

Death's Precious Moments

Nicky Drayden

From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

I thrust my staff into spongy soil, bracing myself as I examine the delicate upturned caps of the bird's nest fungus—the most coveted mushroom among Gulgari shamans this season. Only three rot farms have managed to cultivate them, and ours was the first. Even the most lackluster specimens fetch up to a zino each. This one boasts an impressive golden-bronze hue and holds a half-dozen turquoise spheres inside that resemble eggs, but it is not destined to adorn the elaborate gowns worn in the Undercity. I'm claiming this fungus for my own collection.

I remove a vial from my harvester's satchel and swirl the moss-green elixir around until it glows in the moonlight. I turn it over and let a single drop fall from the dispenser onto the mushroom cap. It sits there for a moment, like a perfect dew drop, then a web of white tendrils grows out, encasing the fungus in a magical cocoon that will preserve it for next season's plantings. I test the casing's hardness with a quick tap of my pincers, then add it to a carefully marked compartment in my satchel.

Insect song echoes off the crumbling canal walls that border our farmstead, opening up into the night sky high above. A symphony of crickets, cicadas, and katydids sing in chorus with the deep throaty bellows of a deadbridge goliath in the distance. Even a few of my siblings join in. I hear the melodic trill of Razi's wings rising above them all. She's the best singer in our family. Mother's favorite from the day we hatched, though she would never admit this out loud.

Suddenly, the music on the wind changes, gone from the warbling calls for late-night romance on the fringes of Gulgari territory to the hard, fast chirps of news from the Undercity—a new lich has been named. I look up over the vast expanse of our farmstead, and all my siblings have stopped their work as well, straining to hear what we all hope in our hearts—that the new lich is kraul. Like us. But no, it's another elf. My siblings go back to work, but I can't tear myself away from the rest of the message: the lich is seeking an apprentice with a proficiency in mushroom identification and a keen interest in necromancy.

"Why do you want to work for an elf?" Razi says later that night after the fields have all been tended and we've returned to Mother's safe embrace. "They wear bits and pieces of us in their hair, paint eyes on their faces so they look like insects, and yet when it comes time to lead who do they choose again and again?"

"What about Mazirek?"



Mazirek, Kraul Death Priest | Art by: Mathias Kollros

“What about him? He’s one kraul priest out of dozens of gorgons and hundreds of Devkarin elves.”

I wring my wings together, producing a sour note of displeasure. I know Razi doesn’t mean that about Mazirek. She’s just upset about the thought of me leaving our farmstead. I’d be mad, too, if she’d told me she was going off to sing for Vraska’s court.

“You’re the best at singing,” I say. “I can barely hold a tune. Ellin is the best at flying,” I flex my wings, one of them malformed. “I can’t even get airborne. I know a lot about mushrooms, but that’s only because Kuurik is a great teacher. Necromancy could be that special thing that I do with my life. A profession that would make Mother proud of me.”

“She’s proud of you. She’s proud of all of us. You can see it in her eyes.”

I look up into the deep, dark sockets where our mother’s eyes had once been, but I don’t see the pride, only the emptiness. We keep her iridescent exoskeleton polished to a high shine, a beacon visible from one side of our farmstead to the other. She is our family anchor. Our everything. As soon as we’d erupted from our egg sacs, we’d fed upon her internal organs—meat sweet and nourishing, making our little larval bodies grow. Then we’d punctured through her carapace and made our cocoons upon her underside, and for weeks, she’d selflessly deterred predators with her pincers. Finally, we emerged and gorged upon what was left of her, all hundred and seven of us, until her exoskeleton was picked clean and we were strong enough to fend for ourselves. Now her giant carapace is our shelter during the daylight hours, just enough nooks and hollowed-out crannies for each of us to find a place to call our own. Mother sacrificed everything for us. How could I not want to make her proud?

“Just think it over, Bozak. Please? We’ll all talk about it tomorrow evening.” Riza yawns, stretched out in the sloping curve of one of Mother’s mandibles. “Till death, dearest brother.”

