

# The Illusions of Child's Play

## Nicky Drayden

From set *Ravnica Allegiance*

I spy her through the front windows of her effigy shop and can't stop my damned heart from fluttering. She's hunched over her workbench, painting faces onto miniature skulls then affixing them to doll bodies costumed in elaborate outfits she designed herself. The black leather is cut better than the Scourge Diva's attire, and the care she takes when adorning the skulls with horns stokes the fire inside me.

I have to talk to her this time. Olrich, that son of a devil who I sometimes dare to call my friend, says he'll flay me to bits if I bring another effigy home instead of her name.

I take a deep breath, then cross the street, carefully stepping around a couple of hellhounds playing tug of war with the femur of some poor volunteer who'd gotten caught up in the festivities last night. Most of the gore has been scavenged already, and you wouldn't know a dozen people died here in the ensuing bloodbath, other than the deep red tinge lingering in the crevices between cobblestones.

Good times.

"Heathen!" yells an old man bundled up in white and blue robes, standing on the sidewalk in front of the shop. I check over my shoulder to make sure he's not speaking to someone else.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"Demon! Stealer of souls! Father of fornication!" he intones, then shoves a leaflet at me for the new Integrity Reclamation Center down the street. "Rehabilitate yourself! Embrace the ways of law and order before it's too late!"

I've been called worse things, and while most of them are true, that doesn't mean I enjoy being harassed by pretentious Azorius elocutors while I'm minding my own business. Memories flash forth from my life before I'd found Rakdos, before I'd channeled my anger into my performances. Back when broken bones and punctured flesh were the preferred medium for my art.

But then I feel *her* watching me through the storefront window. I immediately forget about ramming my horns through this guy and enter the shop.

I pretend to browse, ogling the dolls strung up by their necks. Even her generic effigies are better than most. The magic within them tugs at me, their button eyes staring right where my soul would be if I had one. I loosen the noose around one doll's neck and flip it over, inspecting the stitching while catching glimpses of her from the corner of my eyes. I grab a charcoal stick as well, to keep up pretenses, like I'm eager to draw the face of my foe upon it and then set it alight.

*No more effigies, Kodo!* Olrich's words come back to me. Those weren't his exact words, of course. There'd been quite a bit more name-calling and cursing, but what does he expect? For me to walk up to her and start making idle chitchat?

"Can I help you?" she asks, eyes as dark as midnight and the red paint from last night's parties still clinging to half of her face.



Art by: Randy Vargas

"I. Um. Uhhh " I shove the doll and charcoal stick at her. "I'd like to buy these."

She snatches the doll and stick from me. "Nuh-uh. You've been coming in here every week for a month and a half now. Last time you were in here, you bought a whole *ream* of blight parchment, and I had to conjure an entire new batch! Not even Lyzolda had that many enemies. What do you want?"

*Just introduce yourself. Make small talk. You're a demon, Kodo. Grow a pair of horns and act like it!*

"We," I stammer. "You and me. We " We've crossed paths at various parties, reveling in hedonistic pleasures and agonizing performances. She was tough for a human and didn't flinch at the pain performers—the glass eaters, the fire walkers, the jester who juggled flaming skulls but her tenacity finally cracked at the ogre who attempted to drag a cart full of imps using chains attached to fishhooks in his lower eyelids. Well, there must have been one too many imps on the cart that night, and when the ogre's howls thundered through the party hall, her hand slipped into mine and didn't leave the rest of the night. We drank, we danced, we kissed, then we laughed when we found out we both used "illusion" as our safe word. "We " I use a few obscene hand gestures, trying to hint at acts of depravity we've enjoyed, but she squints at me, waiting for me to say something.

"Ah! The beast with two backs!" she exclaims.

I nod, but then notice someone else has come into the store and has taken her attention. The smoky-sweet stench of void matter overwhelms me and shadows twist and mutate like they have forgotten how to behave. I turn to see a netherbeast—an interesting collection of blue-black limbs stretching out from a torso with a gnarled backbone prominent in both the front and the back. There's no head to speak of, but I can tell it's staring at me.



Art by: Simon Dominic

"I'm not done with you," she says to me before going off to tend to her customer. She loads each of its arms up with burlap sacks sitting on the counter.

I gather up all my courage while she's busy. I won't get another chance. Last person in Ravnica you want to piss off is an effigy mage.

"Tell your master I hope he has a depraved Ragefest!" she says, waving the two-backed beast off with a smile. Then her face goes rigid, and she's back in front of me.

"Hi," I say, extending a hand. "I'm Kodolaag. We've hooked up at a few parties."

She looks me over once, then crosses her arms. "Yeah. You look kinda familiar. Red leather mask? The symmetrical piercings with the iron mace balls dangling from a chain?" A growl settles in her throat. "You do realize this is my place of business?"

"Heathen!" come the old man's voice again, yelling at the netherbeast this time. "Scourge!"

