

# Operation Desperation

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## I.

Teyo, Mistress Kaya, Master Zarek, Queen Vraska, and I took Golgari tunnels as far as we could take them. But the old direct passages between the Golgari and Rakdos guildhalls had been closed since Jarad vod Savo, a former Golgari guildmaster, was first killed in Rix Maadi by a Rakdos blood witch. So in the end, we had to surface and brave whatever Spark-harvesting creepies might be about.

We encountered none, which seemed a good sign.

Moreover, from a hilltop we could see Tenth District Plaza, and the portal was no longer there. We already knew Mister Jura and Mister Goldmane and Miss Huatli and others were doing their best—now with the Golgari’s help—to rescue as many Ravnicans as possible. And Master Zarek had shut down the Beacon. Now, it was clear that Mister Fayden, Mister Karn, Miss Samut, and the Demon-Man Ob Nixilis had successfully shut down the Planar Bridge, as well. That was three of Mister Beleren’s first six missions accomplished.

*Or maybe four . . .*

My companions all stopped dead in their tracks.

I asked Teyo what was wrong, and he said something had changed.

“What?”

“I—”

Queen Vraska said, “It’s down. The Immortal Sun has been shut down.”

Swallowing hard, I said, “Then you’re all free to go, to planeswalk . . .”

Mistress Kaya said, “We’re not going anywhere.”

Master Zarek said, “No. There’s still work to do.”

Four missions accomplished. That just left two. The assassination of Miss Raven-Hair, Liliana Vess. That was Mister Beleren’s mission with Mister Teferi, Miss Ballard, and Miss Reid.

Then there was our mission: Operation Desperation. Master Zarek had told us Miss Lavinia would represent Azorius. And Master Lazav of Dimir had promised he’d participate, too. With Boros, Izzet, Simic, Orzhov, Selesnya, Gruul, and Golgari already secured, that just left Rakdos.

I dreaded going down there, into Rix Maadi. Not that the place frightened me. But without Hekara there in the where that she should be, I was afraid I’d just . . . dissolve . . . like into a puddle. That kinda thing doesn’t happen to me very often. I’m a pretty resilient Rat, you know? Mostly, I have to be. But when I do get sad or kinda broken, it’s okay, ‘cuz no one sees it. I barely even take notice of myself, right? I mean, what’s the point of wallowing in all that weepiness or whatever?

*Who does it help?*

But this time there'd be witnesses. Teyo and Mistress Kaya—and maybe even Master Zarek—would see me break. And if they saw it, then I'd have to see it, too. That would make it real. And that would mean Hekara was . . .

Anyway, nine guilds secured. One to go. And four missions down. Two to go. Well . . . three, really. Can't forget the final mission. 'Cuz when all this, you know, *easy stuff* has been gotten out of the way, there was still the dragon.

*Yeah. There's still the dragon.*

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## II.

The first juggler, wearing studded red leathers and ribbons that ended in sharp metal fishhooks, impressively juggled six flaming torches. The second juggler juggled eight human skulls. The third juggled twelve flaming skulls. The fourth juggler was an undead skeleton, bones reinforced with wrought iron, including four wrought-iron horns mimicking those of its master, Rakdos the Defiler. It juggled flaming cat skulls pulled from a small furnace smoldering within its own rib cage.

Without warning, the skeleton flung one of these small burning skulls at Teyo, who barely managed to throw up a circular shield of white light to block it from hitting him in the eye. The skull ricocheted off his shield and struck the skeleton in the face. It laughed a hoarse airless laugh, and Teyo shivered.

Mistress Kaya tried to reassure him. "They're just trying to intimidate you."

Teyo looked at the ground and grumbled, "It's working."

The skeleton whispered, "You've got us all wrong, Mistress. We're just trying to *entertain* you."

Teyo glared at the skeleton and grumbled, "It's not working."

The skeleton laughed again and said, "Well, at least you're entertaining me."



Dead Revels | Art by: David Palumbo

We were descending the five hundred steps of the Demon's Vestibule toward Rix Maadi. Veins of lava running down the worm-carved walls shed a dull-red light across all I could see. Another performer was perched on every fourth or fifth step. After the jugglers came the puppeteers, each with a marionette designed to stoke nightmares in the uninitiated.

*But I'm not uninitiated.*

I'd been down these steps, seen these same acts, so many times with Hekara. They were like old friends—old friends determined to remind me that my closest friend would never share these steps with me again.

*I hate them! Why are they still here when she's gone?*

*Why am I still here when she's gone?*

I thought I'd seen them all, but the last puppeteer made me gasp aloud. Her marionette was a brutally accurate caricature of Hekara, a razorwitch complete with actual razors.

I could practically feel the concern rolling off Mistress Kaya, as our eyes met, sharing a moment's shared grief. It was either scream or, you know, lean into it. I smiled sadly and whispered simply, "It won't be the same here without her."

