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Precious Gold

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Taste the Magic
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I remember being proud of myself for not screaming or thrashing like an animal when the Rakdos lowlives grabbed me and put the rope around my neck. There, at the end of the noose, my life would take a turn.

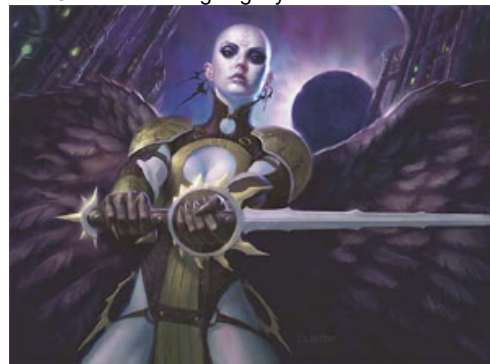
Of course it would, I was going to die. But I remembered my Orzhov and I knew that it was only my body that would die. My life took a turn, though it was not the one I had expected.

It may seem like a tired old thought - that one's life could pass before her eyes. It may, but it is what happened to me as the demon followers tied me up. It may also seem odd to you that a 14 year-old girl could be so lucid, so thoughtful in such a traumatic time. I was 14 years old, but I have been pondering that moment for the last 126 years.



The End

I remember first thinking about the importance of allegiance. I was Orzhov, and I would not act like a weeping Conclaver at my moment of change. I would not let the sloppy Rakdos with their hideous laughter and manic singing shake me as I entered the world of Ghosts. I was too good for that. An Orzhov is too good for that. "You cannot fight them, Emilyya," I thought to myself. "So instead you must show them the nobility of a superior guild." Secretly though, in the back of my mind, I knew that there would be retribution. I was comforted by this thought. The Orzhov did not go lightly on those who break contracts, defile guild territory, or injure important



guildmembers. Of course, I was just one of the Orzhov masses, but they would surely avenge the death of an innocent little girl at the hands of the Demon guild. At the basilicas, the Pontiffs would rage, as they always do, and the ostiaries would shuffle about the congregation collecting funds for the vengeance campaign. Would it be the guildmages who put the Rakdos in their place? I knew it was just a dream to dream, but would the angels swoop in, stonefaced and glassy-eyed? I always loved to see them standing guard at the high ceremonies - dark and distant, as if they were too terrible and too beautiful to even be there. *That* is how I wanted to be. And so I would be, there in the hands of the Rakdos. I was comforted also by the image of our Signet in my mind. I focused on it when the laughter and the pain began to break my stoicism. It was perfect, like the guild itself

- dark and powerful, yet blinding like the sun. The symbol was inspired by the legendary Culling Sun, a force beautiful and terrible, like the angels, that in dire times comes to cleanse the world of the unworthy. Would this be the wrath brought against the Rakdos? Was I worthy of such great holy retribution? I recalled my favorite tithing mantra - the little prayer we spoke as we placed coins in the Ostiary's plate:

"We are the precious gold. With us Orzhova was gilt. With us it gleams most bright."

I was worthy of the Patriarch's grace. I think they would do this for me, as the sermons say they would. I was "precious gold."

This is what I thought as life fell to the earth beneath my dangling feet. I was strong. The Patriarchs would be proud to welcome another Daughter of Orzhova, one who did not buckle under the threats of a lesser guild. Though I was sure my body was suffering, my pride was swelling and my disdain for the Rakdos blooming as I watched them do what other foul guilds do to the innocent.

I was at the end of a noose, and my life would take an unexpected turn. My family and I were devout to the Church. We paid our tithes, went to the Basilica for Tax-Mass and for prayer, and contributed regularly to the Protector's Fund. We comported ourselves like true "precious gold." Orzhova gleamed because of our devotion. The gargoyles watched over it because we contributed. The Demon was kept underground because the Pontiffs performed the Suppression Rituals. Why should I have feared - there at the end of the rope and my corporeal life?

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RULES

I will tell you why.

Dying was an experience very different than I had expected. It was without sensation or ceremony or fanfare of any kind. It was like walking from the parlor to the kitchen - nothing much to speak of. I do remember, before the change, seeing myself from above. I could hear nothing but a steady wind, but my eyes took note of the Rakdos, parading around in their tasteless, shabby hats, paying little attention to me. Then, just before I left that world, I saw what I thought were thrulls. From above I could see them. Waiting? Hiding?