I try to tune him out and keep focused on why I'm here. "I know this is terribly inappropriate, but I just thought we—"

"You thought we have some sort of unspoken bond that extends into our personal lives?"

Well, when you say it out loud, it does sound rather foolish. I grin and try to save face. "Say, the Mock-turne's a few blocks from here tonight "

"Yeah?"

"I thought maybe I'd invite you? I've got a performance. Sort of a poetical social commentary thing."

"Hard pass. It's the first night of Ragefest, and I'm running behind on crafting effigies. Not that it'll matter with that Azorius bunkum out there scaring off my customers."

"Why don't you you know." I point at an effigy, then make little explosion sounds and wiggle my fingers like falling embers.

“New laws in the skies last week. Effigy spells used upon members of the Azorius Senate are punishable by imprisonment. He’s annoying, but I won’t risk losing my shop over it.”

Maybe she can’t risk sending him away, but I’ve got nothing to lose. I pull a sheet of blight parchment from the bin along with a charcoal stick and walk up to the window. The Azorius man is yelling at a pair of ogres now. Derision’s Peak and the surrounding neighborhoods have fallen under Rakdos domain for as far back as I can remember, which is at least a few thousand years. But lately, Azorius has been stirring things up with its presence, buying up cheap property, setting up surveillance rifts everywhere, and then complaining when street performances spill over onto manicured lawns each night. It’s maddening to see my community fall victim to order and justice.

Quickly, I sketch a picture of the man. My drawing skills are crude, but I can feel the magic bleeding from the parchment, tying the illustration and person together with invisible threads. The image begins to dance upon the page, motions mirroring the ones the man is making. I tap on the glass, and he turns around. I press the drawing to the window. He must not know about blight parchment because he doesn’t react to the drawing. It’s weak magic, mostly used by children to torment their siblings and sometimes their parents when they’ve failed to get their way. Just a minute or two of agonizing, mind-searing pain before the effects dissipate completely. Child’s play.





Art by: Wesley Burt

The man watches as I tear the paper in half lengthwise, a jagged rip parting the drawing in two. He grabs his head with both hands, screaming at the top of his lungs. By the time the tear hits his navel, he's dizzy and delirious, and he lopes off into the distance.

"There," I say. "Problem solved."

She doesn't look impressed. "Yeah, and in about ten minutes, I'm going to have half a dozen Azorius arresters banging on my door. Can't sell anything if I'm locked up in Udzec."

I keep waiting for her to ask me to leave so I can walk out of that door and put this miserable experience behind me, but her posture has changed. Gone are the crossed arms, the scowl. Don't get me wrong, she's still annoyed as hell, but somehow it feels like we're in this mess together.

"How many dolls do you need to sell?" I ask her.

"Thirty to break even this week."

"You can sell that easily at the Mockturne tonight. The owner of the club is a good friend of mine. I'm sure he'll let you set up shop. The arresters will lose interest in a simple effigy violation soon as the carnage from Ragefest breaks out."

"Really?" She raises a skeptical brow, then extends her hand. "I'm Zita. You're sure your friend won't mind?"

*Zita. I've got her name, you devilish bastard.*

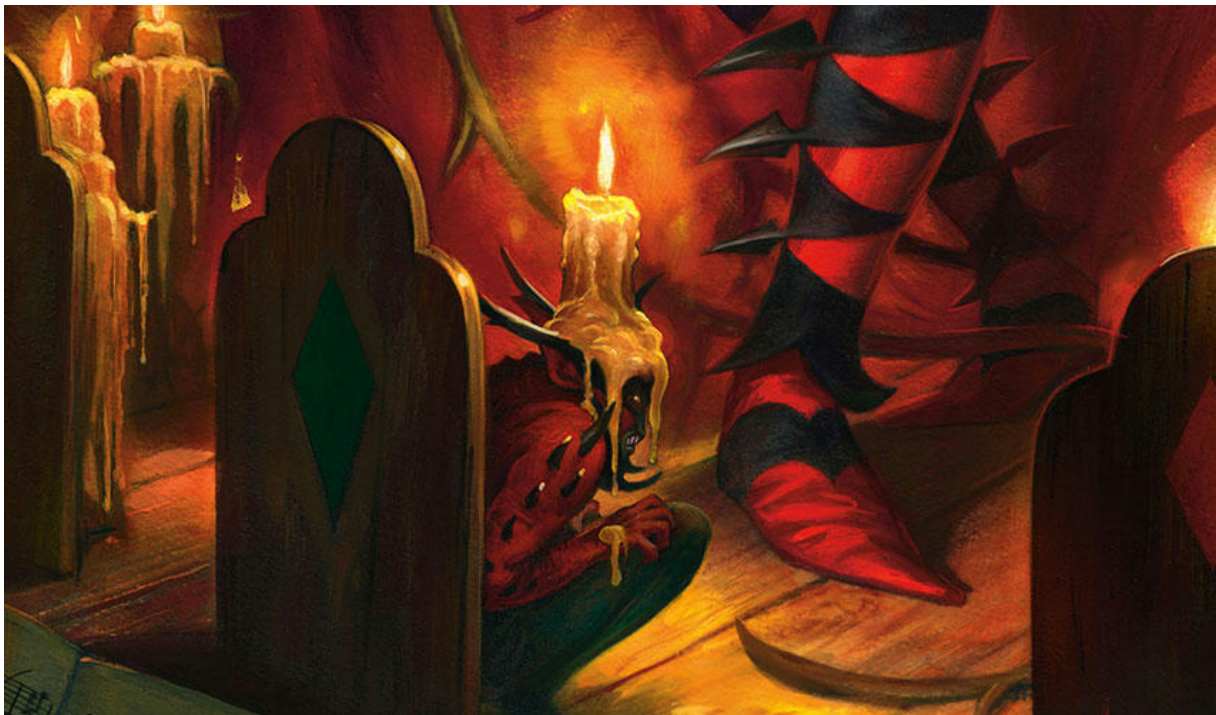
My smile broadens. "Olrich and me, we're like family. There's no way he'll say no."

