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Mark Rosewater

Mark puts a capper on Flavor Text Week

Daily Articles



I was originally planning to spend this week talking about basic design, but I am going to push that article off to a future week to address an outpouring I received on last week's column on flavor text. The sentiment was best summed up in a letter by Will Mistretta that was sent to me personally, posted on our [Magic message boards](#), and appeared as an article on [StarCityGames.com](#):

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 Search

Alright, Mr. Rosewater. This is regarding your recent online article "The Write Stuff." First of all, nice article. All praise aside, I feel that I need to level some fairly harsh criticism at it.

Frankly, the original **Magic** design teams had it right. Cheap, broad "humor" and the casual tone of modern flavor text is killing the once wonderful tone of **Magic: The Gathering**. Killing it. For example, let's take this quote regarding your "new" flavor text for the card **Drudge Skeletons**:

"This flavor text reflects my belief that the undead have great comedy potential."

This is, without a doubt, the single most useful quote for illustrating everything that's wrong with **Magic** flavor text today.

Let's look at the Skeletons' original flavor text:

"Bones scattered around us joined to form misshapen bodies, We struck at them repeatedly -- they fell, but soon formed again, with the same mocking look on their faceless skulls."

Now, your replacement:

"The dead make good soldiers. They can't disobey orders, they never surrender, and they don't stop fighting when a random body part falls off." --Nevinyrral, Necromancer's Handbook"

Frankly, the comparison is pathetic. Just pathetic. An unstoppable hoard of the walking dead intend on your inevitable ghastly demise has been transformed into a gag that could have come from a forth grader's school talent show routine.

Funny undead? Did you really think **Magic** needed an even less funny psuedo-Jerry Seinfeld? *"What is the deal with those Drudge Skeletons? I mean really! What is up with that?"*

Even if the lack of a serious tone could be forgiven, the fact that the "funny" that replaced it just isn't funny can't. I'm very sorry to tell you this, as I understand that you formerly worked as a comedy writer. However... well, there's no diplomatic way to point out that there might be a good reason that gig apparently didn't work out, is there?

Another example (which might very well not be yours, but illustrates my point further). Let's take a look at 1993's **Phantom Monster**:

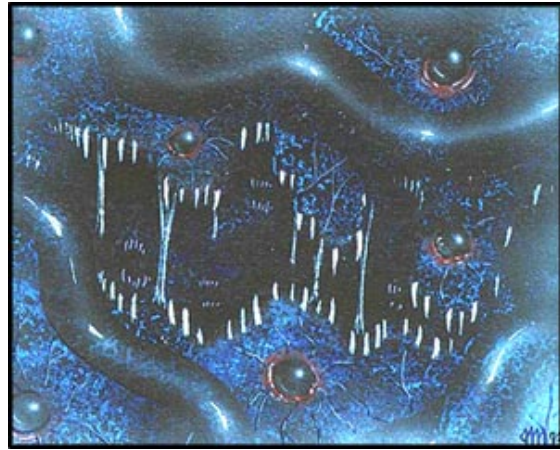
*"While, like a ghastly rapid river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh - but smile no more.'
- Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Haunted Palace'"*

Now compare that with 2001's **Fear**:

"Booga booga booga!"

And **Dwarven Berserker**? A little part of me died when I saw the word "butt" on a **Magic** card...

It doesn't work. I'm sorry, but it just doesn't. Did Alpha have anything that forehead-slapping awful? Did *Arabian Nights*? *Antiquities*? *Legends*? *The Dark*?



Frankly, we hate it. I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but we the players hate your storylines and flavor text. Maybe your time in the ivory tower of **Magic** R&D has isolated you from this, but most of us do not share your punny sense of humor or your love for your pet expansion hog characters. We hate the storyline and we hate the jokes. Check the websites, check the newsgroups and message boards, ask the players face-to-face. We've hated every storyline since *Mirage/Visions* with a passion. We'd rather have Jar Jar Binks in **Magic** than Gerrard or Kamahl. These annoying character make the flavor text impersonal and monotonous. They take the focus off the players and thrust it onto a bunch of unlikable, one-dimensional characters and situations that seem like they were drawn from some 16-year-old pothead's half-baked **D&D** campaign. **Magic** used to be about putting yourself in the game. It used to be about the dueling mages. Us! Now it's about shoddy wankers with names like "Chainer?" We are not amused.

