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DRAGONS MAZE

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 2

DRAGON'S MAZE

The Secretist, Part Three

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DRAGON'S MAZE

THE SECRETIST

PART THREE

DOUG BEYER



ONE WAY

Jace's back slammed against the wall of a sealed stone cell. He was trapped in an exitless Dimir prison, miles below the city with two vampires, the assassin Mirko Vosk and the recently-turned form of his compatriot Kavin. He was bait thrown into a shark tank. The two bloodsuckers approached him to drain him, first of the contents of his mind, and then of his veins.

Jace always had one escape open to him, as long as he had time to muster the will to travel. But it meant breaking his mental connection with Emmara. It meant abandoning her. And she was trapped as well.

"I have to leave you," Jace projected into Emmara's mind. *"But I want you to listen to me very carefully."*

"Don't you dare give me a moving final speech," Emmara's thoughts came back to him. *"Whatever plight you're in, fight it. I have no desire to be witness to your last words."*

The vampires advanced toward him, their faces painted the color of a garish bruise by his globe of blue light. Jace had a momentary thought that his attackers represented an escape of another kind. They would drain him, take away all the responsibility of handling this Ravnican disaster in progress. They would purge him of the knowledge of the

maze again, the need to care, the need to persist or strive. He could slowly drown in oblivion, and let others solve the Implicit Maze, stop Lazav, handle Niv-Mizzet's schemes . . . Maybe it didn't all have to fall on him.

But if he did nothing, the consequences were plain. Jace saw it in flashes, as clearly as if it had already happened. Emmara would be imprisoned by the shapeshifter Lazav, and when she became too problematic, he would kill her. Niv-Mizzet would hold his public race through the maze, and teams from all ten guilds would cut as many throats as they needed to in order to win. Niv-Mizzet would have the advantage of the most information, but Dimir agents would steal what they needed to know, if they hadn't already. Lazav would use the maze to claim power, and with no Guildpact to stop him, he would succeed.

He needed to concentrate. Emmara needed him. He found that was the simplest thought to focus on: Emmara needed him. Emmara was captured. Emmara would die.

"I am not planning on dying," Jace thought to her. "Not yet. But I need you to do something. You have to run the maze for the Selesnya. You have to be selected. Do you understand?"

"What? Jace, that's never going to happen. I'm a traitor to the Conclave."

"You have to be chosen. It has to be you."

"Calomir, Jace. Trostani is going to choose Calomir."

"Under no circumstances should it be Calomir—or the one who's taken Calomir's form. No. Trostani's going to choose you."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because you will be the only one who knows the route."

The fangs were bright as the vampires made their move. Vosk leaped forward and wrapped his claws around Jace's neck, prying him from the wall. Kavin dashed around behind Jace's back and seized his wrists, twisting with unnatural strength and hyperextending ligaments in his

shoulders.

Jace struggled to continue his thoughts. *"I'm going to show you what you need to know. Use it. Take his place. You're the one, Emmara. You have to be the one."*

"You don't understand. I can't."

"Here it comes. Use it. Just keep moving."

Jace flashed through the maze route in his mind, skipping from landmark to landmark, projecting each location into Emmara's mind. An intersection on the Transguild Promenade. A long bridge near the Golgari gate. A path up the wide steps to the Azorius gate. A passage through a tunnel that bent and exited near the hellish Rakdos gate. Every twist and turn of the maze. As he rushed through the route, he sent those images to Emmara. He showed her almost the entire path through the Implicit Maze, crystalizing the images in her own memories.

"Jace, I can't—"

"Now you know most of the route. All but the end. It has to be you, do you understand? Don't let it be Calomir."

Fangs sank into Jace's neck. The air caught in his throat in mid-breath, his muscles locked from panic. He had no trick up his sleeve, no illusionary shell game to play to avoid Vosk's bite. Blood ebbed out of him, and he could feel the stabbing of Vosk's teeth in his mind as well, tearing gashes in his memories and letting them begin to drain out. He could feel Vosk sensing inside him, perhaps even tasting his knowledge of the maze or his connection to Emmara.

