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**A**s I crept down the alleyway like a cat on muscle relaxants, I tried to clear the haze from my eyes. Was my vision blurry due to the inevitable fog rolling in from the bay or the three-day bender I'd been on since my wife left me, my partner got shot, and I lost my hat? Just when I realized it was neither—the haze was pure, thick *danger*—the shadow I had been tailing moved again. It had been dancing down brick walls for half an hour, and now here, in the seediest part of the crummiest neighborhood in Beverly Hills, it coalesced into a shape. A curvy shape. A woman-shaped shape. Oh, but this was no woman-shaped shape—it was a woman. Her raven tresses shone in the moonlight and her long legs reached all the way to the sidewalk—just the way I like them. It was Belinda Snorkleplax, heiress to the rotary phone empire. I stepped out of the shadows and tried to tip my hat to her—damn! I really miss that hat.

"Belinda," I growled steelily. "What's a girl like you doing in a piece of genre fiction like this?"

"Oh, Slade," she sighed steelily. "I needed to see you. I think my life is in danger!"

"That's ridiculous," I laughed steelily. "Who would want to hurt you?"

Just then, as always, a shot rang out. The bullet parted my hair, which is something I prefer to have my barber do. Thank god my hat wasn't here or there'd have been felt and brim everywhere. When I got my hair back the way I liked it, I looked over at Belinda, but she was much more horizontal than she was a few seconds ago. I rushed over to her and knelt to the ground.

"What happened, dollface? Were you shot?"


She didn't answer, which I considered very rude until I realized she was dead. No blood. No bullet holes. But her hands were cupped in front of her and singed black. Clearly someone had tossed her a Nefarious Lich and then yanked it away. Instant, sudden, instant death. There was nothing left for me to do but add Belinda to my "People to Avenge" list. As I walked away back into the fog, I tried to jauntily tip my hat over my eyes—dammit!

## Life's a Lich and then You Die

This deck was sent in by Robby Bullis, who goes by Redland Jack online. (He's been featured in this column once before, and that time his deck was also blue-black with Wizards. Hmm....) I've used Phage as an instant-win mechanism numerous times, but I've never used Nefarious Lich that way. It's even more dangerous to your health than Phage (Naturalize, Disenchant, and Boomerang are just some of the many, many spells that will, erm, spell your doom), but once you've voluntarily decided to juggle vials of acid, determining the relative face-eating causticity of the contents of a broken vial seems pretty pointless. Robby's plan is simple: Play Nefarious Lich, give it to your opponent, and bounce it off the table. Game over.

Oh, but Robby's plan isn't actually all that simple after all. His deck is wearing a disguise. Yes, the deck he sent to me is a Wizard deck for the Tribal Wars format on *Magic Online*! It looks like a Wizard deck, it acts like a Wizard deck, but surprise—it's a combo deck. The deck stalls. It hems and haws. It bounces pesky permanents, trades off its small creatures in combat, and nullifies anything too annoying on the other side of the table. Meanwhile, it's frantically yet stealthily drawing and filtering

cards looking for the combo. There's only one Lich. There's only one Avarice Totem. But there are tons of Tutors, Trinket Mages, and Thought Couriers.

While you're finding your puzzle pieces, you can take advantage of your Vedalken Masterminds. Bounce your blockers after combat damage. Bounce your Stupefying Touches and you've got : Draw a card. Bounce your Aphetto Exterminators or Urborg Emissaries for even more board control. Bounce your Trinket Mages to siphon the artifact lands out of the deck. If the deck can seize an advantage and get some hits in, great. But it's just as happy keeping the status quo. This is not a beatdown deck. It doesn't intend to win with its creatures, even though it's specifically built for Tribal Wars. And that should confound your opponent. Remember when Data thwarted that alien dude who was really good at that game by playing for the tie instead of playing for the win? You don't? What kind of nerd are you?