“Till death,” I say, bidding her not only a good sleep, but a fond farewell. As soon as the noon sun shines upon the murky depths of our canal, I pack my maps, my journals, my vials, and my harvester’s satchel and sneak away while my siblings lie dreaming.

The majesty of the Undercity is overwhelming, with vast stone tunnels shrouded in mist and giant circular entryways, like open maws begging to swallow us whole. My fellow competitors have come wearing their finest robes ribbed with mushroom gills in oranges and teals and bejeweled in shiny pieces of carapace that had once belonged to my brethren. I clench my staff close, feeling inadequately dressed in a bronzed head plate, a modest decorative chest plate, and nothing more. The lich appraises each of us, a deathly pall spread across his skin. His eyes have gone milky, including the moodmark enchantments on his forehead. His gown is a work of art, flowing black webbing with thirty-one different species of fungus worked into a mosaic pattern that compliments his slender, nearly skeletal frame.

There are twenty-six of us brave (or foolish) enough to attempt to identify and retrieve four of the most dangerous mushrooms in all of Ravnica. I stand tall, keep my antenna erect, all my knees locked ready to be the first one back with all four specimens. I packed extra elixirs to seal them in, since exposure to some of the spores can lead to paralysis, asphyxiation, death, or worse.

“Only one of you will be deemed skillful enough to serve as my apprentice,” the lich says. “You must be thorough, cunning, and quick. If you should perish, take comfort that your body will give life to generations of decomposers whose spawn will rot the bodies of the Undercity for millennia to come.” Then he drops a kerchief woven from the finest spider’s silk to signal the start of the competition.

This is my first time away from the farmstead, and I’m unfamiliar with the layout of the Undercity, but the lich has graciously provided us with a map. Most of the other competitors hustle off, but a moment spent surveying the lay of the land will save two moments lost in the swamps. As I plot my course, an elf shoulder checks me as he passes, causing the brittle parchment to split in two. “Watch where you’re going!” I scream out and strum a kraul cuss on my wings. He glances back at me, barely able to see over the bulk of the mushroom cap shoulder pads adorning his gaudy blue robes. His mouth is obscured from view, but from the smirk his moodmarks are projecting, I’m sure he bumped me on purpose. Never mind.

Locating the zombie fungus is easy. It’s deadly, yes, but not exactly uncommon. They prefer to grow under the shade of mangroves, and the map says there’s one not far from here. I sprint through brackish waters, ducking under vines, trailing toward the rear of the pack. We exit through a concrete portcullis and into an open marsh. The mangrove it’s haunting to say the least. Thick knobby trunks are upheld by stilted roots, twisted canopies that look more like green locks than leaves. Most of the competitors are already scouring the tree’s roots—the perfect spot for zombie fungus to grow. I run to join them before the specimens are picked clean, then notice something is off. The moss on the trees it’s on the wrong side. And those roots, I think I saw one of them twitch.

“Woodwraiths!” I scream, drawing the attention of the gorgon running past me. We both stop, turn, and start running in the opposite direction, warning off the two elves and another kraul coming up behind us.

We hear the creaking of old branches and the suck of roots pulling up from waterlogged soil. Then screaming. Lots and lots of screaming. Then quiet.

The five of us don’t stop running until we’re on the other side of the marsh and through several tunnels too narrow to accommodate a woodwraith’s girth. Finally, we settle, winded and terrified.

“Well, we definitely can’t trust the map,” the gorgon says. Her hair is riled up, but I risk a glance in her direction, just to see who I’m dealing with. She’s young, skin a deep olive green. Eyes wise like someone three times her age.

“I can’t believe the lich would set us up like that,” I say.

"Devkarin elves are jerks like that," the other kraul says.

The two elves with us balk, probably unused to finding themselves outnumbered. They sulk off with a few cusses and angry moodmarks.