Jace forced himself to breathe. He let his body go limp, and looked deep inside himself. He visualized a spiraling vortex inside his chest that drew his body inward. He could feel Emmara trying frantically to reach him, but her voice in his mind became faint, fading like sounds from a distant tunnel. He felt suction overwhelming him, pulling his muscles and skin inward to the center of his chest. He gave a final push with his will, and he collapsed in on himself,

releasing himself from the plane of Ravnica.

As he planeswalked, everything faded: the fangs in his skin, the stone cell under his feet, the vast city around him, the sound of Emmara's thoughts. The darkness of the cell was replaced by the nonsensical, roaring dark of the Blind Eternities. There was no sensation of motion, and yet he could feel Ravnica receding behind him, diminishing in importance like a toy he had outgrown. He pulled his consciousness in the direction of another plane and willed himself there. The mad energies of the Blind Eternities tore at him, tried to unmake him as he traveled, but he kept his mind focused, his consciousness whole, and he sizzled through its timeless friction.



From Mirko Vosk's perspective, Beleren had done the impossible. When the blue-cloaked mage vanished, Vosk assumed it was one of his tricks or illusions, and the new agent Gavin suggested as much. Together they searched the stone cell for all signs and scents of Beleren. But the mage hadn't concealed himself. He hadn't used mind magic to alter Vosk's senses, so that his presence couldn't be detected. The mage was actually gone. He had escaped the inescapable prison.

Vosk knew that this would somehow be blamed on him.

So hours later, when Lazav slipped down through the ceiling like a shadow, emerging into the cell, Vosk was already madly thinking of reasons he shouldn't be killed.

"Where is he?" demanded Lazav.

"He's gone," was all Vosk could think to say.

Lazav's face boiled under his hood. He snapped his glance to every corner of the tiny chamber, as if Vosk had hidden him somehow. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, Master. I bit him, and I was taking his memo-

ries, as you instructed. He had what you wanted this time. But he . . .” Vosk glanced at Kavin. “He performed some sort of magic, and he was gone.”

“It’s true, Master,” said Kavin, but Lazav’s snarl cut his corroboration short.

“Enough. What did you learn before the mind mage managed to humiliate you?”

“He knew the route, Master.” Vosk tilted his head, like a snake that had taken interest in a potential kill. “He knew what you wanted to know. I couldn’t drain it from him, but I saw it. I saw enough.”

Vosk felt Lazav’s presence pressing against him, but he saw a spark of interest in his eyes.

“You saw enough,” said the guildmaster to himself. “You have the route.” Lazav let his hood drop forward as he considered this, covering his eyes in shadow.

Kavin looked enthralled to be in the presence of Lazav. The vedalken made a move to step forward and speak up, but Vosk put a hand out to stop him. The idiot didn’t know enough not to provoke his own guildmaster.

Lazav looked up. “Vosk, you will run the maze.”

Vosk ran his tongue along his fangs. He nodded with exaggerated gratitude.

“You’ll use the route you learned from Beleren, and you will participate along with the other guilds. You will not kill any of the others—in fact, you will help them.”

“Master?”

“The maze-runners must live. Any of the others you may kill at will.”

Vosk nodded again.

Lazav hissed a breath out his nostrils and frowned at the floor. “It is not perfect,” he said, “but it will do. Every being not loyal to me shall die, and this city shall be shaken to its knees.”

Kavin pressed past Vosk and bowed. “And what shall I

do, Master?"

Lazav cast a withering look at Vosk. "Kill your pet," said Lazav. "He did not get us what we needed."

Kavin's eyes went wide.

"He may yet be useful to you, Master," said Vosk hastily. "I drained much from him as I fed. It's true that he knew little of the maze, thanks to Beleren. But he has contacts that might be valuable."

"So?"

"He was Azorius once. He has the ear of the sphinx."

Lazav regarded Kavin with new eyes. "Well, then," he said. "Is that so?"

Kavin bowed, blinking, not knowing where to look.

"She trusts you?" Lazav asked.

"At one time, I advised her on Azorius scholarship, Master," said Kavin.

"Then it's time you fulfilled your purpose." Lazav reached out his hand, and the hand became a liquid tentacle, extending toward Kavin. The tentacle spread into webbing, stretching and warping. The webbing wrapped itself around Kavin's face and chest, slithering around his body, cloaking him in a cocoon made of Lazav's own fluid body. Kavin made a muffled, urgent sound, and Vosk saw the man's hands clench into fists. Then Lazav smiled, and it was a horrible smile. Lazav flexed his body, twitching his warped muscles, and the netting contracted. He crushed Kavin's upper body with a muffled scream and a splatter of vampiric blood.