I paid little mind to the sight of the thrulls in my early afterlife. I was still too blinded by pride to bother with it. But a seed was planted. A little seed that would grow in my spirit and shape my afterlife.



The Change

The change was also not what I had expected. I was not in a rich and wonderful ghost palace, and there were no Orzhov spirits there to show me the way to my great-great grandparents. The world was a foggy, shifting vision of a city much like Ravnica. I remembered hearing street kids make jokes and threats about a place called Agyrem. A ghost city. It sounded too mundane to be true - and they never mentioned it at mass or at the trade conventions. My mind swirled and wrapped around itself. Was this Agyrem? If it was, why did the Orzhov not speak of it? Was I unworthy of the ghost palace of the Patriarchs? Did I not conduct myself well enough in life or in death? My world was upside down.



On the other hand, the afterlife *felt* surprisingly similar to regular life. I could feel emotion and sensation. After so much time had passed with no reunions with passed grandparents or meetings with the Patriarchs, my emotions were mostly pain and loss and loneliness. I was again just a 14 year-old girl, missing my mum and papa, scared of being alone. My armor of pride and zeal wore off. Why were things not as the Pontiffs had said? What was I supposed to do? Mostly I just cried. Occasionally I would encounter another spirit and I would ask questions. But not all spirits are Orzhov, and each one has its own sadness to attend to.

I was confused. I was lost. But I was not yet ready to open up and allow the seed in my soul to grow. There was still too much built up. Fourteen years of the words and weight of Orzhova still held fast, but the grip was loosening.

As time passed - can't be specific about days and years as they have no meaning in my new world... As it passed, I did manage to muster the courage to explore this new Ghost City. I found myself compelled to seek out information regarding those I knew in life and, more importantly, the circumstances of my death. I was very surprised to find out how willing the dead are to speak of their lives, and of who they knew. It was a way, I guessed, to hold on to the past. I was also surprised to find out that some of the spirits of the Ghost City could move between the world of the living and the world of ghosts. These spirits were not as eager to talk, though they bore the most relevant news. It was one of these spirits that told me a little tale that seemed unimportant to him, but weighed heavily on me.

He was a stonemason who died when a **giant** toppled a building he was working near. He was under Orzhov contract to re-pave the plaza surrounding "the crying tree." "It was to be a very big deal," he told me. Something about this piqued my interest, so I asked about it often. I found out quite a bit more from a young Orzhov man. He was a ragged, worn out soul. He must have been in the ghost world for a long, long time. He told me that, after



the killing (mine, I was beginning to believe), a great uproar was stirred in the basilicas. He was not there, but some of the souls he served with were. He and some like him were gathered from the ghost world by the agents of the Council and formed into a **defensive unit**. They were to guard the little plaza surrounding the tree where the Rakdos had killed the girl. Anti-Rakdos sentiment was rampant. People were asked to make donations to the Vengeance Campaign at the "**Tree of Weeping**." Soon it was surrounded in gold, and the ragged boy had to hold back thieves and greedy thugs for weeks. He did not see anything else. He was crushed by a rampaging Gruul "**scab**" who broke their line to get to the tree. He said that his readiness was replaced with pity, and in that moment he was crushed. I felt badly for the boy. I would see him often

lingering near what could best be described as a fountain. It was not water that it spouted, but nothingness. Many gathered there to gaze in and forget. I would go there to find people, to seek knowledge. I did not look to forget.

Perhaps I should have. The vision of **thrulls** lurking near my dying form began to creep back to my mind. I was just starting to feel the pride of the black sun once again when the visions started feeding the seed in my soul. A Vengeance Campaign was created for me. A plaza built. The site of my death named and made a monument. But the seed grew and so did the compulsion to know more. I did not question this compulsion... it felt so natural. I

was sure that it had something to do with my future. Perhaps this was the test that I must pass to gain entrance to the palace of the Patriarchs.

But what I found as I kept searching, over a period of 125 years, was not the key to the Ghost Palace. It was proof of a life deceived.

The Truth

Eventually, I would meet my father again. Neither of us would ever find mum. Papa had much to say in between the rings of the **Debtor's bell**. It might have been years between our meetings, but we did manage to piece together a story that was hard for either of us to accept.