"No," Olrich says, peeking through the blood-red stage curtains and into the stone-lined pit where the crowd will gather in a few hours' time. Zita stands near the grating of an unlit furnace, twenty burlap sacks filled with the best of her craftwork resting at her feet. "I am absolutely not getting caught up with effigy magic. Azorius will be out in full force tonight just waiting to catch violators."

"You've never been afraid of them before. That bit you did on Baan a few months back is already legendary."

"Things aren't like they used to be, Kodo." Olrich, the frantic little devil, scampers off on all fours toward what passes for a kitchen in this establishment.

"I'll call in a favor. I'll get you an audience at Rix Maadi!" I shout after him. He stops. Turns. Olrich's biggest dream is to perform in our Guildhall, but getting an act on stage there is all but impossible if your fans don't number in the thousands. He launches himself into my arms so we're eye to eye. Now I have his attention. "It's been a couple centuries since I performed there, but I still know a lot of the troupe. I can get you center stage at the Festival Grounds! Imagine the sweltering heat. The smell of fresh sulfur in your lungs. Please "



Art by: Deruchenko Alexander

"Fine. But she stays in the far corner. And you'd better get me an audience in front of Rakdos himself!"

"Rakdos and me, we're like family " I say, and ten seconds later, I'm breaking the good news to Zita.

The crowd starts filing in not long after she's set up. Not the ideal location, but she's far enough from the entry that she won't catch the attention of passing arresters. Zita's still not impressed with me, but she's not burning me in effigy yet either. Soon, she'll hear my poetry, which will likely sway her one way or the other.

Olrich warms up the audience with his devilish antics and a spot-on impersonation of Niv-Mizzet that includes spitting fire at the feet of those poor bastards foolish enough to sit in the front row. He's good tonight. Thoughts of performing in Rix Maadi are probably still swimming in his head. A lot of small-time performers aspire to it. I don't blame them. In Rix Maadi, the laughs are louder, the tricks more spectacular, the blood redder, thicker, sweeter. Night after night, you reap your rewards, partaking in all matters of the flesh. You build a following, insatiable groupies reveling in your skillful debauchery, until one day, Rakdos notices you have just a *few* more fans than he does.

So he kills half of them.

And after that, the tricks are tame, the laughter is stifled, and the blood slows to a trickle. You pack your bags and leave the Undercity to eke out a living on the streets of Ravnica, reciting poetry to drunks.

I step onto the stage, slip my spectacles over my nose, and then look down at the notes crumpled in my hand. Drums beat, thin human hides giving off high-pitched percussive notes that reverberate throughout the pit. I read:

*Iron. Chains. Blood. Knives.*

*Sons. Daughters. Husbands. Wives.*

*Life drips down the drain.*

*Without pleasure, there's no pain.*

*Stolen moments, stolen years.*

*Time has passed, but the heart still sears.*

*Outside the home where love once sat,*

*Death lays out his welcome mat.*

One person claps timidly. I look up, hoping that it's Zita, but it's not. The audience gets lost in guzzling ale and side conversations. I can win them back, but I'll have to do something riskier.

I clear my throat obnoxiously to snag their attention. "So, I bet you've noticed all the surveillance rifts around here these days, shimmering in thin air, then gone with a *poof* soon as you look right at them. Can't take a dump without wondering if some unfortunate Azorius omnisight mage is watching you strain on the crapper. Though in all fairness, the number Olrich's imp chowder does on your bowels ought to be a jailable offense!"

"There's nothing wrong with the chowder. I eat it every day!" Olrich shouts from offstage, but it's too late. I've gotten a few laughs, and the crowd is warming to me.

"That's because you've got a cast-iron stomach, my friend, and your sphincter control is legendary!" I point to the demon in the front row, spoon half dipped in his soup bowl. "For this poor chump, however, I'm afraid Azorius code 3435-T is about to be broken use of explosive material in a confined space. And that space is his pants."