Lazav retracted his limb, and Kavin's remains slumped to the ground. Lazav's features became fluid for a moment, and when they solidified again, he had taken the form of Kavin.

DISCONNECTED

A sliver of failing sun shone through the crack in the boards nailed over one of Emmara's windows. She did not eat. She didn't want to walk around the house or put the teapot on or pump water for the desiccated plants. Guards from her own Selesnya guild did circuits around her house, keeping her locked in from the outside. Nothing she touched felt like her own anymore. This house had become her prison.

"Jace," she thought. "Jace, can you hear me?"

She had tried to call out to Jace in her mind many times. She had never considered before whether thoughts could have volume, but she had learned that she was able to scream thoughts. She also knew, now, that she could whisper them. Her thoughts seemed barely audible to her now, just thin mental words whispered into the aether, their volume shrinking as her confidence grew that no one was hearing them.

She had also tried to call her nature elementals, but she had even less hope that that would work. Trostani had taken that spell from her. It was as if the power to summon the great beings of marble and vine had only been on loan to her and Trostani had revoked it, and with it all hope of magical

escape. Even the few nature spells she knew would be useless to for trying to break out, especially with the building under constant watch.

A guard looked in at her through the tiny round window in her front door. This time the guard was a white-haired, stern-looking man in chain mail. The man grunted, and his face disappeared as he resumed his rounds circling the house.

They did this every hour on the hour, sticking their face through the gap in her door, checking the locks, and making sure she hadn't moved. She hadn't. She sat on the floor and watched the sliver of sun elongate as it crawled across the floorboards. She wished she were attached to that spot, as if her body had sprouted roots that had dug their way into the floor, branching out as they dug down, grasping at the soil. She longed to feel stability. When she walked, her knees betrayed her, as if the floor were unsteady.

Her guild had imprisoned her. Jace's voice had left her. And then there was Calomir. All the bricks of her foundation had vanished.

Eventually the streak of light climbed onto the wall, and soon thereafter it thinned to nothing. Darkness fell, and sleep did not come. She hadn't heard Jace's voice in her mind. As far as she knew the world had disappeared outside her house, and she was the only person left in the world, floating in the void. She wished the thoughts would stop whirling. She tried to quiet her mind, but thoughts intruded anyway—thoughts of Calomir.

Jace had said that Calomir, the real Calomir, was dead, and that the man whom she had been seeing was an impostor. A shapeshifter had killed Calomir and taken his face. She tried not to believe that, to hate Jace for his lie. But she couldn't, not quite, and a desolate anger surged in her. She grabbed a tin cup and threw it at a window. The glass shattered, and the cup bounced uselessly off of the nailed-

in wooden boards. She stood and walked to the shattered window. The points of glass reflected her face in chaotic patterns. She took a triangle of glass, conscious of its sharpness. It comforted her somehow, knowing she had something that could slice flesh. She returned to her place in the middle of the floor, sat, and waited.

Sometime in the night, a guard visited again. This time it was a young human man with a thin red beard. He looked in, checked the door locks, glanced at Emmara, and cast down his eyes. They all averted their eyes like this, as if to prevent the traitor's visage from contaminating their eyeballs, or to prevent her visage from contaminating their concept of her as a traitor. Even so, Emmara hid the shard of glass behind her.

"You there," Emmara said. Her voice was dry. She hadn't spoken in the better part of a day. "Please send for Captain Calomir. I have information for him."

The guard sniffed, and didn't raise his eyes to her. "He's busy."

"Please, it's important. He's to represent Selesnya in the dragon's maze, and I have information he needs."

"You'll see Captain Calomir when Captain Calomir sees you, not before, traitor."

"Without this information, our guild will fail."

The Selesnya guard sneered. "You're trying to trap me."

"Bring a stunning spell, then, and use it on me if I attempt something. Or do you want me to tell him you were the one who prevented him from knowing what he needed to know in order to prevail in the maze?"

The guard wandered away from the door, mumbling.