*What a dumb, obvious thing to say. Yet what else is there to say?*

Hekara's passing was exactly why Mistress Kaya had *strongly suggested* Queen Vraska accompany us to Rix Maadi—and why Kaya had insisted the gorgon come without her kraul or Erstwhile defenders. If the Cultists wanted an explanation (or demanded vengeance) for the death of Emissary Hekara, Master Zarek and Mistress Kaya wanted the queen there to explain (or pay the price).

Surprisingly, Her Highness had not objected.

Seemingly of its own volition, the Hekara puppet threw very real razors at Zarek and Vraska. The small blades weren't thrown with quite enough force to cause any serious damage to either the Izzet or

Golgari guildmasters, though the former was left with a small cut on his arm and the Queen's face had been nicked and was slowly dripping a line of blood down her cheek. Mistress Kaya's thoughts were now all filled with concern over the blades having been poisoned. I shook my head. "They're clean. But they might not be on the way back *up* the stairs . . . depending on how this goes."

Puppeteers gave way to caged horrors with masked devils seated atop the cages, ready and willing to set the little monsters free. These particular horrors, spidery things that huffed and puffed and screeched and wailed, were only the size of nodorog cubs, but then again, on this tight, claustrophobic staircase, a cub-sized horror could do significant damage. The devils giggled wildly and constantly motioned toward the latches, threatening to open their cages. Teyo flinched every time, which only made them do it more.

The walls were lined, smeared, with hundreds of torn and overlapping banners, some advertising centuries-old performances, most incorporating some insult to one of the other guilds, with Orzhov, Azorius, and Boros being the most common and popular targets. Mistress Kaya stopped to stare at one banner that appeared as ancient as the rest but depicted herself, Master Zarek, Queen Vraska, and Miss Lavinia hanging like marionettes, each from a single string wrapped tightly around their throats. Their heads lolled, their tongues stuck out, their limbs were slack, their faces bloated and blue. The puppeteer holding their four noose-like strings was a painted image of the Hekara marionette, and the puppeteer working *Hekara's* strings was the Defiler, himself. It didn't bode well for our reception below. Mistress Kaya inhaled, exhaled, and moved on. Teyo stopped for a look, too. He was developing a tic in his left cheek. I ushered him forward, saying, "At least they don't have a banner of you."

"Yet," he amended nervously.

Past the devils and their horrors were the fire-breathers. Teyo motioned to create a shield, but I stopped his hand and shook my head again. "You'll only encourage them. Just pay attention, and when they inhale, pass them by."

Throughout our descent, Master Zarek and Queen Vraska remained wary but stoic, each brooding deeply on his or her own dark thoughts, most of which—I could sense—revolved around Hekara. Except for Teyo, who hadn't known her, we were *all* mourning our friend. Even Mistress Kaya and Master Zarek, who had nothing to blame each other for, felt Hekara's loss looming between them. In part, I guess, it was 'cuz Master Zarek had always held himself aloof from Hekara—taking advantage of her without ever truly acknowledging that he cared about her—though now that it was too late, he realized he cared about her deeply. He felt guilty about this, and an irrational part of him was angry with Mistress Kaya for having always treated Hekara with open warmth. Mostly, though, he was just mad at himself.

The deeper we went, the hotter and closer the air became, and not just because of the fire-breathers. The red veins in the curving walls were wider down here and more liquid. The searing lava dripped down onto the steps and needed to be carefully avoided if we wanted to keep our boots intact—or our feet.

The fire-breathers now gave way to unicyclists, who balanced impressively in place, rolling back and forth within a span of a few inches, on devices that appeared designed for a torture chamber: spokes of barbed wire, clawed wheels, seats made from axe blades. More than one of the riders bled. Every rider came close to slicing gashes in our party of five. One cyclist, who couldn't see me, nearly chopped off my foot. But this sort of near catastrophe was a common occurrence, and I'd trained myself to be very, very *aware* of my surroundings at all times. I easily skipped past the threat.

Finally, we reached the bottom step, and the Vestibule terminated at the Festival Grounds, which were guarded by two immense ogres wearing masks made from actual ogre skulls. Mistress Kaya hesitated but the ogres paid no heed to me or any of the others—as if all four of them were just four more Rats. So Kaya ignored them back and continued forward across the large courtyard. In its center was a cracked and graffitied fountain featuring a statue of a centaur. From a certain angle, the statue was surprisingly elegant, but I knew that as we approached it, the others would see that chunks of marble had been broken off the man-horse as if by a sledgehammer. Water dribbled from broken lips, and that water in turn dribbled out of the cracked fountain and down through a crack in the floor, where it rose again as steam.

Above us, unoccupied trapeze swings hung from rusty hooks, while a single young pigtailed tightrope walker, in a black and red harlequin leotard, glided heedlessly across a threadbare strand. Her movements were full of grace, drawing the eye. She glanced down at her new audience, and Teyo gasped. Her lips and eyelids had been stitched shut.

