition: skeletal remains shuddered to a standing position; heaps of refuse became fungal rot-horrors; decomposing moss wound with bits of bone to rise in multilegged form, uttering dark shrieks and brandishing claws of malice.

“Rot-dwelling sewer elves,” Ral cursed. He snapped his head to the other Izzet mages. “What are you waiting for? Destroy them!”

The Izzet rushed to conjure spells, but the Golgari refuse zombies sprang toward them with unnerving speed. The goblin Skreeg yelped as a zombie’s claws took hold of him and raised him toward a monstrous, devouring maw. Ral threw a bolt of lightning into the rotting creature, temporarily blasting it apart. Skreeg fell to the muck of the floor as the undead creature reassembled itself, inducing web-strewn remains to merge into its anatomy.

Ral grabbed the bronze cables from their experimental device and tried to use them as a weapon. He jabbed an undead horror with one, but the live cable barely singed its gray flesh. It would have stopped another creature’s heart, but of course the necromantic beast’s heart—if it



even possessed one—was already stopped.

The zombie-things attacked in a swarm, cinching around the mages like a drawstring. Ral heard screams from his guild mates, and multiple tendrils began to lash onto his arms and neck.

“Hold on to something,” he said and jammed the mana cables directly into his gauntlet.

Ral’s eyelids began to flicker. A wind that had no source arose in the chamber, and all the hairs on Ral’s body stood on end. As zombified hands clamped onto him and began to drag his body toward the zombie horde, tiny arcs of storm energy crackled around his body. The air charged with hyperkinetic energies, and Ral felt himself float a few inches off the floor. He heard only the buzzing whine of power, like an overheating boiler. His vision went crackling white as he strained to absorb as much mana as he could. Like a newborn sun, every iota of Ral’s body exploded with power. All was noise and light, and then all was silence and darkness. He could hear nothing—see nothing.

Ral felt a strange pounding, and after a few moments he realized that it was his overcharged heart. In turn, he noted that he was breathing—evidence that he had somehow survived.

Someone lit a glow-lamp. Ral saw physical objects again, but through a thick fog. The scene appeared around him slowly. He realized that the chamber was a haze of dust and broken debris from the blast.

“Who’s hurt?” he coughed.

“I think we’re fine, sir,” said one Izzet mage, blackened and scorched but alive.

“Thanks to you,” said Skreeg, appearing out of the haze.

The Golgari undead were obliterated, having taken the brunt of the chaining energy surge. Pieces of brick

dropped from the ceiling, exposing swaths of ancient masonry.

Ral felt more alive than he ever had before. His heart beat too fast, and he liked it.

“Skreeg,” said Ral. “The mana coils. Rev them up again. We’re finishing this experiment.”

“Sir?” said an Izzet researcher.

“What is it?”

The mage was looking up at the ceiling, at a bit of old stone exposed by the blast. “You’re going to want to have a look at this.”



Jace crept down the stairs to the main floor and approached the door. Kavin wouldn’t have knocked, and he didn’t expect any other visitors. He prepared a spell to sense the mind of whoever was outside. When he detected the thoughts of his old friend, he threw the door open wide.

Emmara looked as youthful as ever, but as she was an elf, her age tended not to show. She wore a white gown embroidered with a creeping ivy pattern that wound around her sleeves, branching into rich brown threading at the cuffs that resembled the roots of great trees. Jace knew she possessed a wisdom and quiet power that belied her youthful appearance.

“Good evening, old friend,” she said with a partial smile.

“Emmara! It’s been a while. Come in.”

As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Jace’s sanctum was not exactly fit for visitors. As soon as she stepped through the door, he had to guide her apologetically through the detritus of his research. He shoved some pieces of stonework out of the way and they sat down on the floor

by an old, unused fireplace, where the threadbare carpet gave way to a wide hearth.

Emmara scanned the place. “You’ve taken up archaeology?”

“It’s a new project, I guess you could say. A colleague and I are studying patterns in old stonework. I’ve seen the same patterns used in dozens of different sites around the district. They’re geometric carvings with repeating elements. I’m fascinated. Did you know that almost every building on this street has stone sourced from the same salvage yard?”

“I didn’t.” Her face was placid, but from the way she clasped her hands in her lap, Jace knew this wasn’t a social call.