I revel in the raucous hooting and hollering. An ogre jumps up from his seat and grasps the wrought iron candelabra hanging above. He swings back and forth, performing acrobatic flips, and despite the jacquard print loincloth he wears that's refusing to do its duty and the bits of powered cement falling

from the ceiling, all eyes marvel at his graceful maneuvers. At least until one of the iron spikes embedded into his shoulder gets caught in the detail work of the candelabra.

Flesh rips, the ogre falls back into his seat with a cry of pain. He drowns his embarrassment in a flagon of ale. The blood in the air lingers, though, and if the audience's attention was smoldering before, it's blazing now.

"And skyscribing is at an all-time high. There are so many new law runes lit up above New Prahv that the sky above the Guildhall shines brighter than all the candles on Rakdos's birthday cake. It's so bright that Azorius senators are getting sunburnt on their way to work!" I raise my hand and squint like I'm looking directly into the sun. "Oooh! It burns! But not like flaming red skin isn't sexy, am I right?" I strike a lewd pose, and the laughs roll in. I get a catcall as well, and I can't say I'm disappointed when I look up and see that it's come from Zita.

"As you all know, Udzec opened up not too long ago. Maximum. Security. Prison." The boos come fast and hard. "I know, I know. How many of you know someone in Udzec?" Nearly the entire audience raises a hand. "I hear it's overcapacity already. Fifty-thousand prisoners in that Monolith. In fact, there's only one thing in all of Ravnica that's fuller than Udzec, and that's Dovin Baan's ego!" I straighten imaginary lapels and walk around like I've got a fire-poker rammed up my rear, pointing to random people in the crowd, and with my best nasally imitation of Azorius's Grand Arbiter, say, "You get a cell and you get a cell and you get a cell! Prison for everybody!" The crowd erupts. "Are you laughing at me, citizen? No one laughs in the presence of Dovin Baan!"

Then the entire place goes quiet as a crypt. I look over to see an Azorius arrester looming in the entryway. I clear my throat again, then reverse course, digging into the Gruul this time. The laughs are forced. The tension in the room is palpable. I finish my set anyway—twenty-three minutes of pure torture. The crowd starts to thin halfway through, and even Zita looks like she wants to leave. As soon as the last joke slips off my forked tongue, I retreat backstage to gather my wits. Azorius never used to get under my skin like that. A hundred years ago, we would have collectively shamed that soldier out of the venue. But these last few months, something's changed. Now, I'm on edge, worrying about being arrested for using something as innocent as blight parchment.

"I've seen worse acts," Olrich says, hopping up onto my shoulder to console me. He's always been a great liar, and I appreciate it now more than ever.

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I help Zita carry her bags back to her shop. It should be safe now with Ragefest in full force. Masters of Ceremonies dance upon their parade floats, slinging gilded vertebrae necklaces into the crowd. Organists perform excruciatingly loud melodies that can barely be considered music. The retching is so abundant, it's flowing down the streets, and slay bells ring in the distance—tolling for each soul Rakdos has claimed this year. I ignore it all. I'm in no mood to celebrate.

"Is it just me, or are we carrying more effigies than we came with?" I ask Zita.

"I sold twelve, but when that arrester came in, everyone demanded refunds. I also started making a new one during your set. Had to pass the time somehow."

"Ouch." And that seals it. I'll never see her again. At least with our masks off. Three more blocks, and she's out of my life forever.

"Huh, look at that," Zita says, pointing to graffiti on the side of a leather shop: *Dovin Bann sucks rotten drake eggs*. "Spelled 'Baan' wrong. The guy may be a backstabbing, ladder-climbing sellout, but if you're going to slander someone, might as well get the name right." The magic's still fresh and Zita massages the first  $n$  into a passable  $a$ . "Better?"



"I guess," I say, kicking gravel with my hooves. We continue on our way, but a vice parade catches us. Meticulously decorated floats maneuver through the street, carried by massive demons that put my own girth to shame. Jesters move about the spiked wrought-iron pain wheels and torture cages, carefree and oblivious to the promise of death from a single misstep.



Art by: Jonas de Ro

I make the mistake of staring too long, and one of the jesters locks me in her wily gaze and I feel the need to volunteer. I step up onto the float and make my way up the distorted ladders of the torture cage that border on optical illusions. Spikes await me if I fall, probably poison tipped, because louder screams bring louder cheers, and Ragefest is no time for restraint. But I'm not their ordinary volunteer. I've lived and breathed torture cages for centuries. I execute a double flip and tuck, catching one bar, then the next, swinging from hold to hold as I propel myself higher. The skeletal iron structure becomes more precarious the further up I go. The welding's shoddier, the metal's flimsier, but I put all of that out of my mind and concentrate on the show. For the finale, a one-handed handstand on top of the flaming firepit, then I dismount back into the audience to cheers all around.