"Don't worry about them," the kraul says. "Zegodonis was the only elf in this competition who was worth anything, and his bones are picking the flesh out of a woodwraith's teeth right about now. Complete ass. Even for an elf."

"Zegodonis?" I ask. "With the gaudy blue robe and huge shoulder pads? About twenty insect legs in his hair?" The elf who'd torn my map.

"That's the one. From death, life," he says, spitting into the marsh.

"From death, life," I repeat the Gulgari mantra, trying to soothe my nerves. But I can't stop thinking about all those people dead. It happened so fast. If I hadn't taken that moment to look the map over, my bones would be at the bottom of that bog, too.

"Hey, what's your name?" the kraul says to me.

"Bozak," I say, with a strum of my wings.



Art by: Wesley Burt

"I'm Limin." He grins. He's got the most amazing gossamer wings, but they barely twitch when he speaks. Without them, his words sound so flat. So elven. He must sense my unease and offers up an explanation. "I grew up in the heart of the Undercity. There, you have to fit in to survive."

"I get it," I say, even though I don't. If I had wings like his, I'd be strumming them all day long. "You?" I ask the gorgon.

"Kata," she says, unimpressed by either of us. She looks away from me like I'm the one who's got the face that'll turn flesh to stone. "Oh, look. Zombie fungus."

But she's right, not twenty feet away, a small patch of the fungus grows up against a sewer grate. We each carefully collect a specimen and douse it with a casing elixir. Once the cocoon has hardened, I douse my specimen again, just to be safe.

"You saved our lives," Kata says to me when she's done. "I'm grateful, but don't get any ideas that we're working together. Only one of us is going to win this competition." She runs off, leaving Limin and me alone.

"She has a point. But that doesn't mean we can't make a temporary truce. If we share information and resources, we can all but guarantee a kraul will win. What do you say?" He sticks his hand out, the way elves do to seal a deal. I hold back my grimace as I press my hand into his. Where I'm from, a deal between kraul is sealed with the touching of mandibles. Maybe this makes him feel like he's fitting in, but it leaves me feeling like a stranger in my own body.

Together, we harvest young death caps, barely emerged from their veils, and pull firmly ahead of Kata and one of the elves. The other is not too far ahead. He looks back, tries to run faster, but he trips over a raised tree root and falls flat on his satchel.

"Help, I'm hurt," he cries out. "Limin come on, we're friends, right? We practically grew up together."

"He punctured his zombie fungus specimen," I whisper to Limin. The spores are puffing up into the elf's face, but he doesn't notice. "We need to double back."

"Should we tell him?" Limin asks. "Maybe he can—"

"It's too late." He's stopped moaning already. He stands up, and we see the stick impaled through his canvas bag, leading right into his chest cavity. He looks up, admiring the trees around him as blood drips down his robes. It's like the pain doesn't even bother him.

"Which of these trees looks the highest to you?" he says, speech slurred. There are several varieties of the zombie fungus, but this one is the most aggressive and the quickest acting. It's already rewiring his brain, programming him to do the mushroom's bidding. His body is now an involuntary host to the next generation.

The elf chooses a tree and scales it like his body had been built for this sole purpose. He goes right to the very tip, then clamps down. A few hours from now, mushrooms will erupt from his eyes, nostrils, ears feeding slowly upon his body tissue until they're ready to rain down spores upon the marshlands. I don't feel sorry for him. It's the way of life not much different than how my siblings and I came to our mother. She was the one who'd nurtured us, who'd given of herself, but she wasn't our biological mother. We never knew her. She'd deposited her eggs into the giant beetle and spared not a single thought toward us again. I know that Mother's mind had been compromised, whispers of the invaders there prompting her to defend us. I know her screams were not really lullabies, but she loves us. And we love her. No family is perfect.