“What brings you from Ovitzia?”

“I live here now, in the Tenth,” said Emmara. She offered a small object to Jace, holding it delicately in her fingers: a wooden brooch in the shape of an intricately-veined leaf. It was too detailed to have been carved even by a master artisan; it must have been molded by magic.

“What is this?”

“A gift. From my guildmaster.”

Jace took the fragile wooden leaf in two hands. “Guildmaster?” He glanced at the small tree-shaped pin at her shoulder. “You’ve joined a guild?”

“I’ve returned to one. The Selesnya Conclave. I was with the Conclave years ago—before you were born, in fact, human boy. And now that they’re rebuilding, they’ve summoned me back. You must have seen how the guilds have come back in force.”

“To be honest, I haven’t seen much beyond this building lately,” Jace said with a shrug. He realized that his hair was probably sticking out in every direction, and that Emmara had dramatically upped the cleanliness ante by her visit.

Emmara focused on him intently. “Jace, what do you know of the Guildpact?”

It was a delicate question. Jace had never been fully honest with Emmara—he had never told her he was a planeswalker, a mage capable of traveling between planes of existence. Most people had no idea there were planes beyond their own, and those who were bound to a single plane didn’t enjoy hearing that their familiar home was only one of a potentially infinite array of worlds.

Jace tended to keep his planeswalker nature a secret. That meant that sometimes Jace had to put on a bit of an act, to display enough knowledge that he could seem like a native, such as in conversations like this. He knew about the history of the city-world Ravnica only through what he had gleaned from his research—and from seeing into other people’s minds.

He considered trying to poke around in Emmara’s mind to see if he could learn more about the Guildpact. His magical specialty was a shortcut, but sometimes a necessary one. However, Emmara was a skilled mage in her own right and tended to be able to detect his mind magic when he used it around her.

“Politics was never my best subject,” he said.

“We shouldn’t be surprised that the guilds are on the rise again,” said Emmara. “The guilds are the pillars of history. The backbone of our entire civilization for thousands of years, and no matter what anyone said, the Guildpact was what held them together. But the Guildpact is gone. Dissolved. No magical enforcement of any of the treaties or laws. The guild leaders aren’t bound by the old strictures anymore.”

Jace thought of those he had known who sought power—Liliana, Tezzeret, Nicol Bolas. He thought of how they always used their power to gain more of it. “Any center of power is going to test its boundaries.”

Emmara nodded. “And without those boundaries . . .”  
“You think they’re going to try to exceed them.”

Emmara looked at the brittle woodcarving in Jace’s hands. “They’ve already begun to.”

“Who? The Rakdos?” Jace guessed. He had never understood why Ravnicans had allowed a murderous, demon-venerating cult to remain one of the ten official guilds—it just seemed too dangerous. The going theory was that the Rakdos guild provided well-sought services of mayhem and perverse entertainment to those who possessed wealth and power, and that this was enough for them to be kept around.

“No,” Emmara said. “It’s the Izzet. Izzet mages have made illegal incursions into other guilds’ territories.” The Izzet League—the same guild of magical experimenters that had often been present when Jace had uncovered stone artifacts carved with the code.

“But isn’t that an issue for the lawmages? Shouldn’t the Azorius maintain those borders?”

“They’re trying. The Azorius Senate has been issuing injunctions and rulings against the Izzet day after day, at the request of the other guilds. But without the Guildpact, the Azorius have become toothless bureaucrats. Their legislation is just words on paper. Niv-Mizzet doesn’t seem to care.”

Niv-Mizzet was the guildmaster and founder of the Izzet League, an inquisitive and profoundly ingenious archmage who also happened to be an ancient dragon. If the Izzet had a new scheme, Niv-Mizzet was sure to be its source.

“What has the dragon said?”

“Nothing. Whatever the Izzet are undertaking, they’re keeping it secret.”

“And you want to find out what their project is about.”  
*You want me to find out what it’s about,* he thought.

“Trostandi, my guildmaster, thinks it’s urgent for the Izzet to be open about what they’re planning. But if they won’t cooperate, suspicions will grow among the guilds. Tensions will rise. It could lead to a conflict that could tear the guilds apart.” She spread her hands, and clasped them again. “We need the Izzet to cooperate.”