Face it, Mr. Rosewater: Somewhere along the line, probably right around the time *Alliances* gave way to *Mirage*, you guys just started down an unfortunate path and it's only become worse over time. **Magic** needs its majesty and dignity. Every little joke like this, every little extra bit of focus on pet characters, weakens the once-great atmosphere more and more, and let's face it, without the great atmosphere **Magic** was created with, it's just a bunch of cardboard. **Magic** started out so great that it has a long way to fall indeed, but you are still driving it downward at a steady pace, and even **Magic** will hit rock bottom eventually.

Please stop killing our game like this! Bring back the serious tone. Bring back the literary quotes in expansions. Ditch the puns, slang, and cheap gags. FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE quit quoting these boring characters on every other card. Classical quotes and the floating third person "detached historian" point of view are the way to go most of the time, like in Alpha, *Antiquities*, etc.

Please just make **Magic** COOL again. Like it was before. Bring US back to the forefront.

As **Boomerang** once put it:

"O! Call back yesterday, bid time return." - William Shakespeare, *King Richard the Second*

Please.

Will Mistretta

My reply:

Will,

Let me start by saying that this is an excellent letter that makes several very valid points. (As a quick aside, if you want to see your letter in a future column, make sure to take the time to make it well written and thought out.) I would like to take my column this week to address some of these points one by one.

That's Not Funny

Let's assume that recent flavor text uses "cheap, broad 'humor'" and a "casual tone." Do players believe it's "killing the once wonderful tone of **Magic**?" This question is something that Brady Dommermuth, the **Magic** creative director, has been trying to answer for some time. Our goal here at Wizards is to create the game that all of you want. The better we satisfy this need, the more you enjoy the game and the happier everyone is all around. To that end, we take polls, we talk to players, and we conduct a huge amount of market research about players' preferences.

As you can guess, attitudes towards flavor, much like those toward card mechanics, vary greatly from player to player. Your letter does an excellent job of representing the attitudes of a particular type of player, but those attitudes aren't universal.

For example, we conduct a particular kind of market research called a "godbook study." A "godbook" is just a printout of all the cards. We ask a statistical sampling of hundreds of players to pick their favorite and least favorite cards in several categories (card mechanics, art, names, and flavor text) from memory. Then we show them a random portion of a set's godbook and ask the same questions. We take the data from the first part (what we call an open-ended survey) and combine the data with the second part.

Here are the flavor-text results from the *Odyssey* godbook study:

Favorite Flavor Text

Battle of Wits – *The wizard who reads a thousand books is powerful. The wizard who memorizes a thousand books is insane.*

Kamahl, Pit Fighter – *"I didn't come to play. I came to win."*

Squirrel Mob – *An army of squirrels is still an army.*

Cursed Monstrosity – *"Run away! It's an...um...run away!"* – Nomad sentry

Gorilla Titan – *"I want a banana this big!"*

Least Favorite Flavor Text

Gorilla Titan – *"I want a banana this big!"*

Werebear – *He exercises his right to bear arms.*

Mind Burst – *As haunting as a zombie's curse.*

This survey suggests that players like humor. Of the favorite flavor text, only **Battle of Wits** could be called not humorous. **Kamahl, Pit Fighter** and **Squirrel Mob** are a little subtler in their humor, whereas **Cursed Monstrosity** and **Gorilla Titan** are just out-and-out jokes.

Second, not every type of humor is appreciated. **Werebear**, for example, shows that basic puns seem to be frowned upon (for more on puns, see the sidebar at the end of this article). The Creative Text team (those responsible for names, flavor text and card concepts) has been spending a great deal of time in the last year trying to figure out which styles of humor players do and don't like. You should see the results of this in upcoming sets.

Third, and this might be the most important one, different players react differently to the same flavor text. **Gorilla Titan** appears on both lists. Some love it and some hate it, which has caused a lot of discussion here at Wizards. Obviously, we want to do away with the type of flavor text players uniformly dislike. But what do we do with the stuff that polarizes players?

If you would like to see more data, you can click [here](#) to see a compiled favorite/least favorite from godbook studies since *Urza's Destiny*.