The plaza surrounding the Tree of Weeping was never completed. The buildings nearby were destroyed and rebuilt as shop fronts and high priced plaza-view dwellings. Once the shops and dwellings were sold, the masonry work on the plaza was stopped. The gold that had been gathered during that whole time funded a Vengeance Campaign that was supposed to "ruin the Rakdos forever," but produced only one trial of a couple of street urchins who many believe were not even there. After a while, the locals forgot the tree was the site of a great wrongdoing. Some continued to toss coins at its base like children at wishing wells. Once life returned to normal, the Vengeance Campaign was allowed to slip from Orzhov minds. The pontiffs did not rage about the Rakdos – they began a crusade against the "Unholy Golgari – death farmers, depriving souls of the wonders of the Ghost Palace." Meanwhile, somewhere, some Orzhov functionary tried to count the masses of coins piled in a secret chamber.



Masses of coins. "We are the precious gold. With us Orzhova was gilt. With us it gleams most bright." It never occurred to us that this was not meant to be symbolic. We *are* the precious gold, or at least the source of it! How brazen they are, how deceitful. Shame on us for believing in them. Shame on us for thinking that all that power, all that wealth, was used only for us, and not against us. Were we too blinded by routine to notice that just a few **families** had coffers that were spilling over, while all of ours were emptying out? Were we too blinded by pride to think that the creators of the contracts that bound so many Ravnicans to Orzhov service might have done the same to us? Unfortunately, one must die to find this out. By then, that soul is old news - like the Tree of Weeping. That soul can no longer place coins in the ostiary's plate. That soul is forgotten.

The Twist

But fate has a sense of irony. When the manipulative minds put together the plan to raise some "martyr funds," they made sure their contracts were all in order. The correct families would receive the correct amounts of the take. The proper businesses would be involved in demolitions, construction, and advertisement. Secretive channels would be used to deal with the Rakdos, and funds due would move through those same channels (which turned out to be "secret" enough to disappear after the attack). All possible contingencies were accounted for in mage-documents prepared by the officers of the ruling families - all possible contingencies but one.

The part of the contract that dealt with my soul was nullified at the moment when I saw the thrulls. The law-mage's own pride did not allow her to see beyond my complete devotion to the Orzhov guild. The contract called for a devout female follower between the ages of 12 and 15. It detailed which family's spirit kin would control my soul in the afterlife, and what the term of my service would be. But the contract on my afterlife was broken before it even started.

When I saw the thrulls waiting there, watching me die, something deep within me knew this was not right. Orzhov thrulls do not think – they follow orders. My subconscious knew that they were part of the plan, but my pride kept me from recognizing it. At that moment, I was no longer Orzhov (by strict definition of the contract for my soul). I had become something else entirely. A force more basic than the Guildpact settled in me. I was Rusalka – the spirit of a young innocent wrongly killed. It is the nature of a **Rusalka** to search for clues to the truth about her death. For me, this alone would have been irony enough, but fate is not so easily pleased.

The Beginning



There, at the end of a rope, my afterlife took a turn. After 125 years of existence in the shadow of lies, I finally had truth. And peace. But fate was not done smiling. Once again I was at the end of a rope, and things were about to change, but this time I kept my eyes open. I did not push away reality with dreams of angels and riches. What I saw was more strange than any dream. The sky was rippling above me. I heard screaming far below. My eyes followed the rope tied to my chest all the way up to its anchor point - a living mountain of rock. Above it hovered a great stone head. Eyeless. It was horrific, but I did not fear... I was already dead. Then I looked down and saw a sight that was even more strange than the great thing to which I was tied. Ravnica. The dead do not dream. They do not even sleep. How could this be?

It matters not.

The giant stone thing knelt. The rope broke free of it, and then of me. I was back home again. Alive.

Fate's dimple formed beside a wide grin. She knew that I would not fall back into the life I had before. She knew that I would come here to tell my tale, and to steal "precious gold" from the Church of Deals.



*Matt Cavotta has always been a fantasy goober. At various points in his gooberhood, he has used his nerdy knowledge to become a professional goober. He went from scribbling pictures of his own **D&D** characters to illustrating books and cards for his two favorite games; **D&D** and **Magic**. Then he channeled his inner 7th level Illusionist/3rd level Bard and landed himself a job at Wizards as a writer. He continues to cast his illusion spells each morning, lest they find out he's just another goober.*



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