

Life in the Ring

Strips of flaming banners whipped violently around the Carnarium stage, threatening to catch the rafters ablaze. A half dozen goblin stagehands struggled for breath underneath a collapsed girder. There were screams of joy and pain as a cannon, which had become unmoored, tumbled into the crowd. All in all, it was one of the most successful performances of *The Aria of Hilrod* seen since the Decamillennial.



Rinni brushed himself off, stood up on the center of the stage, and took a bow. He raised back up and lifted his hands in the air. He was joined by Ginoria, who took her bow and pointed toward Nikori, who lay unconscious in the rubble. Nikori always had a problem with dismounts.

Ginoria and Rinni stepped off the stage, hand in hand, into the crowd, whose members had braved their way past the still-smoking cannon to meet the performers. Rinni reached down to his leg, running his palm across a freshly opened gash. He held his hand up to the crowd, gesturing in the traditional manner to indicate, *This, I give for you*.

“Ginoria,” the fat Orzhov priest Silar said as he bowed to kiss her hand. “You are looking splendid. I never see you in the church anymore.”



"Debts, like compliments, are best paid by the dead," Ginoria said, smiling as she pulled her hand away.

Rinni continued, running his bloody fingers across the open palms of the crowd, gracing them with his gift, but stopped as he reached a young girl holding up a piece of parchment.

"Who is this pup?" Rinni asked Silar. "Did you bring this one?" Rinni wagged his finger at Silar and made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Try and trick me into signing into your debt again?"

"I'm no pup," the girl said, bringing down the piece of paper. "I wish to join the revue."

Rinni laughed. "Ginoria, could we use this one? Hardly a morsel for an ogre. You think she could fit in a cannon?" He reached down and picked her up by her shirt. "Hmmm, maybe just for the kindling, eh?"

The girl struggled, spinning in the air and bringing her foot nearly to Rinni's face. "Let me go old man," she said. "I tried to do you a favor. Your revue is trash. The Juri will take me and it will be your loss."

"Juri would eat you alive," Rinni said. "Go home pup, before you get yourself hurt." He dropped the girl, who rolled backwards into a somersault, launched to a standing position, raised an arm to the sky, then spit in Rinni's face.

The priest drew back his hand, but the girl bolted into the crowd, grabbed onto the scaffolding, and flung herself up into the rafters of the Carnarium and out of sight.

"Unguilded filth. No respect," Silar said, removing a cloth from the folds of his robe to wipe off Rinni's face. "She could be found, you know."

Rinni waved him off. "No, no," he said, taking the cloth and dabbing the spittle away. "She has the fire. It is pleasure to see it in one so young."

Rinni handed the cloth back to Silar, who returned it to his robe—which would no doubt soon become part of his collection. Rinni thanked him and made his way backstage to his dressing room. There, he collapsed into the broad chair in front of the mirror. Wincing, he peeled off

the heavy padded leather of his costume, dropping it to the ground piece by piece. Sweat and blood had shrunk it half a size. The heavy padding added weight, making the performance harder, but he needed it. Each year, it became harder to bounce back from the blows and falls.

His bruised and swollen hands fumbled over the bottles on his desk—Simic-made tonics for vitality and strength and an Izzet potion that glowed an unnatural blue and let off a just barely audible hum. He finally found and opened a jar of balm, cultivated by the Selesnya, that would soon soothe the pain and minimize any scarring.



After applying a second layer, Rinni made his way to the bed in the corner of his dressing room. Outside, he could still hear the roar of the crowd at the next act, spike jesters of no small skill. In his younger days, he would've watched from the sidelines, but the performance had taken too much out of him. For tonight, there was only sleep.

The Carnarium from above was not a sight Rinni had seen in some time. He sought the girl who had so succinctly put him in his place two nights before. He found her in the scaffolding near the Carnarium's roof, a height he himself had struggled to climb. Her feet were dangling over the ledge, and she was watching the great Minyuli perform. The act modeled itself after the simple parlor tricks of the street magicians who performed near New Prahv. Minyuli's goblin assistant bound him and tortured him, and Minyuli reveled in the pain to better concentrate his magic—a technique he billed as the Projection of Pain—and send a fireball at the goblin just as it thought it had finally outsmarted the mage.



The goblin, already wearing some bandages to cover up yet-to-heal burns, had tied and bound Minyuli to an inverted table, stuck pins in his feet and sides, and set up an elaborate pulley system to stretch him on a rack from halfway across the stage. To add to this, the goblin hunkered down in a barrel full of water to dodge the sure-to-follow fireball. As the goblin turned the crank to the fifth position, steam began to come up from the barrel. The goblin quickly jumped out of the barrel, whose contents had begun to boil over, and ran manically around the stage trying to shake itself dry from the boiling contents. When it ran face-first into a support beam, the girl let out a snort.

“People without tickets get thrown to the hounds, you know,” Rinni said.

The girl looked back to see him, then turned forward and eyed the ground below.

“Far enough to hurt, not far enough to kill,” Rinni said. “But sit, stay, Little Pup. I did not come here to harm you.”

“You want to tell me to go home again?” she said, turning back to watch the stage. “You don’t think I can handle myself in your circus?”

“Oh no, of course you can,” Rini said, slowly lowering himself onto the ledge. “I think Silar was perhaps lucky you chose flight instead of fight. Maybe even you would be of use in the ring someday. I just wonder if it is for the Rakdos or not. But it is very rude of me.” He extended his hand. “I am Rinni.”

“I know who you are,” the girl said.

“I don’t like to presume,” he said. “Ten years ago, yes, Azorius arbiters themselves would tip me their hats, but fame hardly keeps to one like a cloak.” Rinni paused for a second. “This is the part where you introduce yourself.”