Different Strokes

In the end, the discussion keeps coming back to diversity. One of **Magic**'s strengths is that it's many things to many people. Mechanically, R&D solves this problem by creating different styles of cards for different



Silly flavor text polarizes the community. It's a thin line

styles of players. The result of this philosophy is that we create cards that are beloved by some and bemoaned by others. A good example of this is the card **Battle of Wits**. Players either love or hate the card. R&D believes a card like **Battle of Wits** enriches the game more for the players that love it more than it detracts from the game for people that hate it.

The same approach **Magic** has been taken with flavor text. We use many different styles of flavor text for the many different tastes of players. There are lyrical pieces, descriptive pieces, insightful pieces, and yes, humorous pieces. I believe my article falsely implied that we value humor over these other styles. I am but a single writer (and I don't even do all that much flavor text these days) with a background in comedy writing. The article talked about the pieces that I created. So, of course, they were mostly humorous in style. Humor is just one of the **Magic** team's options for tone. For every humor writer like myself is another writer than specializes in a different style of writing.

The Rub

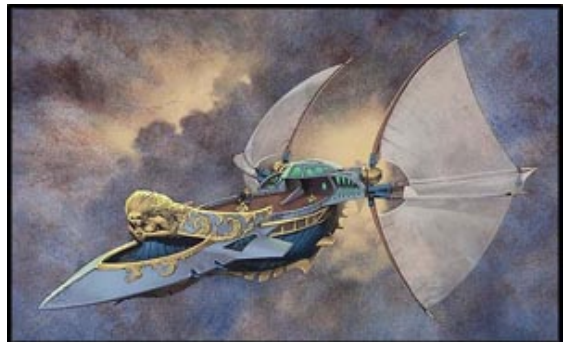
Unfortunately, diversity, which works so well in mechanics and art, is not a perfect fit for flavor text. The reason is that flavor text not only addresses different sensibilities, it actually serves a different function for different players. Some players, like yourself, see flavor text as a way to set the tone of the world. Each piece combines with the others to create a larger mosaic. A single misplaced text shatters this work of art.

Others see flavor text as a way to enhance the "fun" of the game. These are the players that like to recite the flavor text as they play the card. Disconnected one-shot jokes are attractive to these players because it enhances the aspect of the game they enjoy most. The flavor text designed for this second group disrupts the first group much more than text for the first group disrupts the second.

This puts the creative director between a rock and a hard place. Making one group happy upsets another. So what can he do? One of his current goals is to find a way to keep a more cohesive tone but still allow elements of lighter humor. Goblins are a good example of where the two groups merge. Goblins are by design humorous and thus are a more palatable way to introduce humor in a flavorful way into the game.

Here's a Story

Another aspect that you bring up is the background story. You claim that the focus on the story lessens the quality of the game. I think you'll be happy to hear that the creative director agrees with you. The *Weatherlight* Saga was an experiment to see if the game would be enhanced by a continuing story. The answer from the public was a resounding "no" (although the story did have its defenders).



The current philosophy is that **Magic's** strength is more in creating worlds, not stories. The creative director is asking writers and illustrators to move away from using individual cards to tell the story and instead is using them to illustrate the world the story takes place in. The way I like to think of it is that expansions will show all the pieces to the story (characters, creatures, items, locations, etc.), but the books will be the place that shows you how they interconnect. This means when you pick up a book, many elements should feel familiar but the actual story will be unknown.

Quoth the Raven

What about quotes from real-world literature? The compromise reached years ago is that the basic set will have literary quotes and the expert expansions will not. This is because we want **Magic** to have its own world and its own voice. Real-world literature takes players out of the world of dueling wizards and according to some, makes them feel like they're in school. We want **Magic** to be fun, not "edutainment."

To Sum Up

One of the reasons we chose to have Flavor Text Week was to get a response from all of you. The sentiment that you expressed was also expressed by other players in many different forums last

week. We hear you.

On the one hand, I can reassure you that the creative director is continually working to improve flavor text, and that several of your issues are already on the table. Others will be added after last week. On the other hand, no single person speaks for all the millions of **Magic** players. Some of their voices were also heard. Just as we are trying to address your issues, we will also address theirs. It's a delicate balance. But we do care and we really are working to make it better.

Next week, join me as I talk about "blowin' things up real good."

Until then, may you find the flavor text that is both pithy and humorous.