That would have to do, she thought.

By the time Calomir came to the door, the sun was peeking through the cracks in the window boards again. She stood and held her hands behind her back, concealing the dagger of glass.

"You sent for me?" he asked.

"Come in," she said.

The statuesque elf, or the being who had taken Calomir's face, entered and closed the door behind him. He wore his Selesnya soldier's uniform and sword. "Is everything all right?"

The man was a perfect facsimile of Calomir, to the point that Emmara was questioning herself even now. She couldn't dismiss the urge to simply embrace him. But even if it were her Calomir, he had branded her a traitor to their guild, turned her home into a jail cell, and guided her guild toward violence and belligerence against the other guilds. Either way, he wasn't the Calomir she remembered.

"You intend to represent our guild in the maze," she said. "Perhaps I have information you need."

"You've spoken to Beleren," Calomir said. He glanced around the house. "He was here?"

"I'll tell you what you want to know. But first there's something I want to know from you." Emmara's hands trembled behind her back. She hoped she looked calm and cooperative. She cast her eyes down, then up into his. "I've been doing some thinking. Do you remember the day we met? In the Ovitzia District?"

"The day we . . . met?" His eyes darted for a moment, but he never lost his composure. "Of course."

"You do?"

"You thought I'd forget a moment like that? Just because we've quarreled doesn't mean I'm not the same man."

Emmara looked straight into his eyes. He held her stare. "You said something to me that day," she said. "Do you remember? You told me a joke. It was about one of the vendors at the market, or something. I thought it was so clever, so funny coming from a young, uniformed soldier of the Selesnya. Remember that?"

"Of course I remember."

"Tell it to me again."

"What, the joke? No, Emmara, not now."

"Just say what you said."

"A joke told on command has no humor to it."

"But it was just so funny, the way you said it. It endeared me to you that day. I could use some of that, after how you've left me in here."

"The dragon's race is the important thing now."

A cold shadow passed over Emmara's heart. There was no such joke on the day they met— Calomir had never been much for verbal humor. And they had met here in the Tenth, not in the Ovitzia District. "You don't remember that day, do you?"

"Enough of this. If this was all you had to tell me, I have to go. I need to prepare my team and be ready at the start of the maze, first thing tomorrow."

Emmara remembered what Jace had said—that under no circumstances could Calomir be chosen as the Selesnya maze-runner. "Trostani chose you?"

He tipped his head and gave a faint smile. "I recommended myself, and she assented. And once I win the race for our guild, then we can see to your case. I can ask for leniency from the guildmaster. But you'll have to remain cooperative."

Emmara bit her lip and fingered the shard of glass. "I'll be good."

"I know you can be."

"Calomir."

"Yes?"

"Come here." Emmara held one arm out to him, the other demurely behind her.

Calomir paused. But he went to her, and they wrapped their arms around each other.

Vines snaked out of the floorboards, slowly wrapping themselves around his feet and legs. Emmara clutched him

and whispered in his ear. "You. Are not. Calomir."

Calomir tried to pull away, but Emmara held him fast. She sunk the shard of glass into the center of his back. Calomir pushed her away. He craned his neck, trying to see and reach the shard, but it was just out of reach. He turned back to her.

"You little fool," he said.

"How did you do it?" she hissed. "How did he die?"

"Shall I tell you you're delusional now? That that mind mage has fed you lies and sickened your mind?" He tried to step toward her, but his feet wouldn't move. He looked down and saw the roots and vines twisting around his ankles.

"Was it poison?" Emmara spat. "Did you slit his throat while he slept? Did you wring his neck with your own vile hands?"

Just then a Selesnya guard, the young man with the thin red beard again, looked in through the door. His face opened with surprise to see Captain Calomir under attack.

Emmara needed to keep the shapeshifter talking, and keep his attention on her. "You tell me," she said. "You tell me how you murdered my Calomir. Tell me where you left his body, you *thing*."

The shapeshifter smirked. His legs became like liquid for a moment, easily shedding Emmara's vine spell, and he stepped toward her. Behind him, the guard's eyes went wide.

"You're not necessary," the doppelganger said. "I was doing you a favor by allowing you to rot in here. You know I can take your form just as easily as I took his. Now I see that I should do you the same way I did him. It was with his own sword, by the way. This sword." He unsheathed Calomir's sword.