I'm so caught up in the memories of home that Limin has to drag me away. We work together to get the wolf's fang fungus growing from a rotting stump perched up high on a treacherous cliff face in Selesnyan territory. Limin's wings glisten as he flies up effortlessly to retrieve them while I pitch stones at the adolescent wurm trying to make a snack of him. Finally, we come to the last specimen on the list.

We're back in the belly of the Undercity, my legs covered knee-high in brilliant green moss. I press deeper through the marsh, slowing down now as the insect song goes quiet, a warning from my kin that something dangerous is afoot. There's a mossdog den ahead, entrance covered in vines, bioluminescent lichen, and the devouring angel mushrooms we seek. A quick dip under the water, and I've hidden my scent from the dogs. I motion to Limin to do the same. If they're sleeping, we'll have a chance.

The caps are white along the top and feathered like angels' wings with rubbery black rims beneath. They're not poisonous like the death cap and wolf's fang. These cause severe hallucinations that drive you to kill everyone in sight, and then you snap to an hour later, feeling perfectly fine, no side effects except the blood of twenty-eight people on your hands.

I peek into the cave entrance, and sure enough, three mossdogs are curled together deep in the shadows, paws twitching in a state of dreaming—sharp obsidian claws dragging through imagined flesh, muffled barks coming from those fanged mouths. Carefully, quietly, I reach up to snag the devouring angels.

“Psst, Bozak!” Limin whispers, “Are you sure that’s not griffin’s paw fungus?”

One of the mossdog’s tentacles shifts, and I instantly stop what I’m doing. I hold my breath until the tentacle settles. Limin’s buzzing overhead, right outside the cave, gossamer wings glistening, but all I can think about is how he’s spreading his scent around and any second the mossdogs are going to notice.

“I’m sure,” I whisper back. Griffin’s paw looks so similar to devouring angel that even some seasoned spore druids have trouble telling them apart, but my brother had taught me to spot the slight difference in the shape of their caps.

I collect the devouring angel mushrooms and carefully wrap them. I tuck my sample into my satchel and hand Limin his. Limin lands in the marsh, right next to me. I try to push past him, but he shuffles into my way. “What’s the matter, Bozak? Afraid you can’t outrun a little mossdog?” He squints into the cave. “Oh, come on. They’re nearly pups.”

“Mmm-hmm. Easy to say for someone like you.” Someone who can fly, I mean. “Now if you’ll excuse me, we’re on our own from here on out.” I hear more footsteps on the way. I look up to see a silhouette with hair waving like a nest of snakes. Kata’s caught up with us. Gorgons are stiff competition. Literally. And I don’t intend to catch a case of petrification.

“Till death and beyond!” Limin shouts, stashing his mushroom, then tossing a rock into the mossdog den. It lands in the middle of one dog’s forehead, and all those glassy black eyes become alert. Its head lifts. Muzzle draws back into a growl. Then the other two dogs are awake and growling right behind it.

“What did you do, Limin?” I ask, but he’s already flying away.

The mossdogs stare down at me, timidly stepping forth. I turn and take off sprinting, and that’s all the invitation they need to give chase.

“Mossdogs,” I shout at Kata, and then we’re both running, shoulder to shoulder, and the mossdogs are gaining on us.

“I can petrify them “ she says to me, panting and nearly out of breath. “ if you can buy me a few seconds to cast the spell.”

“I thought you didn’t want to work together,” I say.

“Bozak, are you seriously going to be that petty while mossdogs are trying to eat us alive?”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll distract them.”

“Give me half a minute, then loop them back around my way.”

I nod, then flutter my wings in an irresistible hum, and as the dogs give chase, I veer around a copse of vines, then circle back around to Kata, all the tendrils on her head aggravated and waving. She releases her spell, and two of the mossdogs slow down, then freeze, mouths caught open in vicious growls. Flesh turns to stone, an inch at a time, but there’s no time to gawk. I’ve got one more dog headed my way, and Kata is trying to cast again, but nothing’s happening. Suddenly the dog is upon her.