Mark Rosewater

Pun Intended

As a sidebar to this week's article, I want to get your opinion on a touchy topic here at Wizards. The topic is puns in flavor text, like "**The root of all greevils.**" Research shows that players dislike puns. But the pun defenders here at Wizards claim that people are trained to groan at puns. A good pun, they say, is supposed to be disliked. So what do you think? Should we continue to do an occasional "groaner" pun in **Magic**?

Should flavor text contain puns? 

Yes

No

Godbook Study Results

Best Flavor Text	Worst Flavor Text
Battle of Wits (ODY) – The wizard who reads a thousand books is powerful. The wizard who memorizes a thousand book is insane.	Gorilla Titan (ODY) – “I want a banana this big!”
Kamahl, Pit Fighter (ODY) – “I didn’t come to play. I came to win.”	Werebear (ODY) – He exercises his right to bear arms.
Squirrel Mob (ODY) – An army of squirrels is still an army.	Mind Burst (ODY) – As haunting as a zombie's curse.
Cursed Monstrosity (ODY) – “Run away! It's an...um...run away!” – Nomad sentry	Jilt (AP) - “You’re not my Hanna!” - Gerrard, to Yawgmoth
Gorilla Titan (ODY) – “I want a banana this big!”	Flowstone Charger (AP) - A mane of flowstone and a mien of fury.
Bloodfire Dwarf (AP) - For them, the only honorable death is one that leaves a crater.	Dwarven Patrol (AP) - Dwarves never worry about who watches their backs.
Kavu Mauler (AP) - To the kavu, all Phyrexians are merely crunchy snacks.	Tundra Kavu (AP) - A cross between a jaguar and an armadillo.
Martyr’s Tomb (AP) - Honor the brave who fought, Honor the dead who fell, Honor the world they saved. - Memorial inscription	Martyr’s Tomb (AP) - Honor the brave who fought, Honor the dead who fell, Honor the world they saved. - Memorial Inscription
Dragon Arch (AP) - In their hunger for the arch’s power, mages often forget that it only makes dragons easier to summon. It doesn’t make them easier to control.	Shield of Duty and Reason (AP) - The duty: to defend. The reason: to survive.
Mystic Snake (AP) - Its fangs are in your flesh before its hiss leaves your ears.	Shimmering Mirage (AP) - “Oh is that all you need? Why didn’t you just say so?” - Reef shaman
Penumbra Kavu (AP) - “These kavu are so stubborn they even refuse to die.” - Tahngarth	Flying Carpet (7th) - “Wheeeeeeeeeeee!”
Pernicious Deed (AP) - “Yawgmoth”, Freyalise whispered as she set the bomb, “now you will pay for your treachery.”	Fear (7th) - “Booga booga booga!”