There were empty cages large enough to hold human-sized horrors. And everything, absolutely everything, was haphazardly painted with splatters of blood.

At the far end of the Festival Grounds, two more skull-masked ogres stood guard before the ornate stone façade of Rix Maadi. Like the first pair, these ogres seemed to take no notice of us. Still, our little group hesitated before the entrance's ominous red glow—until Queen Vraska muttered, “Screw it,” and marched through the arched gothic doorway. Master Zarek and Mistress Kaya exchanged a glance and followed, with Teyo and I close behind.

Rix Maadi's façade was literally that. Within was no architecture—just a massive natural volcanic cavern. Steam rose from a huge central lava pit and was vented above by natural chimneys that ran all the way to the surface.

We were all sweating *a lot* now. Even Teyo, the boy from the desert. He shrugged and said, “It's not the heat; it's the humidity.”

Stone causeways crisscrossed the lava pit. Steel cables crisscrossed the ceiling, supporting more rusty cages and hooks. Blood-filled basins dotted the landscape. So did dozing hellhounds, including Hekara's favorite, Whipsaw.

*I wonder if she mourns her mistress, too.*

The walls were pockmarked with dozens of doors leading to dozens of chambers. Laughter emanated from some. Screams from others. Both from many. To our left, at ground level, a large aperture in the wall was shrouded by a supernatural mist of pure shadow. A foul breeze wafted forth from within. I'd been here many times before, but it still gave me the shivers.

I slid up to Mistress Kaya and whispered, “Where is everybody? Rix Maadi is usually packed with performers. I've never seen it so empty.”

She looked through the red-tinged gloom. Except for the hellhounds, and the occasional scurrying (actual) rat, there wasn't a soul around, living or dead, except the five of us. Then, as if on cue, a startling figure appeared in a burst of red smoke.

“Dame Exava,” I whispered. “Blood witch. She's the Defiler's current number two.”

As the smoke slowly cleared, Dame Exava came into focus. She was a tall, muscular human, wearing an immense and elaborate mask decorated with two sets of genuine demon horns. A tight bodice accentuated her large chest and bare midriff. She wore thigh-high boots and a wide belt from which

hung numerous iron spikes, all bloodstained. She stood upon a small stage and stared down at my four companions with imperious contempt. She never had been able to see me.

*I never liked her very much.*

Mistress Kaya, Master Zarek, and Queen Vraska looked at one another and then bowed their heads in unison. Master Zarek spoke the formalities: “We honor you, Exava, as a blood witch of rare talent, and we beg an audience with your master, the Defiler.”

Dame Exava studied them in silence. Then she looked toward the pit. Lava bubbled, but nothing else appeared, including the demon.

“Apparently,” she said in a rich contralto, “the Defiler begs no audience from you.”

But in that moment, Rakdos’s booming voice echoed throughout the entire cavern: “*WHERE IS OUR EMISSARY?*”



Rakdos, the Showstopper | Art by: Viktor Titov

Master Zarek glared at Queen Vraska, who stepped forward, ready to take whatever was coming to her. But before she could speak, a voice called out, “She is here!”

*What?! Really?! Hekara?!*

I turned toward the main entrance. It was Mister Tomik Vrona, leading a single Orzhov thrull, which carried a covered corpse.

*No. No, no, no, no, no . . . Why would you do that to me?*

Mister Vrona signaled the thrull, which stopped. He uncovered the corpse’s face, Hekara’s face. He said, “I have brought Hekara back to her people.”

I scurried over to Hekara’s side. The thrull was tall, and I had to stand on tiptoe to see my friend and kiss her pale cheek. It was real now. I honestly couldn’t tell you whether that made it better or worse.



Dame Exava cleared her throat impatiently. She said, “Have your creature place the razorwitch on the stage at my feet.”

Mister Vrona gestured, and the thrull complied. I followed.

Dame Exava knelt beside Hekara and jerked her shroud away. Exava flung it into the air, and it burst in flames dramatically—*overdramatically*. Its ashes rained down on us all.

The blood witch ran a hand from the top of Hekara’s head all the way down to the tips of her painted toes in a disturbing, almost erotic, caress. She said, “You should have brought her back sooner.”

“Apologies,” Mister Vrona said with a bow. “Things have been a bit chaotic up on the surface.”

“That is *not* the Cult’s concern.”

“But it should be,” Master Zarek stated.

Dame Exava rose, snapping her fingers dismissively. Within seconds, six more blood witches appeared in six more puffs of red smoke. They came prepared and quickly stripped Hekara naked and then adorned her in rags and bells. When the process was completed, Dame Exava said, “Have your thrull take Hekara into the Jester’s Crypt.” She pointed a long elegant finger toward the noxious aperture.

Mister Vrona made two more hand gestures, and the thrull took up Hekara. I suppose I should’ve warned him.

But for some reason, I didn’t.

Flanked by a procession of the six witches, the thrull trod dully through the aperture with Hekara in his arms.