Ten seconds of smelling my own flesh cooking has put me in the mood for a festive nibble. I flag down a street vendor and order honey-smoked horror for us to share, tender meat falling off the bone.

"You should have an act like that," Zita says as she leans into me, licking spicy red sauce from her fingers. The barrier she'd erected between us is suddenly gone. Better than gone. Like it never existed. "You were amazing."

"I did have an act like that once."

She looks up at me, ready for me to bare my heart, but footsteps beat the pavement behind us. We turn and see an Azorius soldier marching our way.

"Halt!" he commands. "You're under arrest for violation of Azorius code 3691-J"

I drop the doll sacks and put my hands behind my back, waiting for the magic to snare my wrists. Stupid blight parchment. It's barely effigy magic at all!

“defacing a public building,” he continues, “Plus Azorius code 6342-P, slandering a Grand Arbiter,” the arrester says, binding Zita up with enough magic to stop a giant.

“She didn’t deface any building!” I say, relaxing my hands. “Well, there was that graffiti, but she didn’t put it there. She just fixed a spelling mistake.”

Zita glares at me.

“Your witness statement corroborating her guilt has been logged, citizen,” the arrester intones.

I wince, “But !” And like that, Zita is gone out of my life. This time completely.

Everyone knows Udzec can’t be breached from the outside, but Olrich claims to know someone who works within or at least she *used* to work within. From the looks of things, her fall from the dignity of Azorius had been a steep one. This close to the docks, her hovel is indistinguishable from the fish shacks surrounding it. Thick incense wafting from the cracks in the siding keeps the worst of the reek at bay.



Art by: Adam Paquette

*Scry Me a River*, the sign reads, a weather-worn wooden plank that hangs lower on one side.

“You’re sure about this?” Olrich asks me for the twelfth time. “Because once we step over this threshold, there’s no going back.”

“I can’t just let Zita rot in prison! I know it’s ridiculous, but I feel like we’re soul mates.”

“You don’t have a soul, Kodo.” Olrich bristles. “But if she means that much to you, let’s do this.”

“Olrich!” a woman answers, opening her door a second before we knock. She’s wrinkled all over, not like an old woman, but like she’d simply thrown on the nearest skin without a thought for how it fit. She crouches down and embraces the devil, a hug that lingers long enough for me to wonder about the past shared between them.

“Good to see you, Lucinka. This is—”

"Kodolaag," she says, extending her hand and shaking mine vigorously. "It's wonderful to finally meet you. In the flesh."

She escorts us inside, two chairs set out for guests, one with a booster so Olrich can be level with us. A foil-wrapped box sits in the middle of the table. "You told her we were coming?" I whisper to Olrich. He shakes his head.

"How've you been?" Olrich asks. "Looks like you've upgraded the place a bit."

"Busy. Simic piracy is at an all-time high. One in three boats that launch from here don't make it back to shore. I've evened the odds a bit, letting captains know when the best time is to set sail. Doesn't pay much, but my conscience is as clear as a crystal ball these days." She smiles politely. "I'd ask how you've been, but " She taps her forehead right between the brows, then pours us each a glass of Buttress South Whiskey and drops a single ice cube in mine before I can ask for one.

"You're a precognition mage," I say while she takes a sip, mostly so she won't have time to beat me to it. A wry smile crosses her lips.

"I'm sorry. It's a horrible habit. I need to remember that people quite enjoy having their questions form in their head before I answer them. But I'm so much better than I used to be. The Senate never encouraged us to consider the ramifications of our foresight. Their hearts are in the right place, but their passions for justice can be, well a little overambitious, bound to the letter of the law instead of its spirit. And to answer your next questions, Yes. Yes. Thirty-seven years. I couldn't stand putting people away who'd yet to commit a crime. And strictly platonic. I know you weren't going to ask that one out loud, but it's written all over your face."

My mind is spinning.

"I'm sorry. I did it again, didn't I? Ah, well."

Olrich trusts her, and she seems legit, so I slide the bulk of my savings across the table. It's not much. Even good poets barely make a pittance, and I'm far from good.

Lucinka lifts the lid off the box sitting on the table. "Inside, I've got everything you'll need to accomplish the thing you want to do. Don't speak it out loud. Try not to even think about it. The more spontaneous you are, the less likely you are to raise the suspicion of the precognition mages. Visit Udzec tomorrow morning. Get in line behind the minotaur with a curly red mane. The rest should become apparent as it needs to. Both of you need to be there for this to be successful."

Olrich opens his mouth to object, but Lucinka stares him down.

"Yes, *both* of you. Each of you possess skills needed to free the innocent." She takes one last long swig of whisky, puts the bottle inside the box, closes the lid tight, then slides the box to me. "You're welcome. And don't open this until you're in line."

