

**MAGIC**  
The Gathering™

Ravnica Cycle • Book I



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## CHAPTER 1

*INCIDENT REPORT: 10/13MZ/430221*

*FILED: 17 Griev 9943 Z.C.*

*PRIMARY: Cons. Kos, Agrus*

*SECONDARY: Lt. Zurich, Myczil*

A falcon the color of rusty blood delivered the call just before the end of the day shift, and it was as much dumb luck as destiny that the bird alighted upon the shoulder of a wojek constable named Agrus Kos. Only Kos and his partner were in the squad room at the time, wrapping up the day's scrolls during the brief peace before the night shift had assembled, and after the day shift had for the most part left. By chance, Kos had been closest to the window. The avian messenger's choice of perch gave the lawman his first case as lead investigator after more than a few years spent keeping peace in the City of Ravnica.

If Kos and his partner had finished their duty logs on time and left the Leaguehall a few minutes earlier, the young lawman might have missed it. Had his partner, Lieutenant Myczil Zurich, refused the order by right of seniority and decided to call it a day, they might have ended that evening as they ended many long weeks, with a few rounds at the Backwater. They would have reviewed the day's altercations, violations, and leftover mysteries with a mug of hot bumbat and the freedom to speak their minds and blow off a little steam. More likely they would have gone their separate ways: the lieutenant to his wife and newborn child, the young constable to a small apartment, where he would have studied for a promotion exam. The next day, both of them would have been alive.

After the call, the surviving partner never blamed the bird for doing its job, but for the rest of his life he did remember the moment its talons dug into the shoulder of that young, overeager wojek. The blood-red raptor was the first image in his nightmares for many years to come. The rest were far worse.

A mounted wojek sky patrol over the abandoned Parha industrial quarter sent the original message. The Orzhov Syndicate had slated Parha for evacuation, demolition, and reclamation, and the entire zone was supposed to be empty. But over the last two weeks skyjek roc-riders had observed some rough-looking types, most likely a gang of Rakdos cultists, coming and going from one of the many large, empty structures in this run-down section of the Tenth. Today, for the first time, the skyjeks had seen the thrill-killers loading what looked like two or three zeppelids' worth of shipping containers from the backs of pack beasts and into the biggest remaining structure in the quarter, a huge shipping warehouse. Rakdos were not known for their interest in moving cargo. They consumed the flesh of their own kin as readily as a wojek ate roundcakes.

"If the Rakdos are moving crates," Zunich said, "Odds are they're not filled with toys for the orphanage." He didn't have to say what could be in those crates. The best-case scenario would be a weapons cache. The worst could be. . . . Actually, Kos wasn't sure he could imagine a "worst" as bad as whatever the Rakdos could conceive.

But membership in the Rakdos cult was not in and of itself a crime. This was still Ravnica. The Guildpact Statutes, City Ordinances, and other regulations existed to protect the guilds so they could protect the relatively peaceful development of an entire civilization. Over almost ten millennia, their prosperity had covered the entire surface of the plane in some form or another of urban development. The Rakdos were the prime source of heavy labor, and their mines stripped ore from the depths, where the remaining patches of exposed Ravnican stone offered precious metals, gems,

and minerals. They provided butchers for the Golgari killing floors. They were mercenaries, bodyguards, and slaves for anyone with the gold, regardless of guild. Nor did trespassing warrant the law's attention so long as the owner of the property, the Orzhov in this case, didn't report the violation. The Syndicate had yet to do so. However, a black-market operation run by death-worshipping homicidal maniacs was another matter entirely. It could even explain the Orzhov's reluctance to report the incident, since smuggling was but one of the many operations dominated by the Guild of Deals.

There remained, however, the matter of confirmation, and that's where Zurich and Kos came in. Without confirmation or evidence of a crime from 'jeks on the ground, the shift captain would not approve an assault squad. Before tying up an elite strajek unit, the lucky pair would investigate on foot and send the falcon for back up if warranted.

The wojeks took some time to scout the surrounding vicinity and confirm that the rest of Parha remained as abandoned as ever. The rain began shortly after they arrived, a slow, gentle drizzle that quickly became a downpour.

They took a few minutes to observe the alleged Raktos hideout from a concealed vantage point and checked for patrolling guards. There didn't appear to be any, but Kos briefly caught a glimpse of a face, possibly goblin, in one of the upper windows. It was gone a second later.