Belatedly, I said to no one in particular, “I hope Mister Vrona didn’t like that thrull. He won’t see him again.”

And again on cue, my companions froze at the sound of the thrull’s death-scream. Mister Vrona looked horrified. All I could muster up was a shrug.

Dame Exava said, “I will return shortly. Stay here.” She then burst into flame, much as Hekara’s shroud had. Ashes rained down again, but none of us actually thought the blood witch had burned.

My thoughts were with Hekara. I’d never seen her face before when she wasn’t smiling. Even when performing tragedy, her eyes smiled. No more. No smile in her eyes. No smile on her lips. No kind words exchanged between friends.

“*You’re my Rat.*”

“*I’m your Rat.*”

All gone. Forever.

Mister Vrona was telling Master Zarek, “You have had your duties; I have had my own.”

Master Zarek eyed him. “Which are what exactly?”

Mister Vrona looked right at Mistress Kaya: “I am executive assistant to the *true* guildmaster of the Orzhov. For years, I believed that to be Teysa Karlov. Now I know it is Kaya. And so I have been about the business of serving my mistress.”

Kaya smiled and thanked him. Then the epiphany hit: “Tomik, *you’re* the one who actually rallied the Orzhov troops into battle.”

“That was mostly the giant Bilagru. You made a good impression on him.”

“After you sent him to me and primed the pump.”

Mister Vrona tilted his left hand as if to say, *Such is my duty*.

Just then, Dame Exava emerged from the Jester’s Crypt, her hands absolutely dripping with thrull blood.

Once again, Queen Vraska stepped forward, saying, “Great and talented Exava, Ravnica requires your aid. If Hekara were alive, she’d urge you to help us convince your master—”

Dame Exava interrupted, “*Emissary* Hekara died because she placed her trust in you three.” She pointed from the queen to Master Zarek to Mistress Kaya. “One of you betrayed her, one of you denied her, and one of you simply failed her.”

“All true,” Master Zarek said with evident remorse—but not little determination. “And there are no guarantees now, save this: if the ten guilds do not unite, Ravnica is surely doomed.”

“Then the Cult of Rakdos will dance on Ravnica’s grave. We’re quite good at grave dancing. It’s a specialty.”

“I’m sure you are, and I’m sure it is,” Master Zarek countered. “But the dead can’t dance.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Please, listen. Niv-Mizzet left us one last plan to defeat Nicol Bolas. If you allow me to explain—”

“*WE ALREADY KNOW EVERY DETAIL OF THE LATE FIREMIND’S LATEST GRASP AT POWER*,” echoed Rakdos’s voice. “*WE’LL HAVE NONE OF IT!*”

Dame Exava smiled dangerously. “I think you should go,” she said.

“But—”

“Before you *really* piss him off.”

Master Zarek, Mister Vrona, Queen Vraska, and Mistress Kaya all looked inward, studying to see if there was anything they could do or say that might make a difference. But in the end, their shoulders all collectively sank, and they turned to go.

Teyo turned to me and asked, “That’s it? We’re giving up?”

But I wasn’t really listening. I smelled something or heard something or sensed *someone* I was staring at the opening of the Jester’s Crypt. Somebody behind me gasped.

“What’s your hurry, partners?” Hekara said, emerging from the shadowy space.

I should have run to her and thrown my arms around her. But I just stood there, afraid to hope that what I was seeing was real, you know?

“Hekara?” Master Zarek said.

“Well, yeah,” she replied with a shrug.

“Weren’t you dead?” Queen Vraska said.

“Well, sure. Miss me?”

“More than you can know my friend,” Master Zarek said.



“Stop it,” Hekara said. “You’ll embarrass me. *Just kidding!* I never get embarrassed. Be as mushy as you want. It’s horrible theater but we all have our guilty pleasures, right?”

Queen Vraska said, “I owe you an apology, Hekara. I never should have betrayed your trust.”

“It was a pretty crappy thing to do. And dying sucked. But hey, it all worked out. After all, you can’t be resurrected as a blood witch if you don’t die first, right?”

I think I was crying. I dunno. I didn’t care, either. “You’re a blood witch now?” I asked with some awe. But Master Zarek couldn’t hear me and spoke right over me, asking his own question: “Can you convince Rakdos to join Operation Desperation?”

“Ooh, good title,” Hekara said, “Anyway, don’t sweat it. I’ll represent the Cult in whatever you got planned, mate.”

“No, you will not,” Dame Exava boomed. “The Defiler has made his wishes clear.”

“Really? ‘Cuz he hasn’t said one word to me.”

“At the time, you were dead and thus a somewhat inattentive audience.”

“He could set me straight now.”

“There’s no need,” Dame Exava said. “*I’m* doing that.”

But *Dame* Hekara just wagged her finger at Exava. “But you’re not the Boss. Not the boss of me, anyway. You’re just a blood witch. And since I’m a blood witch now, too, I’m thinking I don’t need to follow your orders. You don’t outrank me anymore, Exava. You just kinda side-rank me.”