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Runes spin outside Udzec, an enormous pillar jutting up into the sky. We get there early, watching as visitors file toward the entrance. I've got the box clutched close, resisting the urge to peek inside. Finally, we see her, the minotaur with a load of red curls running down her back. Olrich and I quickly cut right behind her.

The line slows to a halt. Olrich and I look at each other, then open up the box and stare at the contents: half a bottle of whiskey, a child's romper with autumn leaves on the bib and matching swaddling blanket, and a wrought iron amulet inset with a large amber stone bearing swirls of black that move like nether shadows. Bloodfray magic I've seen it enough times during the last night of Ragefest. The Master of Ceremonies scales a five-story torture cage and cracks open the stone, unleashing a fiery burst



of bloodfray magic on the crowd below, causing instant riots and mayhem. Always a crowd pleaser. At least for those who survive.



Art by: Johann Bodin

“We can’t get caught with this here,” I say to Olrich. “We’ll find ourselves in a cell, too.”

“Lucinka wouldn’t steer us wrong. I trust her. There must be something we’re supposed to do with it.”

I look behind us, ready to leave and regroup, but at least a hundred people block our way out. I tip up on my hooves and see Azorius nullmages at the front of the line, inspecting everyone for magic and contraband. One of the mages, a svelte, pale-blue vedalken, looks like she’s going into a third shift, tired and sloppy, more worried about stifling her yawns than she is with performing thorough searches. A young elf carrying an infant goes through, and the nullmage barely pays attention to the baby. A couple pats. She’s reprimanded by her partner, who pats the child down again, more thoroughly this time. I look down at the romper, then to Olrich. “I think you’re meant to put this on.”

His eyes light up. “No way, no how. I’m three-hundred years older than you, for the love of Rakdos!”

“I know that. But you said it yourself. You trust Lucinka.”

“She’s a scheming prune-faced medium, is what she is,” he huffs, but then stuffs himself into the romper, little flap in the back letting his pitched tail swing freely.

“You’re as cute as the day you were manifested,” I say.

“No one is going to fall for this.”

“I think you underestimate how pinchable your cheeks are.” He actually does look adorable, and while that might earn us a little less scrutiny, it won’t be enough to sneak something as potent as bloodfray magic past nullmages.

“Here, swallow this,” I tell Olrich, palming the amulet at him. It’s hefty, but Olrich’s stomach is like a vault. I’ve seen him hide an actual bag of coins the size of my fist when he suspected his workers of stealing from the till. “Put that cast-iron stomach to good use. There’s no time to mull it over.”



The look Olrich gives me could freeze Rix Maadi over, but he obeys. The final thing we need is a good old-fashioned distraction. The minotaur in front of us wears a wool cape, hood draped down in the back. Perfect place to hide a bottle of whiskey. Carefully, carefully I rest the bottle inside, hoping it's light enough not to pull the fabric.

The minotaur turns around, gives me a nasty look, but then she sees Olrich swaddled in my arms and her eyes light up. "Oh, what a cute little beastie. He's got your eyes for sure. Shame little fella has to visit a place like this. Never in a thousand years would I have thought I'd be here either, but the husband got caught up with the wrong sort. I tell ya, if you ever do business with Orzhov brokers, get your receipts in writing!"

"Next in line!" the nullmage calls.

The minotaur turns around, steps forward, and gives her mane an aggravated shake. "Jitka Wothis here to see Grimbly Wothis."

The mages wave her forward and perform their jobs of detecting and nullifying magic. She makes it through that part, but when she gets patted down, they find the bottle.

"How did that get there?" she yells. "That's not mine!" All the mages near our line converge on her, except the Vedalken, who just yawns and bids us forward as the minotaur attempts to gouge anyone who comes near her with her horns.

"Sorry your little one had to see that," the nullmage says, absentmindedly casting a spell over me. "You wouldn't believe the kinds of things people try to sneak in here." She tickles Olrich on the chin. I shoot him a hard stare until he lets out an adorable giggle. "Booze, enchanted weapons, potions. You name it. But anything we miss will be caught by the precognition mages. Anybody even dares to think about breaching this place with magic, and we can shut it all down in twenty seconds flat!"

Her hands pat Olrich down, and I try my best not to think about the you-know-what hiding you-know-where. If Olrich's stomach is tough enough to hold down his imp chowder, then maybe magic would have a tough time escaping it as well.

Finally, we're waved through. A sigh escapes my lips, but before we can take two steps forward, another mage motions to us. "You two. Wait just a minute."

He marches up to us, then puts a book into Olrich's hands. A coloring book: *Breaking the Cycle of Generational Heathenry*. A giant caricature of Rakdos is on the cover getting stomped on by an impeccably clothed Vedalken who bears more than a slight resemblance to Baan. "Azorius is wholly committed to teaching the next generation the ways of justice, no matter what swamp hole they're born into." He proceeds to hand coloring books out to all the kids who've come to visit their incarcerated parent, and I'm utterly struck by how many there are here.