When it's time to win, you need three things: Nefarious Lich (or Delusions of Mediocrity if you've gotten in so many Wizard slaps your opponent has 10 or less life), Avarice Totem, and some method of bouncing a permanent (Chain of Vapor, Echoing Truth, or even Urborg Emissary). You also need 10 mana to make the trade (that's what the *Invasion* sac lands are for—once you start going down this path, you better be committed to it), and you need your opponent to have less than five mana available. Activate the Totem targeting your Lich *while holding the CTRL key*. Then, while that's on the stack, respond to it by activating the Totem targeting one of your opponent's permanents. The Totem will swap itself for that thing, then it will swap itself for your Lich. (You have to be sure your opponent can't activate the Totem himself in the brief window he has it or the Lich swap will never happen.) Then bounce that Lich. This is especially good if your opponent has just gained a million life with that Cleric combo. Life totals? Who cares about life totals?

### Curse of the Nefarious Lich

Tribal Wars Wizard combo deck

60 cards

4 Swamp	2 Aphetto Exterminator	1 Avarice Totem
4 Ancient Spring	1 Archivist	2 Chain of Vapor
1 Darkwater Catacombs	1 Cabal Patriarch	1 Counterspell
4 Salt Marsh	1 Puppeteer	1 Delusions of Mediocrity
2 Seat of the Synod	1 Riptide Director	4 Diabolic Tutor
4 Sulfur Vent	4 Thought Courier	2 Echoing Truth
3 Underground River	4 Trinket Mage	1 Nefarious Lich
2 Vault of Whispers	3 Urborg Emissary	4 Stupefying Touch
_____	3 Vedalken Mastermind	_____
24 land	_____	16 other spells
	20 creatures	

Interestingly, both of your victory conditions (the Lich and the Delusions) will help you stall the game until you can make the trade by giving you extra "life." You get 10 more with Delusions, and you get the equivalent of the number of cards in your graveyard with the Lich.

## The Art of Noir

I was sitting alone in my office drowning my sorrows. Rain streaked the grime-streaked windows. Thunder rumbled off in the distance, then came a little closer.. a little closer.. a little closer.. then scampered off into the distance again. What a tease. I was out of scotch, so I had to make do with scotch tape. I had been on an 8-day bender since my secretary left me, my new partner got shot, and I lost my favorite hat rack. I was glad it was gone. Its empty hooks just reminded me that my hat wasn't coming back.

A shadow crossed the frosted glass of my office door. I reached for my gun but failed because it was already in my other hand. I reached for my bullets but failed because I had absentmindedly scotch-

taped them together. I'd have to get out of this one on my wits alone.

The door opened a crack, and in snuck a leg. A very pleasantly shaped leg. Even better, that leg was attached to a pleasantly shaped torso. And that torso had all the right connections: arms, head, everything. I nodded courteously to the torso, then raised my eyes to the head, which was clearly in charge of the operation. It was Penny Snorkleplax, Belinda's younger sister.

"What're you doing here, Penny?" I said dramatically. "I couldn't protect your sister and I can't protect you."

"Oh, Slade," she overacted, "you're the only one who can protect me."

Proving once again that I'm always right, a tremendous—yet Erratic—Explosion chose that moment to rip through the building. Suddenly that torso wasn't as well-connected as it had recently been.

## Whereupon Our Humble Author Expounds on How Great He Is

A few years ago, a brilliant young **Magic** editor designed one random card that managed to sneak its way into *Onslaught*. That editor was me. That card was Erratic Explosion. My intent from the beginning was that it would be a multi-layered burn spell. Its effect is chaotic and random... but in a way you can control because you build your own deck. I figured it would be a Limited staple because it was common removal. You could predict how much damage it would probably do... but there'd be some gambling involved, and I liked that. The number of games won by a last-minute desperate Erratic Explosion to the head for—whew!—7 was outweighed by the millions of times the card was cursed because it targeted a face-down creature and flipped over a Goblin Sledder. I loved the curses, and the card outperformed my expectations. I also figured it would be part of a Constructed combo deck—Draco is never far from my mind—but I was shocked beyond belief when it turned out to be part of a *good* Constructed combo deck. One that won tournaments. Explosion + Draco + Brainstorm = 16 damage, and painlands were so prevalent at the time (the deck first got attention at Pro Tour Houston '02] that 16 damage was usually enough. That little card is one of my proudest **Magic** achievements, so I'm always tickled when someone makes a new deck around it.