“Witch, I’ll kill you all over again!” Dame Exava leapt, her bloody hands reaching for Hekara’s throat.

Hekara cartwheeled away. The cartwheel morphed into a somersault, which morphed into a backflip. Hekara landed on the stage, and I *applauded*!

Once she had the high ground, Hekara materialized multiple razors in both hands and threw them all simultaneously. “Once a razorwitch, always a razorwitch!”



Blade Juggler | Art by: Dmitry Burmak

Dame Exava was caught unprepared. She parried most of the blades with a wave of her hand, but more than one pierced her skin. It hardly slowed her down, but Hekara wasn't exactly in this fight alone. Master Zarek fired up his Accumulator and fired off a relatively small bolt that caught Exava from behind. She screamed and dropped to her knees.

A hellhound reacted, but Hekara intercepted her, saying, "Stop it, Whipsaw. Sit!"

Whipsaw stopped but did not sit. She growled menacingly, her mouth dripping acidic saliva that sizzled when it hit the ground. Master Zarek recharged, ready to fry the beast. Hekara waved him off but didn't even bother to look his way. She just kept speaking soothingly to Whipsaw: "Don't mind Ral. He's okay. And Exava will be her old diva self in no time. Now sit!"

Whipsaw sat.

Hekara called out to the still-absent Rakdos, "I'm going to help my mates now. You don't mind, do you, Boss?"

The Defiler remained silent.

"Okay, then," Hekara said with a laugh. "Let's get on with it!" Then she walked toward me. I held out my arms for a hug or a spin or any old thing she felt like doing.

*"C'mere, baby-cakes, gimme some sugar."*

*"I'm your Rat."*

*"You're my Rat."*

None of that happened.

She walked right past me—without noticing me at all.

I was stunned. I looked up and saw Teyo and Mistress Kaya gaping at me with pity. Then I looked away. But we all knew. Instantly. Whatever process had brought Hekara back to life had changed her enough so that she could no longer see me.

*I just lost her all over again*

But what difference did that make now? We had set out to bring four wayward guilds back into the fold.

Zero to go. Four down. And this last one took me with it.

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### III.

I guess at some point I *must* have resumed breathing.

I mean, she was alive, right? That's what really mattered. *I* had lost her, but at least she was back, you know?

*There are worse things than finding out that someone you love is still in your world even if you're no longer in hers.*

I walked right beside her the whole way to the plaza.

Teyo said, "Do you want me to say something to her?"

Mistress Kaya said, "Stop torturing yourself."

I pretended I couldn't hear them. I just decided to, I dunno, *bask* in Hekara's presence for a bit.

And at some point, I must have resumed breathing.

A part of me probably thought she'd see me again.

*Just give it time*

But a part of me knew better. She was a blood witch now. She was Dame Hekara. And I was still just an insignificant Rat. She didn't look at me. She didn't want to see something like me. She was too far above me now. Plus, they had done something to bring her back. Changed her a little. But that was all right. She teased Master Zarek and Queen Vraska the whole way to our destination. So they hadn't changed her all that much. And at least I still got to see her. Once I dried my eyes.

So, yeah. I must have resumed breathing again.

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### IV.

We waited, as one by one (or occasionally two by two) everyone made their stealthy arrival among the ruins of the former Embassy of the Guildpact—working very hard to gather without attracting the notice of the creepies or Miss Raven-Hair. I smiled at Teyo. I could tell he was still concerned for me, so I changed the subject: "Don't worry. I'll explain everything that happens as we go."

He said, "I think I've got the gist of it all by now."

"Yeah, but you don't know most of the players."

He started to say something, paused and then said, "Thank you, Araithia. That would be very helpful. And I expect very entertaining."

"You just love to hear me babble."

He blushed then. Which made me blush. So I punched him on the arm.

“Ow.”

“That didn’t hurt.”

“Don’t I get to be the judge of that?”

“No, you big baby.”

“I’m still older than you.”

“Not very.”

“No. Not very.”

“I win.” I felt like kissing him, which was very strange. So I punched him again.

“Ow.”

Everyone was assembling, so I began. “Operation Desperation, the Firemind’s final plan requires all ten guilds, the leylines of Ravnica, the charred bones of Niv-Mizzet, and that thing.”

I was pointing to a brass model of a dragon head—Master Niv-Mizzet’s head, to be specific—being carried forward by Chief Chemister Varryvort, an Izzet goblin. “It’s called the Firemind’s Vessel and will contain his spirit when summoned from wherever it’s currently residing—assuming this works, that is, and given the name of the plan that could easily be too much to assume, you know?”

Chief Varryvort gently placed the Vessel atop Master Niv-Mizzet’s blackened bones.

“See, Plan A had been to give Master Niv-Mizzet the power to fight Bolas. That didn’t work out, and you can see the end result. Plan B—as in Beacon—failed, too. This is Plan C, I think. Unless I’ve lost count.