Jace sat back and took a breath, examining Emmara’s face. She was trying not to plead with him, but he could see the urgency behind her expression. There was an edge to her manner that he hadn’t seen in her before. It wasn’t fear. She had no concern for any threat to her own safety. He sensed that she spoke out of an obligation—something deeply felt, a concern over and above loyalty to her guild. He wondered if there was someone else whom she was protecting.

“How can I help?”

Her smile glowed. “Join us,” she said. “Help us. Help us to understand what the Izzet might be doing, so we can maintain peace in this district, and all the districts.”

“You want me to join your guild?”

“You’d be welcome in the Conclave. The Selesnya believe in bringing people together, in building ways for all of us to coexist. Jace, with your talents—you’d have such potential for connecting with people. We could use you.”

“I don’t know.” A guild would mean tying himself to a set of values, to one point of view. Most of all, it meant tying himself to the plane of Ravnica. And he wasn’t sure, even if he *were* to select one of Ravnica’s guilds, that he would choose the Selesnya. Jace looked around the sanctum, indicating the research around them with a vague gesture. “I have a lot of projects going on . . . I can’t commit to that right now.”

“But you’d be able to help so many people. I’m influential in the guild, Jace. Trostandi has selected me as a kind

of dignitary. And you could be such a natural at bonding with people. We could work toward the same ends. We could learn the truth. Together.”

Jace hesitated. Not many people had ever looked at him the way Emmara was looking at him in that moment. He wanted to say something that would make her look at him that way for a lot longer. He imagined the way her face would brighten even more if he told her yes—how he could touch her hand and tell her that nothing was more important to him than joining her, helping her. He wished he could go through with it, for her sake.

But he couldn't.

“I'm sorry. I just can't join the Selesnya. But maybe I could help in another way.”

Emmara's smile melted. “Oh. I'm too late, then. You're part of another guild already?”

“No. That's not it.” He thought of all the time he spent on other planes. He thought of all the mysteries that drew him from one side of the Multiverse to the other. “I'm just not . . . someone who likes to get too attached.”

That struck her. “I see,” she said and stood. Her demeanor reverted to formality and etiquette. “Well, I should be going. I have a lot of guild matters to attend to. Thank you for your time, Jace. It was good to see you.”

“No, Emmara, I'm sorry,” he said, standing with her. “I just meant I can't afford to get mixed up in any of the . . . guild politics right now. I'm researching something important, and it's taking up all of my time. I'd love to help you after I solve this.”

She nodded. “We'd love to have you,” she said. When she was at Jace's door, she turned. “That leaf I gave you is a Selesnya artifact, made by a woodshaper. You can use it to contact me, if you want. Just say the activating words into it, and I'll be able to hear you.”

Jace looked at her gift in his hand. “What are the

words?”

“I need you.”



The streetlamps had begun to glow by the time the Selesnya elf woman left the building. Mirko Vosk stood on the building's flat rooftop, near the ledge, watching her walk off into the night. Following the woman had paid off, and not in the way he had expected.

Vosk's eyes reflected the light of the streetlamps like a cat's, and he was nearly bare-chested despite the cool evening. He walked over to the chimney opening again, where he had listened at it with his sharp ears, but he heard no more from the man she had visited. She had shown clear interest in this man, an acquaintance of hers she called Jace. She believed in his talents—likely some kind of mage. And this Jace had mentioned that he had been conducting research about some sort of pattern or code.

That was exactly the kind of information Mirko Vosk's master would want to possess. The Selesnya woman smelled appetizing, and her direct access to Trostani was valuable. But Vosk sensed that he had more than one target now.

Mirko Vosk stepped off the ledge of the building. Instead of falling, he floated into the night sky with a casual, upright elegance. It was time to seek an audience with his hidden master.



The Izzet mages weren't hard to find. After a couple of days of observation, Jace heard an explosion and saw a startled flight of birds from across the district.



The plume of blue smoke was a telltale sign of one of the Izzet's pyrotechnic experiments. Jace tracked the source of the blast and spied two mages, a human and a goblin, outfitted with alchemical gadgetry and mizzium gauntlets. They emerged from a disused tunnel, leaving behind charred bricks and a haze of smoke, and their instruments crackled with energy. From what Jace had gathered, this was the Izzet style of research: keep adding energy until something blows up, then observe the results.