Aston Ramsden decided that the introduction of scry meant it was time to start exploding things erratically again. Well, just one thing, really: your opponent's head. Scry lets you futz around with the top of your library, which is great for both finding combo pieces and setting up (and setting off) an Erratic Explosion. Aston's combo, which sticks to the Standard card pool, is Erratic Explosion + Furnace of Rath + Dragon Tyrant on top of your deck. That's a smooth 20, and (unless you've tipped your hand by pitching a useless Dragon to Thirst for Knowledge) it's a complete surprise.

Oddly enough, scry doesn't help in this deck as much as I expected it to. It's great when you're looking for the Furnace, Explosion, or Seething Song, but you *don't* want to find a Dragon while you're scrying unless the rest of your combo is already in hand. You can't keep that Dragon dancing on top of your library for very long, and the worst thing this deck can do is draw it. A Dragon in your hand might as well be a blank card; you have no way to put it back on top of your library. Therefore, the real combo is actually Explosion + Rath + Long-Term Plans. That'll set you up perfectly and give you a nice ticking countdown timer feeling as you peel the extra two cards off the top of your deck.

### Scry Your Eyes Out

Standard Erratic Explosion deck

60 cards

7 Island

7 Mountain

3 City of Brass

3 Dragon Tyrant

4 Sage Owl

7 creatures

4 Condescend

4 Erratic Explosion

4 Furnace of Rath

4 Long-Term Plans

3 Great Furnace  
3 Seat of the Synod  


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23 land

4 Magma Jet  
4 Seething Song  
4 Serum Visions  
2 Thirst for Knowledge  

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30 other spells

This deck is almost identical to Aston's build. I modified the mana base by adding Cities of Brass as well as artifact lands to help out the Thirsts. I added Sage Owls for extra decktop manipulation and chump-blocking. I reluctantly removed Aston's two Eyes of the Watcher—adding scry to a scry spell is redundantly redundant (though it helps you blitz through your deck looking for combo pieces), scry on Long-Term Plans is a bad idea (the scry resolves immediately before you shuffle your deck), and there aren't that many other spells in the deck. My decision might easily be wrong. On the other hand, I reluctantly kept the Dragon. It can be replaced by anything that costs as much, like the  Blinkmoth Infusion. The Infusion is better if your opponent gains life or you never find a Furnace. I ultimately left the Dragon in there because you can theoretically play it with the help of Seething Songs and attack (whereas the Infusion can't possibly help you as a spell), but in all the games I played, getting the Dragon on the table wasn't a realistic possibility. Once I got to three lands and a Seething Song, I would always scry away lands in favor of card drawing spells or combo pieces. But these are minor tweaks. The core of the deck remains a very satisfying scry, scry, scry, 20 to the head.

## Black and White and Dead all Over

The sun was setting in the distance. I gazed into the brilliant panorama of colors—gray, lighter gray, darker gray, and black. Stunning. My beating heart was a... um... heart... beating... in my chest. I was running out of metaphors as fast as I was running out of Snorkleplax sisters, and the responsibility for their deaths rested squarely on my head in exactly the manner that my hat did not.

"Lose something, Slade?"

I slowly turned toward the direction of that honey-dripped voice. There she was, right next to the beehive. Myrna Snorkleplax had the face of a goddess and the body of a really hot goddess. Resting rakishly on her golden curls was my hat, and I'd never seen it look so happy.

My eyes narrowed but my mouth widened to let out the air that my vocal cords had formed into the words, "Myrna, I'm sorry about your sisters."