The warehouse was a simple, box-shaped building like so many in this run-down sector of Ravnica's Tenth District. The sagging assembly of wood and brick occupied most of the block that contained it, and over time its hard luck had seemingly seeped into every other building in the area. Boarded-up restaurants and storefronts huddled together around the warehouse as if for warmth. An abandoned construction pit to the east had flooded over time and probably concealed at least a few desperate aquatics in ramshackle huts, unable to survive the long journey to a larger body

of water. What had probably been a church to some forgotten god crumbled under millennia of creeping growth and rot due north of their target.

The upper tier of the warehouse's windows no longer held any glass—only shards. The walls around them bore large black scars from the raging fire that had rendered it worthless to the original owner decades ago. What remained of the large painted sign over the main doors read “Broz Shipping.” Eight windows and the visible entrance—a pair of heavy, wooden doors shaded by almost a third of the original awning—faced south toward a long, open street. The wojeks stepped into the middle of that street from their hidden observation post. Kos drew a silver baton and Zurich drew a short sword, and they marched up the ancient, wooden steps.

The older of the two lawmen wore a white handlebar mustache and had the pinkish complexion of a heavy drinker. The color of his pasty skin stood in harsh contrast to the scarlet leather and golden wojek sigil of his duty uniform. Myczil Zurich took the left side of the door and held his sword ready. The lieutenant motioned his partner to the door. Kos, just entering his second year wearing the ten-pointed star, did his best to maintain calm.

“Ready?” Zurich whispered, and Kos nodded. “Good. You’ve got the honors, Constable. And remember,” the lieutenant added with a nod to the silver baton gripped in Kos’s sweating hand, “the silver end points away from you.”

The younger partner nodded again and forced a half grin for Zurich’s benefit. He shifted the pendrek into his left hand and turned to face the door. Kos reached into one of the pouches on his belt, pulled out a pinch of red and silver powder, and flicked it into a cloud that spread over the doors and stuck to the frame. The dust that settled onto the door fell in a pattern resembling the first letter of the word “death.” The letter was three feet high.

“Forty, fifty victims,” Kos whispered. “Maybe more.”

“That dust only counts to fifty. Be careful,” Zurich replied.

Kos took a step back and pounded on the heavy, wooden slats three times with the butt of his pendrek. They waited almost half a minute, then Kos tried again. Nothing. The warehouse was silent as a tomb. Kos suspected that the blood-dust might have been all too accurate.

With a nod from Zunich, Kos knocked on unresponsive hardwood a third time and called into the warehouse with his best drill sergeant's bellow.

"This is the League of Wojek! This building has been condemned, and any occupants are in violation of Guildpact Statutes and City Ordinances! You have ten seconds to—"

The door swung open and slammed into the outer wall of the warehouse with a crash. On its way around, the edge of the door caught Kos's baton and knocked the silver end of the pendrek into the rookie's chin, sending him tumbling over backward onto the hard stone and sending Hul the falcon flapping for the safety of Zunich's shoulder. A tall, ram-horned half-demon leaped over Kos, its jaws hanging open in silent terror, and disappeared from Kos's vertical field of vision. Seconds later, the scream was cut short by the sound of Zunich's sword slicing through flesh, followed by a thud as the Rakdos corpse hit the wet street. It wasn't pretty, but lethal force was the rule when dealing with an enraged Rakdos of any species.

"And that," his mentor said, "is why we don't stand in *front* of the door when we knock, Constable Kos. This isn't necrobiology, you know."

The elder partner offered Kos no assistance in getting up from the ground. He never did—and Kos, for one reason or another, often found himself on the floor in Zunich's presence. Last night, it had been a lost drinking contest. Today, it was a simple rookie mistake that had almost gotten Kos killed. The day wasn't over yet.

Zunich stepped over the younger man and pressed his back against the wall alongside the door, where Kos knew he should

have been when he knocked. His nerves had made him sloppy. The lieutenant poked his head cautiously around the edge of the doorframe.

“Holy mother of Krokt!” Zurich gasped.

Zurich was not a man who gasped easily. The younger ’jek scrambled to his feet and joined his partner, and for a few seconds both stood frozen in the doorway.

The darkened warehouse was utterly silent except for the random dripping of blood that pooled lazily on the floor. Every plop sent a jolt of nausea into Kos’s gut. Myczil Zurich had the best record in the Tenth, bar none, and he was often called to the most important or simply most baffling cases, partner in tow. Kos had seen an orc kitchen stocked with raw, sliced, once-sentient viashino steaks; been first on the scene of a Gruul murder-suicide that started in the distant tower-tops of the Reaches and ended with a pair of sudden stops on the cobblestone; and taken eyewitness accounts from stunned Magewrights when their experiments went wrong in the worst possible way. He thought he’d seen a lot.