“So over there, Master Zarek’s consulting with Miss Revane. Mister Beleren says she’s some kind of expert on leylines. Has a magical connection to them. So Master Zarek’s explaining what they need to accomplish.”

Master Zarek and Miss Revane were speaking too quietly for either of us to make out the words. But when Master Zarek fell silent, I did, as well. Miss Revane then proceeded to study the problem for . . . *ever*. She remained completely motionless the whole time, resembling a painted statue more than a living being. While we watched her, Chief Varryvort came over to stand beside Teyo, I guess to get out of the way. Not seeing me, he was about to step on me, but I just sidestepped over to Teyo’s other side.

Finally, Miss Revane nodded, saying, “It might be possible. The leylines were disrupted by the Planar Bridge, but with the Bridge gone, I believe I can repair them and help Ravnica reassert herself.”

“Well, that’s promising, at least,” I said. “Now all we have to do is wait for the rest of the guild representatives to gather.”

Master Zarek, Mistress Kaya, and Queen Vraska were already present, as was Hekara, of course. Miss Lavinia arrived next. It seems Master Dovin Baan had fled Ravnica, and *Mistress* Lavinia was now acting guildmaster of the Azorius Senate.



Lavinia, Azorius Renegade | Art by: Steven Belledin

An impatient Hekara was cartwheeling around the decimated chamber, bells tinkling from leather ribbons on her new costume. I sighed out, “She’s so cool!” Then she cartwheeled right past me.

*But that’s fine, right? It’s fine!*

Borborygmus arrived next with my parents. Ari smiled at me and pointed me out to Gan Shokta and the cyclops. Both squinted at the space next to Teyo until they could see me. It made me feel a little better, and I said to Teyo, “My mom’s pretty cool, too.”

Milady Emmara Tandris, champion of the Selesnyan Conclave, arrived with my godfather, Boruvo, who exchanged a few dangerous-sounding growls with his former Gruul clanmates—particularly my mother, who regarded him as a traitor for having switched guilds. I wondered if that’s why I was still Gateless. Was it ‘cuz I knew I didn’t fit in Gruul—but didn’t want to risk losing her by picking a different guild?

*Krokt knows I can’t afford to lose anyone else.*

And, who knows? I might fit just fine in Gruul. Hard to say.

I noticed Teyo bracing himself, ready to create a shield to prevent a fight. But there wasn’t gonna be any fight. I gave them all a stern look and said, “Can’t we all just get along?”

The four of them all nodded without too much reluctance.

Next came Prime Speaker Vannifar of the Simic Combine, accompanied by Mister Vorel.

Then Mistress Aurelia, guildmaster of the Boros Legion, flew in, still hot from battle.

Only when all the others had shown their faces did Guildmaster Lazav of House Dimir reveal that he had been there all along—right beside Teyo and I—by morphing out of the form of Chief Varryvort.

“Damnit, Lazav!” Master Zarek said in a clipped and dangerous voice. “What the hell have you done with the real Varryvort?”

Master Lazav “reassured” Master Zarek in a lazy drawl, “Your accomplished chief chemister is sleeping one off. He’ll be just fine come morning—assuming this succeeds, and *any* of us are just fine come morning.”

I noticed Miss Revane was looking uncomfortable, so I nudged Teyo with my elbow. He stared at me, confused. “Help the elf,” I whispered.

He nodded and stepped forward, saying, “If everyone would just gather around Miss Revane.”

Mistress Kaya approached, and Miss Revane silently indicated where she needed the Orzhov guildmaster to stand. The process was repeated in turn with Hekara, Master Zarek, Mistress Lavinia, Master Lazav, Mistress Aurelia, Borborygmus, Prime Speaker Vannifar, Queen Vraska, and Milady Emmara. There was some (rather silly) grouching—and considerable mistrust among them all, with Mistress Lavinia and Queen Vraska very nearly butting heads when Miss Revane placed them next to each other. But Miss Revane finally chose to speak, declaring, “Let me make this clear: without a perfect act of unity from every single guild in concert, the plan has no hope of succeeding. You must put all grievances—petty or otherwise—behind you.” The act of saying that many words in sequence seemed to visibly exhaust the elf, but they did the trick. Soon enough, the ten guild representatives were standing in a slightly warped circle around Miss Revane, and the bones and Vessel of the Firemind. The remaining few in attendance—myself, Teyo, Spearmaster Boruvo, Mister Vorel, Ari, and Gan Shokta—stood in something of a clump just outside the circle. My mother seemed to be looking Teyo up and down. She frowned a little and shot me a questioning look. Apparently, Teyo Verada hadn’t passed muster as a dependable friend for Ari Shokta’s daughter.

It was kinda mortifying, and besides, I didn’t want Teyo’s feelings hurt, so I looked away, pretending not to notice.

“You stand upon the ancient leylines of the Guildpact,” Miss Revane said, pulling our attention back to the matter at hand.