"You look like him. But you can never be him, *Dimir deceiver*." Emmara did not look at the guard at the door for fear of alerting the shapeshifter to his presence, but she

pronounced those last two words for his benefit.

The shapeshifter shifted his spine, and tendrils spread out from his back as his flesh rearranged itself. The shard of glass dropped out of his back and shattered on the floor. The shapeshifter stalked toward her, raising Calomir's sword. She had no power to summon her elementals anymore. She had very little magic that could constrain a being with such a fluid form.

"It'll look bad if you kill me," she said.

"I'll tell them the traitor tried to esc—" the shapeshifter began, but then he toppled forward and collapsed on the floor. Not dead, but not moving.

The red-bearded guard stood there, holding an artifact in the shape of a carved branch, an item designed to hold a spell—a stunning spell. The man looked terrified.

"You've done well, fellow soldier of Selesnya," said Emmara.

The guard blinked at the prone shapeshifter. "That's not Captain Calomir."

"No. It's a shapeshifter. A face-taker. And that spell won't keep him down long. Give me your sword."

"I—I don't know . . . I can't . . ."

"Quickly! He'll kill us both. He might even steal your face, and kill anyone who learns his secret."

"I can't kill a superior officer."

"He's not—" Emmara began. She stopped herself, and sighed. "It's all right. Can you let me out of here? Trostani needs to know."

The guard unlocked the door and let her out. Emmara slammed the door closed behind her. "I doubt it will do much to lock him in there, but it might slow him down."

But when she looked back through the window in the door, the shapeshifter was melting into the floorboards, his liquefied body finding fine cracks in the wood and descending out of view. Emmara didn't even have time to

shout—he was gone, and she couldn't detect which way he had slithered.

The ruddy-bearded Selesnya guard stood agape, taking in the barrage of new truths about Calomir and therefore about her guilt. "I . . . I'm sorry I doubted you, ma'am," he said.

"That's all right," she said.

The guard bowed his head, this time not from disgust, but with respect. "I wish there was some way I could repay this slight against you, Dignitary."

Emmara brushed house dust from her robes. "I could use a witness when I speak to the guildmaster."



When Jace opened his eyes, he lay on a pebbled shore by a river. Gray-barked trees flanked the river, admitting a strip of bright gray sky above them. Jace put a hand on his neck, feeling the ragged holes left there. He kept his hand squeezed against the wound, but blood trickled through the gaps between his fingers and down his arm. He tore a strip of cloth from his cloak, wadded it, and pressed it against the wound, and used another strip to tie the bandage fast to his neck.

Jace stood and walked along the riverbank. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had been to Zendikar. It was as good a destination as any, as different from Ravnica as any world he knew, barely touched by the hand of civilization. It was too savage a plane for conspiracies and intrigue, too changeable for permanent nations. There were no guilds, no streets, no scheming guildmasters. Still, the shifting, smooth pebbles under his feet reminded him of a cobblestone street.

It was conspicuously quiet. When he walked along the riverbank, the stones under his feet scraped against each

other in an imitation of company, and the river murmured continuously. But these simple nature sounds were not Ravnica's urban bustle. They were not Emmara's voice in his head. If there was a way for him to communicate with her from one plane to another, he didn't know it. The link was broken. He was cut off.

The gray trees gave way to a clearing, and the land fell away into a broad valley. The landscape looked like it had been torn by claws. Gorges traced across the valley, like roads of ruin. The soil had turned ashen, brittle, lifeless. Even the stone rubble looked pitted and porous, as if it had been drained.

He didn't have to return, of course. If he were caged on Ravnica, or if some mystical gravity drew him irresistibly back, then he would be released from the decision. But nothing was forcing him. He adjusted the makeshift bandage on his neck, which was beginning to soak through with a wet red stain. From this serene world, Ravnica seemed unreal, like a collection of vivid paintings he had seen once in a mad dream. He squatted down on the pebbles of the riverbank and used a stick to turn over the bones of whatever he had eaten the last time he was here. He wondered where his own body would eventually rest, and how alien it would seem, his haphazard bones a curiosity on a world without humanoids or perhaps even without bones. It was entirely within his power to do absolutely nothing, and to speak to no one for the rest of his life, and to contribute his alien bones here, to this world, to this stony riverbank.