But the scene before him was by far the most grisly thing he’d ever laid eyes on, and the image would stay with him for the rest of his life.

“Lieutenant . . . they’re all—”

“Yeah,” the older ’jek said. “Counting that one that just used you for a springboard, I count . . . twenty-two? Hard to say. That’s a lot of meat. More than twenty, that’s for sure.”

“How can you be so sure?” Kos asked, trying to keep what little he’d managed for breakfast from coming back for another pass. “The powder said—”

“The powder isn’t infallible. Count the heads. I count twenty—no, definitely twenty-two. Thought those two over there were the ogre’s feet for a minute. I see eyes and ears.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Kos said.

He shot his eyes upward in an effort to avoid the horrific scene

of slaughter that littered the center of the open warehouse, fighting nausea, and noticed ghosts. The Rakdos, to a man, ogre, troll, orc, and goblin, were dead.

Some of them, however, didn't seem to want to leave.

"Sir!" Kos said and pointed unnecessarily at the glowing flock of specters.

The ghosts represented roughly the same cross section of Rakdos lying in assorted pieces before them. Kos caught himself staring into the tiny white eyes of the glowing, translucent shape of a troll, its massive shoulders hunched as if in shame, and its empty eye sockets like pits.

Zunich placed a gloved hand on Kos's baton and forced Kos to lower it. "At ease," he growled and eyed the specters above them. "They're the only witnesses we've got, for all the good they'll do us."

"But look around," Kos said, trying not to breathe in the stink of the warehouse. "We should be seeing 'seekers all over the place. Those things look—I don't know, peaceful."

"Violence is pretty much the only way to make a peaceful kill-guilder ghost," Zurich said. "Rakdos woundseekers are rare. They *expect* to die this way." He waved a hand at the troll-ghost, which descended over the carnage, its phantasmal eyes still locked with Kos's. "Go on, Kos. You're the lead. Ghosts won't wait around to be questioned forever."

"Good point," Kos said.

"Ground him," Zurich said.

Kos opened another pouch on his belt and pulled out a small puzzle-box about the size and shape of his fat, leather notebook. The younger 'jek palmed the box and backed slowly away while maintaining eye contact with the troll specter, which seemed hypnotized. When the ghost's ethereal feet brushed against the small section of bare floor before the constable, Kos dropped to one knee and slammed the box onto the wooden flooring.

There was no flash, no explosion, no bolt of lightning. There was no sound at all other than that of the box striking wood. The ghost stopped its slow, lazy descent, its insubstantial feet now stuck “inside” the box. The grounder popped open when Kos released it and its individual components rotated and shifted until the box’s shape was almost unrecognizable. The grounder never found the same bizarre shape twice; every ghost created a unique configuration.

Finally, there was a sound—a low, rasping moan that seemed to come not from the horned phantom but from the puzzle-box itself. The call triggered a flurry of movement among the remaining Rakdos ghosts, while the troll’s ethereal form remained anchored by Kos’s trap. The glowing phantoms roiled and swirled overhead and disappeared through the floor like water through a bathtub drain.

Ghost witnesses were valuable assets to a wojek investigation in most cases, but the ’jek had to choose the spirit he wanted to question carefully—once one was grounded, the others, if any, invariably fled. A ghost under the spell of a grounder could not refuse to answer a question, but the answers didn’t always make sense. Gazing into the tiny, white pinpricks in the troll spirit’s empty, black sockets, and seeing through the ghost’s eyes to the pile of corpses, Kos hoped he’d chosen well.

Kos fished a stylus and a leather-bound notebook from an inner breast pocket. He flipped through a year’s worth of collected notes, most of them dictation for Zunich, and folded the book open at the first blank page. He made note of the hour, date, and location. To save time, he jotted down the estimated number of corpses and his best guess at the various causes of death.

“Hello. My name’s Constable Kos,” he said to the ghost. It was a friendly demeanor he’d seen Zunich use, and having no previous experience outside of the academy it seemed the best initial approach. “I’d like your help in finding out who did this. Can you tell me your name?”

The moaning from the puzzle-box paused, as if the ghost were drawing breath. Finally the moan returned, but this time the sound formed words.

“Gaaaarrrrrrr,” the ghost said.

“Mr. Gar, I’d—”

“—mmaaaaaaakh,” the ghost finished. Kos heard Zunic stifle a cough.