“Which has exactly what to do with dragon bones?” Mistress Aurelia asked in a decidedly suspicious tone.

The elf again looked uncomfortable, and Master Zarek took a step forward before quickly stepping back when Miss Revane glared at him in frustration for leaving his designated spot. He said, “We are here to resurrect the Firemind as the new Living Guildpact.”

Apparently, this was news to about half the guild leaders.

Mister Vorel shouted, “What?” and Mistress Aurelia growled, “That’s what this is?” more or less in concert. Borborygmus roared along with them both.

Mistress Lavinia grumbled, “Didn’t we try this already, when he was alive? What makes you think—” Hekara said, “It’s not called Operation Desperation for nothing, you know.”

Master Zarek held up his hands and said, “We did try, and we failed. But the same terms apply. Jace Beleren has lost the power of the Living Guildpact. We need that power to defeat Nicol Bolas. If we succeed here, Niv-Mizzet will rise again to that power and use it against the Elder Dragon. Then the Firemind will step down as guildmaster of the Izzet and, as one of Ravnica’s most ancient, wise, and venerable paruns, take up his new role as impartial arbiter to all ten guilds and Gateless, alike. The gods know he can hardly do a worse job than Beleren.”

Mistress Lavinia, Queen Vraska, and Milady Emmara frowned at that last comment, but the rest simply acknowledge the truth of it and settled down some.

Standing on tiptoe, I whispered in Teyo's ear, "I'm glad he acknowledged the Gateless. We're always forgotten when the big mucky-mucks gather to talk guild business."

Hekara was practically bouncing up and down, saying, "I've never been part of an all-guild casting. Now I'm kind of glad the Boss didn't want to come himself."

Mistress Aurelia shook her head and scoffed, "The demon can't be bothered to save Ravnica, so Rakdos sends one of his minions."

I whispered again, "The Boros Legion has always been Rakdos intolerant."

Hekara wagged her finger at Mistress Aurelia. "It's not like that at all. The Boss didn't send me in his place. I totally came without his permission."

Queen Vraska smirked. "Hekara, if we're being honest, you came in open defiance of his wishes."

"Exactly!"

This started off another round of grousing and recriminations. Milady Emmara and Prime Speaker Vannifar turned on Master Zarek, demanding to know how he expected any kind of success when the Cult's eponymous guildmaster and parun wasn't on board.

Mistress Aurelia said, "Even attempting this is virtually pointless."

After a frustrated look from Master Zarek, Hekara attempted to backpedal her verbal unicycle away from her previous blithe rebelliousness. "Don't get me wrong. The Boss is fully behind this effort."

Mistress Aurelia eyed her. "Is he now?"

"Oh, yeah, completely. Entirely. Probably."

Master Zarek stepped in (verbally, that is—he wasn't about to move from his assigned spot and risk another glare from Miss Revane): "We might as well give it a shot. The ceremony will only take " He trailed off with a questioning look at Miss Revane.

"Five minutes at most," she responded. "Assuming it works at all."

Mistress Kaya said, "Five minutes? Time is precious, but at five minutes we can't afford *not* to make the effort."

Miss Revane looked around the circle. One by one, each of the ten nodded in agreement, some with enthusiasm, some with determination, some with considerable reluctance. But they all nodded nonetheless.

Far from looking enthusiastic, determined, or reluctant, a seemingly emotionless Miss Revane said, "Everyone, take a deep breath."

Teyo inhaled and exhaled deeply.

I giggled. "I think she was only talking to the people in the circle."

He blushed deeply.

"Oh, look," I said. "You're so cute when you're embarrassed."

He blushed deeply-er.

"Yeah, like that!"

My mother scowled again. I ignored her some more.



As Teyo struggled to recover his composure, Miss Revane began chanting—too low for me to hear. From where she stood, beside bones and Vessel, lines began to alight beneath her feet. Black lines. Blue lines. Green lines. Red lines. White lines. Then, suddenly, the lines shot out in multiple directions all at once, forming concentric circles beneath the feet of the ten representatives.

Teyo's eyes grew wide, and he studied the lines with fascination. I think they must have appealed to his geometric mind, you know?

What interested him was starting to interest me for some reason, so I tried to pay close attention. All the representatives had two colored circles beneath them, and no two combinations were the same. Mistress Kaya, for example, was surrounded by a circle of white and a circle of black. Black lines connected her black circle to identical circles around Queen Vraska, Master Lazav, and Hekara. Hekara's second circle was red, which connected her to Borborygmus, Mistress Aurelia, and Master Zarek. The latter's second circle was blue, connecting him to Mistress Lavinia, Master Lazav, and Prime Speaker Vannifar. The Prime Speaker's second circle was green, connecting her to Borborygmus, Queen Vraska, and Milady Emmara. Milady's second circle was white, connecting her to Mistresses Lavinia, Aurelia, and Kaya. It was kinda perfect, when you think about it. Anyway, Teyo seemed to really like it.