Jace stayed hidden at the mouth of the tunnel, letting the two of them pass by. He opened his mind to briefly skim their thoughts. The goblin, Skreeg, appeared to be an assistant to the human, or possibly an apprentice. The human went by Ral Zarek.

"No sign of any gate there even though the energies were promising," said Skreeg. "What will we tell the Great Firemind?"

"You let me worry about that," said Zarek.

Skreeg and Zarek were on the move, turning onto a main thoroughfare and chatting quickly, so Jace couldn't delve deeply into their minds to learn all that they knew. Instead he shadowed them, trying to stay close without being seen.

"Could it be that the Dimir just don't have their own gate?" asked Skreeg.

"Impossible," said Zarek. "It's here. It's waiting somewhere for us. We'll just have to look deeper."

"How do we know that? How do we know we're even going to find what we're looking for?"

"This path was built for us by the ancients, Skreeg. A parun set all this up, do you understand? A founder of one of the guilds built this puzzle across this whole district so that we could find it."

"Of course," said Skreeg. He scratched his ear. "But

why do we think it's for us?"

Zarek snorted. "Because we found it first."

The two Izzet mages walked fast and spoke in low tones, and Jace couldn't walk closely enough to them without seeming suspicious. He had to find a way to stay closer to them. He knew blending spells that would mask his presence to the minds of onlookers, but he didn't think he could maintain such a spell, read their thoughts, and keep up with their pace all at the same time. Perhaps he could get closer without staying on street level.

Jace ducked into an alleyway as the two Izzet mages walked on ahead. He climbed a fence and pulled himself up onto the rooftop of a tavern. He crept across the roof, staying low, until he could see over the opposite edge to look down at Skreeg and Zarek. He listened in on their surface thoughts again. Unfortunately, he had missed some of their conversation.

"That's only the first step," Zarek was saying. "According to Niv-Mizzet, the code tells us something more. It's not enough just to find the gates. We have to know the path before we can uncover what's behind it."

Skreeg clasped his hands together and beamed up at Zarek. "Oh! Tell me what's behind it!"

"He's a discourteous old lizard, Skreeg. He doesn't share with me all the secrets he knows. But I think I know what it is we seek."

They were again moving away from Jace. He had to leap across a gulf to the next building, dash to the edge the sloping roof, and crawl along the edge directly above the mages to listen in on them. They were speaking even lower now, and even with his inner senses active, Jace had to strain to comprehend what they were saying.

"I believe it's a great weapon, Skreeg," said Zarek. "Hidden here, in the Tenth. The ancient guild founders knew that the Guildpact might not last. And I think one

of them knew that if the pact was broken, a single guild would have to rise to rule all the others. That's why they left us a weapon, Skreeg, and hid it in such a way that only the one worthy of wielding it could find it. And *we* are the worthy ones, aren't we? That's why Ravnica will be ours."

*A weapon, Jace thought. The code, the gates, the path—all of this concealed some kind of weapon.* At least, Zarek believed it did.

Jace could no longer follow them by rooftop, and had to watch as they crossed the street away from him. The mages had arrived at the beginning of Izzet-controlled territory, walled off with tall, stark barricades covered in steaming metal pipes. Skreeg and Zarek climbed a wide set of stairs up to a large, round gateway, crowned with a huge signet that resembled the outline of the dragon himself. A squad of Izzet guards nodded to them, and the gate slid open to admit them.

As the gate opened, Jace was surprised to see the silhouette of a dragon's head, looking through from the other side. It was Niv-Mizzet himself, waiting for their return.

"What have you found for me?" asked Niv-Mizzet.

The dragon's voice boomed such that Jace could hear it from his hiding place. But he couldn't hear the reply, and the Izzet mages would soon be sealed behind the gateway.

He felt he was close to finding out what lay underneath all the secrets, but he was sure that he would be caught if he tried to slip through the well-guarded Izzet gate. He was already losing the connection with the mages' minds. Still, Skreeg and Zarek didn't have all the information he craved, anyway.

The dragon, however, did. He had one chance: He would have to look into the dragon's mind before the

gate closed, if he dared.

He dared.