Death Grasp (AP) - Yawgmoth's greatest joy came from watching one hero defeat another.	Air Elemental (7th) - Where psycho meets cyclone.
Shivan Dragon (7th) - The undisputed master of the mountains of Shiv.	Granite Grip (7th) - "Let me introduce you to Rocky."
Persecute (7th) - "I want every last one of these tree-hugging, earth-loving, pointy-eared weaklings out of here. Now!"	Unholy Strength (7th) - "I don't feel any different."
Lava Axe (7th) - "Catch!"	Feroz's Ban (7th) - Feroz is gone, but what remains is his final gift to his people: the right to be left alone.
Lightning Blast (7th) - "I'll climb down soon. Don't worry, it's just a thundersto--" -Former elvish scout	Goblin Digging Team (7th) - "Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig. Die!" -Goblin chant
Soul Feast (7th) - You are what you eat..	Root Greevil (PS) - The root of all greevils
Spined Wurm (7th) - "I wouldn't stand in front of that wurm, son. 'Course, I wouldn't stand behind it neither. In fact, standing anywhere near that wurm's not much of a plan. Running, now that's a plan!" -Wandering mage	Mogg Jailer (PS) - Hey, wake up! -- Mogg secret password
Temporal Adept (7th) - "Of course, she's at the head of her class. All of her classmates have disappeared." -Tolarian renegade	Aurora Griffin (PS) - Though a fierce fighter, its true value is that it inspires beleaguered forces
Bedlam (7th) - The generals were dead. The battle plans were forgotten. It was everyone for themselves.	Multani's Harmony (PS) - "Welcome to paradise"
Trained Orgg (7th) - "That arm's for bashin'. That one's for smahin'. That one's for scratchin'. And that one..I don't know what that one's for." -Orgg trainer	Ancient Spider (PS) - It outlived both king and castle
Vizzerdrix (7th) - A bored wizard once created a vizzerdrix out of a bunny and a piranha. He never made that mistake again.	Warped Devotion (PS) - "Before the glory of Yawgmoth, yes, even this makes sense" --Urza, to Gerrard
Might of Oaks (7th) - "Guess where I'm gonna plant this!"	Endbringer's Revel (PR) - First death. Then Shauku.
Ertai, the Corrupted (PS) - Alerted by Phyrexian science, corrupted by black mana, and twisted by rage, Ertai still looked in the mirror and saw only glory.	Lesser Gargadon (PR) - Trod on by a gargadon --Kipamu expression meaning "wiped out"
Ertai's Trickery (PS) - "Don't worry, Gerrard," said Ertai. "I'm sure the crew will come to your rescue as quickly as they came to mine."	Silt Crawler (PR) - f they could replenish the land instead of draining it, Jamuraa would be teeming with them.
Lord of the Undead (PS) - "I confer with Death itself. What could you possibly do to injure me?" --Lord Dralnu	Inflame (PR) - Wound, maim, kill: it's all the same to a Keldon.
Flametongue Kavu (PS) - "For dim-witted, thick-skulled genetic mutants, they have pretty good aim." -- Sisay	Reveille Squad (PR) - "To arms! To arms! The Lion roars!"
Mirrorwood Treefolk (PS) - It doesn't need a bite. The bark works just fine.	Spur Grappler (PR) - Grapplers hunt in packs, driving their victims over steep mountain cliffs.
Hull Breach (PS) - "Crovax knows we're coming now," said a grinning Sisay. "I just sent the Predator crashing into his stronghold."	Silkenfist Order (NE) - Hands weave life and death; Intertwining spirits knit; Tapestries and shrouds.
Phyrexian Tyranny (PS) - "He is Yawgmoth's reward to me. I shall kill him a hundred times a day." --Crovax, to Ertai	Skyshroud Poacher (NE) - "It's OK. They're just elves."
Implode (PS) - To serve Dominaria, nine planeswalkers sought the annihilation of Phyrexia itself.	Air Bladder (NE) - Random mutations among Rootwater merfolk were common - and disturbing.
Deadapult (PS) - "Nothing ruins your day like a blazing zombie."	Spineless Thug (NE) - These troops are only as strong as evincar's control.