I can’t lie my first instinct is to leave her there and go after victory, but what would Mother think of that? I rip my wings together, putting together a beautiful song. Insects flock to me, a swarm of silver-backed locusts. I sic them on the mossdog, who stops tearing at Kata, and starts trying to gnash away

at the bugs. "Go, get away!" I yell at Kata, but she's got another idea. Her hair is flaring again. "No!" I scream, but it's too late. The third mossgod turns into a statue, and with it, nearly a hundred locusts. They fall to the ground like pebbles.

"What? They're just bugs," she says, when she notices me glaring at her.

I get ready to tell her that they're more than bugs, they're my kin, but then I notice her hair is still agitated. I'm just a bug to her as well.

"Only one can win, Bozak. And it's going to be me." She fixes me with her stare. Her pupils dilate until her eyes are entirely black, then light starts glowing around the edges. I stand there a moment, frozen from shock, from the ache of broken trust but then my staff pulses in my hand. Its point is sharp enough to pierce flesh, maybe. I move fast, thrust the staff forward. It catches the gorgon in the stomach. The light in her eyes fades, the spell releases, and the stiffness building in my joints eases away.

She lies there, clutching the staff at the entry wound, coughing up blood. My staff glints and almost seems to have come alive with magic. My mind shifts and I grab the shaft, running my hand along the pearlescent outer curve and the ribbed blackness of the inner curve. I'd carved it myself from one of Mother's legs. Whatever bit of magic it had contained is gone now, her last gift to me. Her encouragement spears me on, my mind set on one thing. Winning.

With all of the mushrooms safely tucked away in my satchel, all I need to do is get back to the lich before Limin does. I may not be able to fly, but I don't need to when I've got insects on my side. I brush my wings together and hum deeply, imitating the mating call of the deadbridge goliath. The ground thunders, then I see it, a giant beetle running right toward me. He's confused seeing me and not his potential mate, but I grab onto his leg and hold on for dear life and he trudges forward, making up valuable time. I see Limin ahead, and I'm catching up, but then the beast veers and I'm forced to bail. Still, I'm close enough that I'll have a chance.



Deadbridge Goliath | Art by: Chase Stone

Then out of the swamp, a moss-covered figure rises, staff held in both hands. He batters Limin as he passes, breaking off two legs and part of a wing. Limin tumbles into the boggy water, screaming as the mossy figure snatches his satchel. The assailant then looks up at me elven ears and moodmarks

showing through the green grit upon his skin. Half his face is covered in splinters, and his gaudy blue robe is shredded to pieces.

Zegodonis. He'd somehow survived the woodwraith attack. We race, I'm going as fast as I can, and he's limping behind. He curses at me, calling me every kraul slur he can think of, but I keep my eye on the prize. The lich is standing there, not far. I reach him first, and instantly I'm filled with accomplishment. I've done it!

"Congratulations," the lich says, the dead in his voice a perfect match for the rest of him. He examines my specimens twice over before Zegodonis hobbles up to us.

"Congratulations to you, too." He takes Zegodonis's bag, glances inside. "Both of you have met the challenge. And both of you shall serve under me." The lich's eyes brighten when he looks at Zegodonis, something I would have thought impossible from the look he'd given me.

There was supposed to be one winner, but I don't dare confront them about it. Instead, I choose to savor this moment and focus on becoming the best necromancer I can be.

"Not here. Over there!" I scream at the fungus drudge for the fifth time. He moans at me, limbs covered in soft, white fuzz and a grouping of long-stalked mushrooms sprouting from his shoulders and head. His body is held together with death magic and fungal rhizomes that animate bones that hadn't felt flesh for the past century. Drudges are nearly impossible to work with. The Erstwhile zombies, they're decent at taking instructions, though the lich hasn't put me in charge of any of those. But I enjoy watching how they march to the beat of a bygone era, dressed in dusty fineries with lots of scallops, frill, and innumerable cloth buttons sewed upon their bodices.