Olrich starts to tear the book in half, but I grab it from him. "Don't. Everything is happening for a reason. Eyes open. Mind clear."

"Fine. But I swear if anyone pinches my cheeks, I'm going to bite their face off."

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I've spent so much of my life living in the moment that it takes a while to recognize the curdling feeling in my gut. Guilt. Remorse. An overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Zita sits down across the table from me, a thin sheen of pale blue magic discouraging physical contact.

"How are you doing?" I ask her. "Are they treating you well?"

She nods. "It's not so bad here. Food is decent, and the guards are pleasant enough. Plus, I've made a few friends."

I breathe a heavy sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that. You hear the horror stories inhumane living conditions, forced labor, brutality."

Zita smiles, but her eyes remain distant. "Not at Udzec for sure. I'll serve my time in peace, taking it day by day so the future won't start to feel like an illusion."



Art by: Randy Vargas

I go rigid. *Illusion*. Our shared safe word. Everything here is *not* fine. The guards must be forcing the prisoners to speak fondly about their internment—or else. I need to get Zita out of here *now*, but if we let loose the power of bloodfray magic, this whole place will shut down in seconds, with us still inside.

"I swear, I'm going to get you out of here, Zita," I whisper. "I'll find a way."

She nods slowly, then looks down at Olrich. "What's up with babycakes here?"

Olrich opens his mouth to cuss her out, but I shove the coloring book in front of him. "Here," I say. "Keep yourself busy, *son*." He opens the book, takes one look at the next illustration, then tears it up into little pieces and stuffs them into his mouth.

Zita takes a quick look around, then reaches through the magic barrier. She grits her teeth as electric charges course through her body. She touches the coloring book, and the Azorius soldier drawn on the page jumps to life.

"No touching!" the guard standing over Zita says.

Zita throws her hands up. "Sorry, sorry. I just wanted to hold my son. I miss him so much."

The guard raises a brow at what must seem like an unlikely family, but I'm sure he's seen a bit of everything in a place like this. He settles, and Zita stares sharply at me. I look over at the page with the illustration imitating the guard standing behind her. Makeshift blight parchment. I poke a tiny hole in the effigy's calf, and the guard reaches down to massage a cramp in his leg. I keep waiting for the

nullimages to detect the magic and converge on us, but the magic must be too weak to register. Zita's just given us a way out of here.

I nudge Olrich and have him make conversation with Zita as I carefully draw each of the guards and mages standing watch in the visitation room, several to a page, as dozens of visitors converse with their loved ones. I count the illustrations twice over, just to double-check I've got them all. Then I rip the pages out and shove them through the barrier.

Electric magic ignites the paper, and the guards wail out in unison as if they're being burned alive. Zita storms through the magic barrier, wincing at the shock. Her clothing smolders and is on the brink of catching aflame. She strips out of her prison garb, and Olrich gives her his swaddling blanket. It's too small to wrap around her, but she studies it for a moment, then rips it at precise angles, and with a few tucks and folds, she's made herself a short but passable smock.

I use the last two pages of parchment on the sentries standing watch throughout the winding hallways. We've got spontaneity on our side, and if we're fast, we'll be long gone before the precognition mages catch wind of our escape.

Footsteps around the corner, and I keep wishing that Olrich wouldn't have eaten that one sheet of paper. But then Olrich clears his throat and says "Citizens! Behold! It is I, your highly esteemed Grand Arbiter, Protector of Justice, Purveyor of Protocols!" in a spot-on impression of Dovin Baan that puts my attempts to shame. "Cast thine eyes shut and count upon the ways my insight and ingenuity have so expediently transformed this guild into the shining beacon of righteousness as it stands today."

The footsteps stop. "Oh, Master Baan? I didn't know you were—"

"I said eyes shut and start counting!" Olrich commands.

"One," comes the feeblest voice. "You have thoroughly shaken the ranks, ridding the Senate of those who misused power in its name."

We step quietly around the corner, then past the soldier, and soon find ourselves in an orderly line with the rest of the people exiting the facility. We're moving fast. We're going to make it.

"That's them!" says a familiar voice. "The demon and his devil of a son! Draw a verity circle around me so there'll be no doubts I'm telling the truth!" We turn around and see the minotaur again, nostrils flaring.

"Me, too!" says a vampire woman, vigilantly avoiding the beams of morning light filtering in through the windows. "I saw him do it."

Before we can deny it, Olrich and I are bound up in magic. Zita looks back at us.

"Go," I mouth. She hesitates, then gets lost in the fold of people.

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As soon as we're given our uniforms, we're put to work with the rest of the non-violent offenders and pre-offenders. Another shipment of white quartz moves slowly overhead, a circle of three-dozen mages setting the floating block down on the worksite of Exner, the new prison that's supposed to dwarf Uzdec.

Now, it's merely a frame of iron scaffolding jutting all the way up to the clouds. It's an ambitious project, but with 20,000 prisoners' worth of free labor, it's going up fast and should be ready to open next spring.