"I'm not, honey," Myrna said, blissfully unaware that the recent use of "honey" in my internal narrative had rendered her comment stiltedly redundant. "I killed them."

Of course. There could be only one #1 in the rotary phone empire. "I see. But how did you get my hat?"

"While I was running errands—you know, kidnapping your wife and secretary, shooting your three partners—I picked it up."

"Three partners?"

"Yeah, honey. Sorry about the new guy. But no one's gonna get close to you except me."

As I looked into her deep, sky-gray, evil eyes, a feeling of intense love—or perhaps poison—washed over me. Myrna, my hat, and I strolled off into the vivid grayscale spectrum of the sunset. But if she thought this was a happy ending, she was in for a Rude Awakening.

## Plenty o' Land

For months now, I've been sitting on one of the best little combos I've ever seen. It's not a game-winning combo; it's just a cute interaction... but I've never found anyplace good to put it. That combo is Living Terrain + Darksteel Citadel, and it warps the game in subtly weird ways. For 3GG, you get an indestructible 5/6 green creature with haste. (I'm assuming you enchant an untapped Citadel you already had out, and you swing in with it immediately.) But while this creature is immune to Blaze and Terror, as well as Stone Rain and Shatter, normal non-creature-killing spells such as Demystify (on the Living Terrain) or Boomerang (on the Citadel) will wax it permanently. Indestructible 5/6 monsters are nothing to sneeze at though (unless you're allergic to them), and it's about time I put it to work.

The rest of this deck also focuses on lands. I love nonbasic land decks, and this one is delightfully subversive. The creatures are really lands! (Thanks, Elvish Aberration, Krosan Tusker, and Solemn Simulacrum.) The lands are really creatures! (Thanks, Blinkmoth Nexus, Nantuko Monastery, Wand of the Elements, Living Terrain, and Rude Awakening.) The lands are also damage: Keldon Necropolis can sac an animated Blinkmoth Nexus to deal 2 damage, and Crucible of Worlds—what? I didn't mention that's in here?—lets you do that every turn. That's a pretty expensive damage source, though; Barbarian Ring is much more cost-efficient to recycle.

The roots of stronger decks are in here. Mana acceleration via Sylvan Scrying and Reap and Sow is put to better use in a Tooth and Nail deck. And there are much better, more dedicated Rude Awakening decks floating around. So what? This deck is fun. Fu-u-u-u-un. It slurps so much mana out of the deck that you're going to draw good stuff, and the good stuff is different every time. Sometimes it goes beatdown with indestructible Terrains. Sometimes it gets out a giant Molimo. It's a showcase for the Crucible, as I've done the recursive Element-making plan, the recursive life-gain plan, and the recover-quickly-after-Obliterate plan. You determine the course the deck takes by deciding what to fetch with the land searchers, but then the deck surprises you with weird little gifts.

### Huge Tracts of Land

Extended land deck

60 cards

1 Plains	4 Elvish Aberration	4 Crucible of Worlds
1 Island	2 Krosan Tusker	4 Living Terrain
1 Swamp	2 Molimo, Maro-Sorcerer	1 Obliterate
1 Mountain	4 Solemn Simulacrum	1 Overgrown Estate
6 Forest	_____	3 Reap and Sow
1 Barbarian Ring	12 creatures	2 Rude Awakening
4 Blinkmoth Nexus		4 Sylvan Scrying
1 Cabal Pit		1 Trade Routes
4 Darksteel Citadel		1 Wand of the Elements
1 Grand Coliseum		4 Wayfarer's Bauble
1 Keldon Necropolis		_____
1 Nantuko Monastery		25 other spells

23 land

Of special note: Obliterate destroys neither enchantments nor indestructible lands, so you can sweep the board clean... except for your 5/6 Citadel.

Slade turned an eye to the camera as Myrna sauntered off toward the horizon. "This isn't the end, kid. It's just the beginning of the middle of about three-quarters of the way to the end. And it's a jarring perspective shift to third person. But it's not the end. Until next time, have fun... with danger."

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