The fungal drudge, I call him Benzi, places the corpse he's carrying onto the pile in the corner of the lich's sanctum, then turns to me. Eye sockets trained on me, he waits eagerly for my next command. I sigh.

"Sorry, Benzi," I say. I shouldn't have screamed. I get frustrated and take it out on the zombies sometimes. This isn't exactly how I'd envisioned being apprentice to a lich—tending to the undead instead of learning to raise them. The lich is out consulting at Korozda, the Gulgari guildhall, and he's taken Zegodonis with him. Again. There's been a fungal attack on Sunhome. Three high-ranking Boros officers were exposed to the same type of zombie fungus we had been asked to gather. They'd climbed the towers of their guildhall, and one actually made it to the top. Vraska, our guildmaster, is worried the Boros will use this as another excuse to infiltrate the Undercity and has summoned the liches to confer on how best to proceed. They'll be gone for hours.

The lich doesn't like me in his sanctum, and he reprimands me if I linger too long when dropping off bodies, so most of what I've learned about spells has come from eavesdropping at the door. But now I can thoroughly explore without the risk of getting caught. There are shelves upon shelves of skulls: Rakdos devils with thick curling horns and eye sockets that glow a deep emerald green when the lights are low, long-snouted viashinos, minotaurs, giants all the way up to a dragon's skull that now serves as the lich's lectern. The mushroom specimens lining his walls put my own collection to shame. There must be thousands of them. The rot is so thick in the air, so rich and decadent, that I'm tempted to try a death spell of my own.

I practice the movements I've seen the lich do, and I prickle all over as mana rushes through me, coursing over my skin like hundreds of marching ants. I fight the urge to shake them off, and instead relax, letting the mana flow down my arm, the soft green light pooling into the palm of my hand. I channel a bit onto the not-so-fresh rat corpse I'd found while cleaning behind the Erstwhile's crypts.

Then I watch. The rat's back leg twitches, but nothing more. I'm certain with the lich's instruction, I'd be able to do it by now. Zegodonis has learned several spells already. I'd hoped that necromancy would be my calling, but maybe it's time to admit that cleaning cobwebs out of crypts and bossing fungal drudges around is what I'll be doing with the rest of my life.

I hear voices down the hall. The lich. He's back already. I can't let him catch me in here. I duck into the nook in the back of the sanctum, then look out at Benzi who's still staring at me, ready to give me away.

"Come!" I command him. He shuffles over to me. "Faster!"

The yelling never speeds things up. I run out and push him into the nook. He moans.

"Shhh," I tell him. "Play dead."

Benzi obeys, a little trick I'd taught him in our spare time. He slumps over, head leaned against the cold, gray stone wall. The lich enters from his private door, two Boros soldiers following him. They hold themselves tight and proud, but the way their puffy eyes are darting around in their sockets, I can tell they are scared to be here. The lich goes to the vials of mushroom specimens and chooses the ones we'd retrieved from the mossgod cave.

"Devouring angel. Perhaps the deadliest mushroom in all of Ravnica. It won't kill you, but it'll make everyone who inhales its spores embrace their rage. You remember the Tin Street massacre?"

"Yeah," says one of the soldiers. "We arrested a couple of Gruul raiders for that. You're saying we got the wrong criminals?"

The lich arches a thin, sickly eyebrow. "I've already planted a neutralized specimen on the gown Vraska will be wearing for her address to the Krunstraz this evening at the Hanging Keep. Exhume the bodies from the massacre and analyze the spores. The evidence will show that the attack came from the same plant. Boros will have no choice but to charge Vraska with murder. It will stick this time, I promise you."



Underrealm Lich | Art by: Anna Steinbauer

"Come on, we've got a party to crash," the Boros soldier says.

"Indeed," the lich says, his bony fingers pitched into a steeple. "And I do hope that when it comes time for Boros to back a new candidate for guildmaster, they take into consideration the help I've been to you today."