Gainsay (PS) - "I'd be happy to stop contradicting you, Urza, just as soon as you start being right." -- Bo Levar, planeswalker	Stampede Driver (NE) - "The thunder of hooves is music to my ears."
Dark Suspicions (PS) - "After four thousand years, you learn to plan for betrayal." -- Urza	Wild Mammoth (NE) - "Sit. Heel! Down! HELP!"
Goblin Spy (IN) - "Isn't he on our side?" "Yep." "Why's he spyin' on us?" "Don't ask."	Laccolith Whelp (NE) - They don't feed; they stoke.
Tsabo Tavoc (IN) - "I might almost pity my enemies--if it wasn't so amusing to watch them die."	Seahunter (NE) - "They can't feel pain. They just wiggle 'cause they're scared."
Armadillo Cloak (IN) - "Don't laugh. It works." -- Yavimaya ranger	Deepwood Drummer (MM) - "His drums echo Deepwood's heartbeat."
Shackles (IN) - "It could be worse," said Gerrard, looking around. "Well, maybe not."	Balloon Peddler (MM) - "The market festival turned out to be the high point of Jaffy's visit."
Undermine (IN) - "Which would you like first, the insult or the injury?"	Alabaster Wall (MM) - "Its mortar is mixed with waters straight from the Fountain of Cho."
Voracious Cobra (IN) - There's no known antidote for the cobra's venom . . . or its appetite.	Disenchant (MM) - "The scepter of power is fragile in a calloused hand."
Squirrel Wrangler (PR) - "Gnawed to death. Bad way to go."	Gush (MM) - "Don't trust your secrets to the sea."
Keldon Arsonist (PR) - "Fields can be replanted. Settlements can be rebuilt. Burn it all." --Latulla, Keldon overseer	Blaster Mage (MM) - "Don't get up. I'll show myself out."
Mine Bearer (PR) - "The Keldons may have explosive tempers, but I have explosives."	Henge of Ramos (MM) - "It is the hub. We are the wheel. - Dryad saying."
Greel, Mindraker (PR) - "You're Latulla's gift to me, and I always play with my presents."	Carnival of Souls (UD) - "'Davvol, blast those elves.' 'Davvol, transport those troops.' No one cares that today is my birthday."
Shrouded Serpent (PR) - Many travelers have wandered into a fog only to find that it had teeth, claws, and an appetite.	Wild Colos (UD) - "You'll never get a Keldon's goat."
Withdraw (PR) - We outnumber them! Charge! Charge! Hey, where'd you guys go? Retreat! Retreat!"	Plague Dogs (UD) - "They're not just retrievers, they're carriers."
Well of Discovery (PR) - When you have given everything, then you are capable of anything. -- Well inscription	Junk Diver (UD) - "Garbage in, treasure out."
Excise (PR) - "Creation is no great feat. Anything you make, I can unmake in a heartbeat." --Alexi, zephyr mage	Capashen Standard (UD) - "Benalia has no need for peacocks to serve as symbols of vanity. The Capashens strut more proudly than any bird."
Latulla, Keldon Overseer (PR) - "Everything around her suffers." --Haddad, Kipamu soldier	Colos Yearling (UD) - "A steed grows with its rider."
Jolrael, Empress of Beasts (PR) - "I need no army. I have Jamuraa."	Yawgmoth's Bargain (UD) - "He craves only one commodity."
Death Pit Offering (NE) - "Kill them all and feed them to the new recruits." - Crovax	
Dominate (NE) - "I've got to reclaim what is mine. And you, Greven, are mine." - Volrath	
Flowstone Crusher (NE) - "Someone must have done something very bad to make a rock that angry." - Rebel Scout	
Animate Land (NE) - Irony is getting walked on by the earth instead of the other way around.	
Volrath the Fallen (NE) - I stepped out. I did not step down.	
Viseling (NE) - This may hurt a lot.	
Rackling (NE) - This may hurt a little.	

Laccolith Titan (NE) - Proximity guarantees injury or death.

Shock Troops (MM) - "When goblins blow themselves up, it's called stupidity. When humans do it, it's called heroism."

Ceremonial Guard (MM) - "These guards are the most disciplined military unit in the city. They couldn't fight their way out of a broom closet, but they've got discipline."

Tidal Kraken (MM) - "To merfolk, pirates are a nuisance. To pirates, merfolk are a threat. To the kraken, they're both appetizers."

Righteous Indignation (MM) - "You are the disease that plagues Mercadia. I am the healer's knife that will cut you out."

Intimidation (MM) - "If they move, kill them. In fact, kill one now to make sure the other understands."

Brawl (MM) - "Anything can happen when patience is scarce and wine is abundant."

Counterspell (MM) - "Your attack has been rendered harmless. It is, however, quite pretty."

Fodder Cannon (UD) - "Step 1: Find your cousin. Step 2: Get your cousin in the cannon. Step 3: Find another cousin."

Wake of Destruction (UD) - "Land charred black, rivers boiled, Crops and wells alike despoiled, Mountains leveled, forests felled - Footprints of the beasts of Keld."

Thorn Elemental (UD) - "Rain from this storm leaves you pinned to the ground like an insect."

Marker Beetles (UD) - "In case of emergency, crush bug."

Ancient Silverback (UD) - "The Phyrexian killing machines couldn't have known the seriousness of their mistake in wounding the ape - they'd never seen it angry."

Impatience (UD) - "Ask a Kledon to hold his temper and you'll be left holding your guts."

Phyrexian Negator (UD) - "They exist to cease."


Bloodshot Cyclops (UD) - "After their first encounter, the goblins named him Chuck."

Temporal Adept (UD) - "Of course she's at the head of her class - All her classmates have disappeared."

Disappear (UD) - "If at first you don't succeed, run away and hide."

Soul Feast (UD) - "As no one has ever accepted a second invitation to Davvol's table, the evincar often dines alone."

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