The quartz block hits the ground with a thud. I take to it with my pickax, breaking off chunks. I'm fast and accurate, now. The first couple days, the soldiers whipped me for breaking stone into irregular

shapes and for taking too long. Here, away from the constant scrutiny of nullmages, it's easier to use magic without getting caught, and there are plenty of shaman in our group that can heal broken skin. I've listened to their stories. Petty crimes, mistaken identity, and, in most cases, pre-crimes based on the whims of precognition mages locked up in their white stone towers.



Art by: Even Amundsen

Olrich ambles up to me on our lunch break, hand behind his back. He presents me with a thin necklace fashioned out of rodent vertebrae and twine. "I know there's not much to celebrate "

I'd nearly forgotten it was the last day of Ragefest. It seems like a lifetime ago that I'd walked into Zita's shop, determined to stop being a creep and start being a friend, but it hasn't even been a whole week. I hope she's out there partying in the streets somewhere, blood in the air, riots in the streets. 'Tis the season for decadence and depravity.

I look up at the skeletal tower of Exner. Jagged iron points this way and that, but I'm sure I could scale it in seconds. My mind is already churning, and the time I have to orchestrate this plan is thinning. Precognition mages will tune into my thoughts in no time. "Olrich," I say, shaking him by the shoulders. "Remember that thing you swallowed? Is it still in there?"

"Yeah, giving me serious cramps, but I haven't had a chance to get rid of it."

"Cough it up."

"But—"

"Now! Hurry!"

Olrich produces the amulet. Not through the orifice I'd hoped, but beggars can't be choosers. I grab the amulet and make a run for the unfinished tower. Soldiers hop to their feet, chasing me with whips, magic coursing from the tips and through the air. It catches me, but I ignore the pain, and climb, imagining myself to be a performer once again, flipping, dipping, taking dangerous dives, and staying one step ahead of their aim.



I reach the top, taking a moment to enjoy the view thousands and thousands of prisoners below me, and hundreds of guards. When Lucinka foresaw me freeing the innocent, I thought she meant Zita, not countless victims of injustice.

I smack the amulet's stone against the iron scaffolding, but nothing happens. I glance up and see a dozen archons dominating the skyline, radiating a blaze of white light. Their flying beasts plow through low-hanging clouds, gaining speed, getting closer. The precognition mages are onto me and the spectacle I intend to create, if only I can release this magic. It never looked that difficult for the Masters of Ceremonies, but then again, those amulets hadn't been sitting in a devil's stomach for several days, festering in the depths of pure darkness. But if the stone is stronger, then maybe that means the magic is, too. I gather all my might, flexing muscles that have strained against quarried rock, and slam the stone again.

The amulet cracks and unleashes a swarm of black tendrils, pressing the light back and turning day to night. The amulet pulses with the deep, rich red of freshly spilled blood, then the stone shatters completely, sending a single plume of molten magic shooting high up into the darkened sky. All goes dead quiet for just a moment, and then an explosion knocks me senseless. I cling to the scaffolding as bloodfray embers rain down below, covering the entire worksite.

When the smoke clears, the archons are still coming, but it's too late for anyone to organize against a riot this massive. The madness spreads. Tools become weapons. Blood is thick in the air, and the spirit of the season fills me with the most perfect rage. And, with a childish smile on my face, I rush down into the fray, eager to partake in the biggest Ragefest celebration ever.

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Three chairs, one with a booster are positioned around Lucinka's table, and a foil-wrapped box sits on top. Zita, Olrich, and I take our seats as Lucinka fusses at the folds of her skin, like there's a gap that she's afraid we might be able to peek through.

"When can I—" Zita starts to ask, inexperienced at conversations with a precognition mage.

"—return to your shop? Never, I'm afraid. Your lives as you knew them are over. Azorius won't stop hunting until every single one of the people who escaped during the riot is brought to justice. They admit 3,300, but the actual number is much higher."

Zita frowns. I know how much her shop meant to her. "Okay, so where do we—"

"—go from here? You'll have to set up new lives in the Undercity," Lucinka says. "You three work well together. Establish a new troupe. Surround yourselves with people you can trust."

Olrich perks. "The Undercity. A troupe? I can see us now the most vulgar jokes, the most death-defying acrobatics, the most extravagant costumes!"

"Costumes," Zita says, a little cheer creeping into her voice. "I can make costumes."

Lucinka smiles knowingly. "You'll need them, because the kind of work you'll be doing as a troupe will extend beyond frivolous entertainment. While most of the people you freed are good people, there are a few we need to worry about. One in particular."

I look at the box on the table. "And what's inside here will help us capture them?"

"Ha, no. This is a wedding present for you and " she looks into Zita's wide eyes. "Oh, never mind. Just another question you won't get around to asking for some time yet. I really am the worst."

Zita squeezes my knee under the table. I look at her and smile. Tomorrow may be an illusion, but it's one I'm willing to wait for.