“Lunicia,” she said. “Lunicia the Tremendous. At least someday.”

“I was your age when I saw my first revue,” Rinni said. “Younger, perhaps. *Dance of the Nine Chains*.” Rinni chuckled. “The fulcrumist was incompetent. The first two pairs that came his way he launched directly into the crowd. They ate it up, of course—carnage is carnage—but the ringleader was none-too-pleased. The next pair came with razor wire instead of a chain. You should’ve seen the look on his face.” Rinni made a face of exaggerated shock, holding his hands up to his face, fingers bent back to imitate stumps.

“That’s not funny,” Lunicia said. “That was a person.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Rinni said, “they put two or three of them back. He went on to have a fine career as a chainwalker. Short, true, but fine.”



On the stage, a dancer swung between a series of poles and chains using two hooks, one mounted on each hand. She held her body rigid and straight, and gained momentum spinning around one pole only to release herself into the air, arc upwards, grab onto one chain and swing it to a separate pole, then instantaneously reversed direction and flung herself across the room in another direction.

“I don’t understand sometimes how you all can accomplish such acts of beauty in one breath,” Lunicia said, “and such brutality in the next.”

“Funny thing about the Centralum,” Rinni said. “The dancer takes years to prepare. The hooks are not fastened to her wrists, they are implanted. Each change in direction brings complete pain to the dancer.”

Lunicia ran her hands over her wrists. “That’s horrible,” she said.

“There is no other way for her body to support the stress,” he said. “It is an ugly thing to do, but a beautiful thing to behold.”

“I’m beginning to feel I’m safer without a guild,” she said.

“Ah, safe, yes. You want to be a safe acrobat? Perform in the streets. To be a Rakdos is more.”

The girl turned back to the stage. “So I can grow old like you?” she asked. “To perform until my body stops working?”

“Rakdos performers do not grow old in the ring,” Rinni said. “They go on exactly as long as they are meant to. They acquire skills. They acquire scars. Their movements may be hampered, they may slow down, but it is all part of the dance. They play the role they were meant to play. To make people laugh. To remind them how precious and how fleeting our lives are, no matter how harsh or short. Our lives are a gift.”

“You speak as if he is a god,” Lunicia said. “Where is the glory in that?”

“Our lives are fleeting but his is not,” Rinni said. “The people need the entertainment, yes, but do not underestimate the Demon. The nine Paruns gave the Demon a guild to entertain him—to satiate his bloodlust. Only the Firemind remains who knows what the Demon is truly capable of. We Rakdos, we perform—we live and we die—to appease him, so that the Demon can return peacefully to his slumber.”



He signed and dated the paper. “You watch the show tonight. If you never come back again, I could not blame you. You keep this paper to remember why. But I think maybe it intrigues you.”

The performance began with Nikori on the high chains, walking with two torches in his hands. As he reached the center of the chain, he began to juggle the two torches, tossing them from one hand to the other. Rinni entered the stage with two torches of his own, which he juggled back and forth with Nikori, high above him. Just as it seemed as if neither could sustain the loop any longer, Ginoria entered the stage with two more torches, which she tossed one at a time to Rinni, who added them to the rotation.

The torches moved faster and faster, until Rinni’s hands erupted in fire. The torches fell to the ground as the flame in Rinni’s hands grew, but not out of control. It flowed off of his hands like smoke off a thurible. Molding the fire into a sphere in his left hand, he played it with his right, encouraging jets to emerge like spires on the ball.

Ginoria took a swig from a bottle, and black liquid oozed out of her fingertips, taking the shape of sticky tendrils winding across the stage. Rinni and Ginoria locked arms with each other and begun to spin impossibly fast around the stage. The ichor fanned out like spinning blades circling over the crowd’s head until the flames caught it, lighting it ablaze and creating ribbons of fire that danced through the air. The scent in the air was one of burning sulfur.

As quickly as it began, the flames from Rinni's hands and ichor from Ginoria's pattered out, and the two fell to the floor. The crowd hooted and hollered. Slowly making his way to his feet, Rinni took a bow, and then pointed to Ginoria and Nikori, who each took their bow in turn.

Mustering what little strength he had left, Rinni raised himself up again for the final act. Every performance in his entire life was leading up to this one. This was his one unforgettable act, the one that nobody who was anybody would admit to have missed. This was the showstopper.



The low and rumbling chuckle of the Demon could be heard throughout the hall, which triggered the audience to erupt into throes of elation. It was a sound unlike anything Lunicia had heard before. The way it shook the hall was both terrifying and oddly comforting. Lunicia watched as spectators young and old wrestled for souvenirs of the event—something to remember it by, something to prove that they were there in the flesh when it happened. Within a week, a dozen other performers in other circuses would imitate the act—but these spectators knew they were there for the first run. Lunicia was filled with a sense of grief, but also excitement. She understood what Rinni had told her now.

Making her way backstage amid the chaos, she sought out Rinni's dressing room to try and get a clue how he did it. There, she saw the balms, the salves, and the mostly empty but still somehow electric bottle with the prominent Izzet signet. It was then she knew that no matter how skilled she could become, her acrobatics would never be enough alone—she would need to acquire allies in other guilds.

Lunicia grabbed what she could from Rinni's dressing room. She would go to the fat priest, Silar. Certainly he would buy her autograph of Rinni and some of these knick knacks. She would have coin in her pocket and a contact in the church. Allies who could supply her with the means to top not only Rinni, but every performer in every circus in Rakdos. It might take years, but she would

bring the Demon to his feet—not to chuckle, but to hear him roar with pleasure. The cost was no object.