

Behind the Black Sun

Adam Lee

From set *Gatecrash*

The candle flickered.

"I am a gateway for life," the cleric said. The dancing light added some numinous gravity to the statement.

The cleric smiled at the unconscious reaction that must have flickered across my face.

"Most give me a strange look when I tell them that. Perhaps it is because I wear the garb of an Orzhov and they believe in the grotesque slander perpetuated about our guild. We are not all selfish and greedy." The cleric sighed. "The ignorant always assume the worst, I suppose. People are easily swayed by mindless passion and intentioned guile, wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose so," I said. "But you have to admit, the Orzhov are not known for playing fair."

The cleric leaned back in his chair, turned his palms up and shrugged. "We put everything in writing. It is all there to see. People just don't read the fine print before they sign."

I could feel the cleric's defensiveness and kicked myself for letting my own personal bias slip out. It was hard enough to find evidence of this order, let alone to actually be granted an audience with one of its members. I could feel years of work beginning to crumble in my hands. I'd have to swallow my opinions and pride if I was going to get anywhere with this unprecedented access.

"Very true. People are focused on what they want and rarely have the patience to wait and evaluate before acting on their desires."

That seemed to bring the cleric back again.

"Few can see the truth in that and I'm glad you do. My choice about revealing our order depends on your seeing with an open mind." He poured wine into a golden goblet and offered me some, but I politely declined. "The Orzhov value patience greatly. Its virtues are taught to us as soon as we begin our service to the guild; the task for which we have been chosen requires not only patience, but dedication, trust, and selflessness as well. Our task, our calling, is to lay down our lives for the Syndicate. We hold something beyond mere monetary value to the guild. We are a gateway through which something greater than ourselves can emerge."

Now we were getting to it. I was always fascinated by how devout belief could supersede the inherent desire to preserve life—our instinctual selfishness. The Boros wojek who sacrifices himself so innocents may live always held a mystery to me, a glimpse into another set of standards that runs deep within, operating below our critical, self-absorbed minds. It felt appropriate for Boros and Selesnya to exhibit such behavior, but the Orzhov? The rumors struck me as odd for the guild of deals.

Now, I would find out about this mystery cult within the walls of the Syndicate and document a critical moment of time in this cloistered world shrouded in myth and speculation.

The cleric set down his goblet and stood up.

"Walk with me to the sanctum."

We walked into a high-ceilinged chamber that smelled of woody incense and torchwood. The cleric's robe flowed about him and the heavy gold disks that hung from his collar like thick smoke.

In the flickering torchlight, I could make out a large Orzhov symbol on the floor done with large, stone tiles. The cleric knelt in the circle and motioned for me to sit on a small, armless chair some distance from him. As soon as I had pulled out my quill and paper, he began, his voice echoing off into the darkness.

"Our order represents the purest ideals of the Orzhov, which is why so few of us are chosen. It is too heavy a mantle for most, but I found that after being chosen my life was suffused with a great sense of purpose. To this day, fulfilling that purpose has been my highest ambition."

At that moment, two robed priests walked into the torchlight like silent phantoms. One set candles before the cleric and lit them with long matchsticks. The other priest set several bowls before the cleric that contained something heavy. I could tell because of the dull thud it made on the stone tiles. Then the priests left as silently as they came.



From the folds of his robe, the cleric produced a glass tube capped at either end that hung on a gold chain. Within the tube swirled a turbulent, white smoke that seemed somehow alive.

"This is the Deathpact," he said, as he gazed into the tube, its faint light playing across his features like sunlight through water. The cleric gazed into its depths, mesmerized. Its eerie luminescence made his already pale face impossibly paler, which served to exaggerate the blackness of his obsidian eyes; he looked like some ivory specter as he pondered its swirling depths. "It is the namesake of our sacred order. Hard to imagine that within this small cylinder lies such magnificent power."

The cleric unhooked the slender cylinder from its chain and reverently laid the tube before him. He then removed the lids from the golden bowls and reached in to scatter handfuls of coins around him on the floor. The sound of the coins as they echoed throughout the giant hall made me feel as if I was in

some strange, enormous wind-chime. I felt a bolt of primal apprehension shoot through me and flood my limbs.

What kind of power was he talking about? Was I in danger?

I instinctively moved back from the cleric and resisted the urge to flee from the room. I took a deep breath as he continued, recording everything with my quill pen in spite of my fear. The instincts of being a scribe are hard to quell: knowledge at any price.

I wondered what meaning, if any, the coins had, but I dared not break the ritual with a question. It felt rude. Sacrilegious. I scribbled down every detail I could as the cleric made more gestures and utterances. His trance slowly deepened; the scratching sound of my quill on parchment felt like an intrusion, but I was more afraid to leave out any detail.

Then he became still.

After a long moment with only the sounds of the torches burning, the cleric whispered.

“I am ready.”

Then he unscrewed the cap of the glass cylinder.

My mind raced with anticipation. *Ready for what? What was going to happen? What secrets were I about to witness.*

It seemed a trick of the mind at first, but then...

The turbulent smoke within the glass cylinder tentatively snaked out like a sentient thing. The cleric took in long deep breaths as the white smoke quested toward his face. It bumped into the cleric's chest; he reflexively jerked but held his eyes shut as it encircled his neck. As the smoke drew closer to his face, sliding upward toward the cleric's nose, I could make out a jet-black strand within it that looked like a slick piece of rubber glistening in the torchlight. The cleric's mumbled prayer ceased as he took one deep breath through his nose. As if it heard the inhalation, the smoke lunged into the cleric's nostrils and vanished. The cleric made a gagging sound as he crumpled forward.

I jumped up, but as I did my sleeve caught my ink-pot and sent it clattering across the stone floor. Black ink sprayed about like dark blood in the torchlight. I rushed to the cleric's side as he writhed on the floor and rolled him over. He clawed at his golden collar. His face had turned to a mottled patchwork of purplish veins and bruised flesh. I called for help. All I heard was the reverberations through the great hall.

Then black smoke began to billow out of the cleric's mouth. It reminded me instantly of an Izzet chemical fire I had witnessed a few years back.

The cleric's head and neck arched back as he went instantly stiff. The black smoke poured from his nose and ears as well and began to form before me as I recoiled and brought my sleeve to my face.

The cleric's body shriveled and desiccated before my eyes as a thick white vapor fumed out of it and coalesced into a humanoid shape. Arms, legs, head, and torso gathered before me into a solid form of a regal woman with skin like alabaster. The black smoke formed into two great wings behind her and billowing smoke wrapped around her like living cloth. Gold coins and their golden containers became puddles of liquid metal that formed into shimmering armor and the massive arc of a scythe. All this moved before my unbelieving eyes in an arcane act of creation, but all I could do was gaze on the face of this unearthly creature who regarded me with an impassive but intensely curious gaze.

She held out her hand, her pale fingers closing around the ebony haft of the great scythe precisely as the last wisps of black smoke formed the handle.



The angel flexed the fingers of her free hand as if to test their efficacy, then looked at her shining armor and surroundings. I was frozen. I didn't want to move, lest I incurred her wrath, but neither did I want to stay.

She flexed her raven-feathered wings then turned about to face me.

"You. Orzhov scribe. Write this." Even though it was just above a whisper, her voice sliced through the air like a razorblade. After a moment of hesitation, I scrambled for my parchment, quill, and toppled ink-pot. Thankfully, a few drops remained in the well.

"I have come from the ghost halls of the Obzedat with a message for Teysa Karlov. There is more to the maze than we knew. Teysa Karlov must find the correct route and complete the maze at all costs."