"Oh, we think we know the right Devkarin for the job," they laugh.

The lich smiles, a harrowing stretch of desiccated lips revealing an endless expanse of ash-gray teeth. "Zegodonis!" he yells. Zegodonis comes running in. "Show these fine soldiers out, will you?"

"Yes, my lich," Zegodonis says with a deep bow.

The lich examines his pile of corpses, then starts his reanimation spells. I peek around the corner, watching as he casts, and one by one, life fills their bodies. I wait, nervous. I've got to warn Vraska.

I look down and realize I'm still clutching the dead rat in my hand, just what I need to cause a distraction. If I can get the lich to look the other way, I can sneak out of here. I stare at the rat and cast the spell as I saw the lich just do it. The green light fills my palm again, thicker now, more like syrup than water. I pour it over the rat. Whiskers flicker. Tail twitches. Four little paws paddle at the air.

I pull a boar's tail mushroom sample from my satchel, cheesy and soft. I feed it to the rat. It nibbles, stuffing its mouth. Pieces of chewed mushroom tumble out of the hole worn through its abdomen, but it doesn't seem to notice. I carefully toss a couple of mushroom chunks at the lich's feet, then put the rat on the floor. It skitters across the tile, eats both pieces, then takes a chomp on the lich's ankle.

He enrages, his flailing arm knocks a spell book off his lectern. Old parchment goes flying everywhere. In the chaos, I stick to the shadows and slip out the door. Then I'm running as fast as I can to the Hanging Keep.

I feel hundreds of eyes upon me as I approach the Hanging Keep. I crane my neck, looking up at the fortress clinging to the ceiling like a wasp's nest. Even from down here, I can hear the buzzing and clicking of my fellow kraul, riled up from the excitement of a visit from the guildmaster.

"I need to see Vraska," I say to the guards.

I expect them to ask for my credentials, or at least explain why I'm here, but the guard just eyes me up and down like I couldn't possibly pose a threat. "Standing room only. Go ahead up," he mumbles, motioning to the bottom entrance of the Keep.

"Actually, could I get a lift?" He glances at my crooked wing, then whistles over to a winged guard who whisks me up and into the first level of the Keep. Overhead is a grand atrium, jewel-colored moss draping from the overhangs. The royal guard, overwhelmingly kraul, crowds every level, and I can feel the collective buzz through my exoskeleton. Seven stories up, Vraska is leaning over the railing and waving at her devoted followers. I squint. I think that's Vraska. From here, she's the size of an ant.

The crowd is so thick, I'll never be able to reach her in time. The Boros officers may already be on their way, so whatever I do, I have to do it now. I push my way through the swarm until I reach one of the Keep's windows, a handy shortcut to Vraska. I make the mistake of looking down, dizziness clouding my thoughts. All I need to do is scale seven stories, and I know exactly how I can climb them without a lick of fear.



Kraul Harpooner | Art by: Kev Walker

I pull a zombie fungus sample from my satchel and place it on my tongue. The cocoon melts away. Minutes pass, and with it, my fear of heights. I can't think of anything I'd love more than to reach the very top of the Hanging Keep. I squeeze out of the window, sink leg after leg into the outside of the structure. I climb seven stories, and then force my thoughts against those of my fungal invaders. I must stop climbing.

Higher, the fungus tells me.

Higher.

Higher.

It beats like my heart. But I have to go inside. I work my way through a series of back chambers until I find the atrium. Vraska is standing there with her back facing me, giving an impassioned speech to the Krunstraz, her hair waving wildly. A dozen mushroom species adorn her gown. I look for the devouring angel fungus. I see golden parasols on her shoulders, scarlet elf caps on her bodice, club coral fungi, shaggy mane then there, tucked among the griffin's paw fungus trailing down the webbing of the gown's train, I spot where the lich had hidden the devouring angel mushroom, its cap bulging up ever-so-slightly higher than its non-lethal neighbors. I creep forward, one step at a time. Her guards and advisors are with her, but they've all got their eyes trained on the crowd gathered below. One of her advisors turns and sees me. He excuses himself and starts coming for me. It takes my brain a moment to identify him as kraul. Then his face becomes obvious. It's Mazirek.