By that time, the ceremony's eleven participants (including Miss Revane) had fallen into some kinda trance, sporting eleven blank stares. Suddenly, golden light poured out of twenty-one sightless eyes.

*An odd number, 'cuz, you know, Borborygmus is a cyclops and only has one.*

Operation Desperation had been activated. A colorless portal—like clear water—opened above the Fire-mind Vessel, and wispy smoke of blue and red emerged and descended, as if sucked down from portal to Vessel. The bones ignited, bright-yellow and orange flames rising high—and giving off enough light to temporarily blind us watching. We raised our hands to shield our eyes, and, squinting, I saw Miss Revane engulfed in fire. Engulfed but not aflame: the elf didn't scream or writhe or burn. The blaze expanded from bones, Vessel, and elf to encompass the ten guild leaders. And like Miss Revane, they showed no signs of being burned by the fire. Still entranced, they didn't seem to notice it.

Unfortunately, something else did.

I was the first to spot it, pointing up and shouting over the roar of the fire: "We've got company!"

As the light from the fire had gleamed brighter and brighter, it had attracted the attention of one of the God-Eternals. I couldn't remember its name, but it had a kinda bird-shaped head and only one arm. The giant creepy crossed the plaza in tremendous strides and was soon looming over the ruins of the former embassy, peering down on Operation Desperation, still in progress, and all of *us* !



God-Eternal Kefnet | Art by: Lius Lasahido

Teyo didn't even think, bless him. As the creepy's single massive fist swung down, Teyo reached up with both hands and manifested a half sphere of light that covered all seventeen of us. When the creepy's fist smashed against it, the shield barely held—and Teyo was rocked, stunned. He sank to his knees and I grabbed him to stop him from falling on his face.

"You did it," I whispered. "Keep doing it."

He nodded numbly and raised his arms again.

Another blow came down. The light shield shattered on impact—but prevented the God-Creepy's fist from making contact with any of us. Teyo groaned and shook his head to clear it. Dazed as he was though, he couldn't seem to summon up a new shield. The next blow would crush us all.

But Teyo had bought Miss Revane and the guild leaders the time they needed. The ritual had been completed under his shield. Enough mana had been filtered through the participants to flow through and around the bones and Vessel of the Firemind. The yellow and orange flames had turned to gold and ignited blue and red smoke within the Vessel. The smoke had burned briefly purple before the golden flames overwhelmed all other colors. The blaze seemed to take shape and solidify around the dragon bones, filling them out, turning them from skeleton to living creature.

And then Master Niv-Mizzet was reborn, with scales of shiny gold to match the golden glow emanating from his eyes. A decagon was etched—seared, really—into his chest, and magical spheres of black, blue, green, red, and white swirled around him, like five planets orbiting the sun.

Still supporting Teyo's weight, I said, "That's different."

Teyo couldn't speak. His eyes rolled upward in his head, and I followed their gaze in time to see the God-Creepy's fist barreling down on us.

But the new and supposedly improved Firemind spread his wings and launched himself up toward the monster. The dragon's golden wings glowed with a golden light, and his upward arc sheared the God-

Creepy's fist off at the wrist. It landed like a boulder ten feet behind us, shaking the ground but doing no further damage.

The ibis-headed creepy swung his single, truncated, lazotep-covered limb toward Master Niv-Mizzet, but the dragon easily dodged the blow, flapping his wings once to rise above his foe. Then the Firemind opened his maw wide; his upper and lower incisors scraped against each other, generating a spark, which ignited the dragon's breath. An unending torrent of flame engulfed the God-Eternal, incinerating what remained of its flesh and melting its lazotep coating into a molten rain that dropped ten feet in front of us, sizzling against the ground but doing no further damage.

Ari and Gan Shokta cheered. Mister Vorel growled with obvious satisfaction. Spearmaster Boruvo grunted with the same. I smiled, and I suppose Teyo struggled not to pass out. My mother knelt beside us and, putting a rough hand on Teyo's shoulder, said, "Your boy did well, Araithia."

Now it was my turn to blush. "He's not my boy," I said. "He's my friend."

"He can see you, and he can protect you."

"I don't need protecting."

"We all need protecting sometimes. Just don't need it too often."

"No, Mother."

The eleven were just beginning to come out of their trances. Master Zarek shook his head to clear it and then looked up . . . *just in time to see Master Niv-Mizzet fall.*

The dragon crashed down ten feet to the left of us, shaking the ground—and shattering all our hopes. The Firemind lay there, breathing heavily and barely moving. One wing seemed bent beneath his body at an angle so awkward, I had to cringe.

Gan Shokta said, "That's it? Is the great power of the new Living Guildpact already spent from dealing with a single one-armed Eternal?"

Master Zarek looked stunned, and everyone else looked stricken, angry, or both. Suddenly, the notion that Master Niv-Mizzet would somehow have the power to defeat Nicol Bolas seemed foolish and, well, *desperate*.