He thought of Emmara and was immediately tempted to forget her face. He hadn't intended to abandon her, but perhaps that was how planeswalkers survived. Perhaps that was how they prevented bonds with any one place or with any one person. They kept themselves cleanly separate, isolated, and their nature secret. Knowledge of other worlds would be too difficult for the planebound to understand.

The people of Ravnica wouldn't want to know that their own plane was only one speck in an infinite Multiverse. In a way, Jace was doing Emmara a favor. That was the best way for him to care for her, to keep her at arm's length. If he allowed himself to want anything more, it would compromise his very identity as a traveler of planes. It would compromise who he was.

Jace watched the opposite shore across the river and tried to listen for evidence of some form of animate life. It was quiet to his ears, but with his mental senses he felt a wisp of thought, like faraway voices almost hidden in the wind.

He told himself to close his mind off, to keep himself isolated from the minds he sensed. But something made him reach out to them, to find their source. He could see no one in the ruined valley. It looked as lifeless as burned sand. He walked along the river and listened with his mind.

As he walked, the thoughts grew stronger. He could hear shreds of intelligent thought, strands of conversation. He spread out his consciousness, and found their source—the thoughts were coming from somewhere deep underground. He focused in on one of the minds, fearing that someone might be trapped below the ruined land. But there was fatigue in the person's mind, and the dull ache of constant worry, but no panic. She was a woman of Zendikar's kor race, sharpening a steel sword while talking with her family. They all lived in a dark, grimy cavern under the surface of the land. Her family had been forced to live there as disaster had come to their world. The woman had a determination to her mind, a self-enforced sense of hope that lay behind her constant reassurances to her children. She worried that she could not instill the same hope in her children, that despair would take them.

Jace concentrated, and spread his consciousness out to the rest of the subterranean family. The minds of the son and the two daughters wavered at the edge of despondency,

having spent too many weeks without a view of the sun.

Jace hesitated. He was trying to stay disconnected, not to bind himself up with even more people struggling though their lives. But he felt for this woman and her family, and how the children might be able to make it through their plight if they could understand their mother's force of resolve. He thought back to when he fought Ruric Thar, how he channeled all the minds of the Gruul warriors at once, how he let the communion of their thoughts flow through him. He reached out to all of the family's minds at one time.

With concentration, he could do it—but it didn't accomplish anything. He could feel all of their thoughts together, but they couldn't hear each other. The communication was one way, from them to Jace only. Perhaps if he could get himself out of the way, let their minds flow into one another's without him in the way. Perhaps if he could become a kind of bridge, and put them in contact with each other directly—

Jace grabbed his head and cried out. It felt as if his mind was coming apart, disintegrating from the inside out, coming unraveled. Concentrating on multiple minds at once was arduous enough, but letting the family's thoughts channel through him and into each other's minds shredded his faculties and caused him outright pain. It was worse even than the feeling of planeswalking; it was as if that form of mind magic was shredding his very soul. He snapped back his senses, disconnecting himself from the family and the family from each other, and after a few long heartbeats, the pain subsided.

He stood there with his hands on his knees, alone at the cusp of the devastated valley, heaving breaths. His entire body throbbed, as if every part of him had tried to flee in a different direction all at once. He wasn't sure what had happened, but he felt he had touched something new in himself, and it almost killed him. He had attempted mind magic that was clearly beyond him, or perhaps it was inherently

deadly, unable to be mastered. He never wanted to attempt that again.

Still, for a moment he had been that bridge. He had used his own mind as a conduit to let those people reach out to each other, and for a moment, the mother's defiance flowed into her children in a way she had never been able to express, and their aching admiration of her flowed back. Jace had removed himself from the exchange almost entirely, but it somehow still made him feel intimately close to them.

Jace forced himself to turn his back on the valley. He stalked back upriver, thinking of the black void he had seen inside the mind of Calomir, or the creature that had his face. The Dimir shapeshifter's mind had been unreachable, the perfect haven for secrets, the perfect foil for Jace's magic. As Jace walked up the hill he also walked away from this world, his physical form inverting on itself and fading from Zendikar. His path of footprints in the riverbank came to an abrupt end.