“Mr. Garmakh,” Kos continued, “That is your name, yes?”

“Yyyyyyyyyessssss,” the ghost hissed.

“Very good,” Kos said. “What happened here?”

“Heeeee haaaaaaapeeeeeened. Heeeee caaaaaalllllls. Reeeeeleeeeeease Gaaarrrmmmakh. Gaaaaarrrmmaaaakh muuuust foolllllooow.”

“He? He who? Who calls? Is it the same one who killed all these people?”

“Reeeeeellleeeeeeaaase Gaaarrrmmaaaaaakh.”

“I will release you,” Kos said, “but if I’m going to find whoever made you the way you are I need more than—”

“Reeeeeellleeeeeeaaaaase meeeeeeee. Reeeeeellleeeeeease meeeeeeee.”

“Kos,” Zunic interrupted, “I don’t think you’re going to get anywhere.”

“Yeah,” Kos said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “I think you’re right. Still. . . .” The constable tried one more time. “Garmakh, the one who did this—does he call? Where is he now?”

“Heeeee iiiiiissss aaaallll. Heeee iiiiiissss neeeeeear. Heeee caaaaalls.”

“Did. He. Do this. To you?” Kos said through clenched teeth. He could already see the scroll describing how he’d completely wasted their one ghostly witness.

“Heeeeeeee caaaaaalllls.”

Kos looked over his shoulder at Zunic. “Want to give it a try?”

“No,” Zurich said. “You’re not to get anything more out of him. When they start in with the repetition there’s not much else you can do.”

“But he’s our only witness!”

“Heeeeeeeee waaaaaaaaaaitsss iiiiii shaaaaaadooooow.”

“Look around you. They’re dead, but they’re all witnesses too, in their way. This is a dead end,” Zurich said. “We need to assess this scene before it gets any colder. Let him go, Kos.”

“I’m the lead here,” Kos said, “and I should make that call, Lieutenant.”

“You’re the lead, yes,” Zurich said, “but I’m still your mentor. Drop the ghost, Kos. It’s a waste of time.”

Kos took one last look at the ghost, then shook his head. He was already getting a bad feeling about his first case as lead ’jek. Nothing was going according to plan, not at all. He stooped and tapped the puzzle-box three times, careful not to touch the icy ghost it held in place. The box whirled, spun, and folded in on itself. The ghost had sunk through the floor by the time Kos retrieved the grounder and put it back on his belt. In its wake, the carnage returned with brutal clarity, and Kos felt sick all over again.

“Any more suggestions, Lieutenant?” Kos asked sincerely. Kos was ambitious but not stupid. He knew enough to know there was a lot he didn’t, well, know. Zurich, in a surprising number of situations, did.

“Take that book and stylus of yours, and let’s record the scene,” Zurich said.

“Shouldn’t we send Hul for backup?” Kos asked.

Zurich regarded the red falcon perched on his shoulder, waiting expectantly for a message it could relay to whomever the lieutenant wished, so long as the recipient was another ’jek. “I think we’d better keep him with us for now. I don’t like this. I’m not sure the perpetrator has left.”

“What makes you say that?” Kos asked.

“That ugly fellow that fed you the door was running from something, and I don’t think it was those harmless ghosts. It said, ‘He is near.’ That might be pretty literal. Let’s see what these dead folks have to tell us. You want to begin?”

“Go ahead,” Kos said. “I already picked the wrong ghost. Maybe you should take this case.”

“I’m not taking your case because you think it’s tough,” Zunich said. “I’ve got enough scrollwork to do as it is. I will give you the benefit of my expertise, if the lead investigator wishes.”

“I wish,” Kos said.

“All right then. Get this down. We’ve got multiple victims, all showing signs of complete or partial dismemberment,” Zunich said. “Let’s start at the top of the clock and work our way around.” He picked his way carefully around the pile of death—the labmages had been known to curse ‘jeks that stepped in blood or the telltale residue of magic.

“First victim, adult male troll, estimated age at anywhere from fifty to eighty years,” the lieutenant said. “Likely the corpse of Garmakh, as that’s the only troll head I see in the pile. Arms and right leg removed from torso by what appears to be brute force. No visible blade marks evident but considerable epidermal tearing around the sockets indicates the arms and leg were pulled from the victim, who then bled out. Victim was definitely alive and kicking at the time of his death.”

Zunich waited a second for Kos to catch up, then moved on to the next body. “Moving clockwise, we’ve got a pair of half-demons, dismembered at the neck, shoulders, and hips. Like to see the labmages figure out which parts go with which torso. Don’t write that last part down.”