"You!" he says.

I try to compose myself so I can tell him about my lich, and the Boros, and the devouring angel fungus, and the plot against Vraska, but the fungus has crowded out nearly every function that doesn't involve climbing and all that comes out is an incomprehensible grumble.

Higher.

A guard grabs me by the arm and wrenches it tight. It should hurt the way he's bending it, but it doesn't.

"Get him out of here," Mazirek says.

The guard shoves me forward, but I focus my thoughts. If the fungus has dulled my sense of pain, I can use that in my favor. I wrench hard against his grip, once, twice, violently enough to dislodge my arm from the socket. There's a dull throb where it has broken free, but it doesn't bother me.

The guard is left there holding my arm while I make a run for Vraska. I grab the devouring angel mushroom on her gown and swallow it whole. I can't let it be found here. I can't let the Boros sink their grips further into the Swarm, just when we're starting to recover from the internal chaos of the change in leadership. I run to the window. Looking down is still scary, but I do what I must do. I flap my wings and jump.

Maybe what's great about me is that there are so many things I can do well enough.

I can sing a mating call well enough to fool a deadbridge goliath.

I can throw a stone accurately enough to hit a worm in the eye from fifty feet.

And I can spread my wings and fly far enough *fall* far enough from the Keep, ensuring that Vraska won't be implicated in the Tin Street massacre.

I twitch in the shallow water of an Undercity marsh. I hadn't expected to survive the fall, but maybe my wings had slowed me down just enough. My body throbs all over, not quite pain, but an uncomfortable pressure, like I've been holding my breath too long. The urge to climb is gone. I thought maybe I'd be raging from the devouring angel fungus by now, but perhaps the lich really did neutralize it completely? I should go somewhere far away from people, just to be safe. I try to sit up, but two of my legs are broken and there's a crack in my carapace running end to end. Something else is wrong with me—a fungus stirs within that's powerful, precise, and sits watch over my thoughts.

I move my remaining arm, but it is not the automatic movement I am used to. It's more like a combined effort, like the time my siblings and I had hoisted Mother away from the riverbank during our first flood season. My other senses come slowly as well, like they're processed and filtered through a hundred different minds before they get to me.

"Take. Time," comes a voice from beside me. There were a lot more words than that spoken, but I'm only able to understand those. In a coordinated effort, I twist my neck. My muscles slither more than move.



Art by: Svetlin Velinov

My vision is blurry, pressure from fungal matter taking root behind my eyes. A few of the mushrooms have sprouted through, and they wreck my peripheral vision. I touch them, feeling upturned caps and tiny egg-like spheres within. Bird's nest fungus. Had my samples ruptured from their casings in the fall? They're not the fastest growing mushrooms, and I start to wonder how long I'd been unconscious.

"Careful," the voice says. I focus hard on the person and see kraul features.

"Razi?" I call out my sister's name, but my voice is a rasp, and when I'd tried to strum my wings, I couldn't feel either of them. I panic, reach around to my back. I feel stumps covered in soft fuzz.

"Wings. Lost. Fall." The face behind the words starts to congeal. It takes a long, long moment, but I recognize it.

"Mazirek?" I'm drawn to him, not just from years of admiration, but physically drawn to him. I'm looking at him how the fungus drudges look at me, eagerly awaiting his command.

Maybe I hadn't survived the fall after all. But there are worse places to end up than bound to the most powerful kraul in the Swarm. I wrench my facial features up into a smile, completely humbled, and ready and willing to serve him as best I can.

That moment it takes for everything to sink in—*that's* the moment of death—not when you take your last breath, or your heart beats its last beat. It's the moment when you realize you've got your whole death in front of you, and the possibilities are endless.