“Right,” Kos said.

They continued to pick their way around the corpse pile which, Kos thought, was more of a parts pile. They confirmed the remains of another four half-demons, recognizable as such only because each

one was unique and unlike any other creature on Ravnica. Whatever hideous things the Rakdos did to create half-demons, the result was different in every one. It also made each one easy to identify if they ran into trouble with the 'jeks—as almost every Rakdos that lived to adulthood eventually did. Among the seven half-demons (including the one Zunic had dropped outside) six were known members of Palla's gang, which confirmed the suspicions of the skyjeks.

The rest of the corpses were human, if you could call them that. Humans in the Rakdos guild were the toughest, meanest, biggest examples of the species on the plane; many could easily be mistaken for trolls or half-demons themselves when wearing spiky killguilder armor. The Hellhole enforced the laws of natural selection with brutal efficiency.

"I think we might have a problem," Kos said. "I see beards and, er, other indicators on all the humans. No women from the look of it and definitely no one fitting the description of their boss, Palla. So where is she?"

"Right." Zunic continued to stare into the darkness around them at the body parts and the slick, bloody floor and said, more to himself than to Kos, "Palla, Palla, where did you go?" The veteran 'jek scanned the rafters and gables above, looking for the gang's missing leader among the crates of stolen shipments.

"The slaves aren't here either from the look of it," Kos noted.

Zunic placed a hand on the crate closest to him and sniffed the air. "I think you might be wrong about that," he said.

"What?"

"Look around you. I think they're here, but that they were never meant to be slaves." Without another word, he drew his short sword and used it to pry open the nearest crate. The lieutenant took one look inside, turned away, and held his hand over his mouth.

Kos cautiously took a look, fought the same fight against nausea, but lost. Lost everything, all over the floor. The labmages weren't going to like that, but at least he didn't puke on the evidence.

Packed into soggy, moldering hay, and staring up at them with milky eyes, sat two rows of severed human and elf heads, five males and one female. All had been treated with some kind of necromagic that preserved the terrorized expressions they had worn just before decapitation.

The female had been a wojek, one Kos didn't know well but recognized, a Constable Vina Macav. Like Kos and Pashak, Vina was part of the new rank and file recruited after the recent Rakdos uprising. She had gone on leave a month earlier and failed to report back for duty. Kos recognized her face from the signs posted throughout the Tenth that read, "WANTED: DESERTER."

"Guess that desertion charge probably won't stick," Zunic said as Kos wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. "And I guess the blood-powder wasn't wrong after all. They must have been killed here. All right, we can add a new violation to the list. Nobody kills a 'jek in my town and gets away with—"

Someone sneezed a floor above them, and both wojeks froze. Kos focused all his attention on the sound, and a few seconds later thought he heard a sound like a cross between an injured mossdog and a softly crying child.

Zunic gestured to a ladder that led to the second-floor loft. Kos realized just how little of the warehouse they'd actually explored so far. The stacks of crates that loomed all around them, packed with grisly cargo, could be hiding anything. The only light was from a torch that even now was sputtering and growing dim.

But inexperienced though he was, Agrus Kos was still a wojek officer. In the City of Ravnica, one did not attain that rank by accident. He pressed two fingers against the badge on his chest and took a moment to remind himself of that fact, then headed up the ladder. Zunic followed after Kos had made it halfway up.

They found the goblin huddled in a darkened corner. One of the little creature's ears appeared to have been ripped from his head, and thick blood oozed between the fingers of its right hand and

ran down its neck, forearm, and shoulder. Otherwise, the goblin appeared uninjured. Its skin bore several tattoos and ritual brands. The **U**-shaped symbol of the broken chain burned into its forehead marked it as a freed slave, while the black and scarlet tattoos on its cheeks marked it as a member of the populous Krokt clan, the largest tribe of goblins on Ravnica and members of the Rakdos cult since pre-Guildpact times. According to the Krokt, the demon Rakdos himself carved the tribe from the stone of the mountain whose name they shared.

The goblin's yellow eyes widened in pure terror when Kos cleared the top of the ladder, and it began to jabber in its own tongue. Unfortunately, Kos had always had a tin ear when it came to goblin languages. His partner, however, had been on the streets of Ravnica long enough to pick up several dialects.

"Mycz, I know this is my case, but—"

"No problem," Zunic said. "I'll talk to him." The older 'jek tugged at his moustache, mulling over phrases that might calm the terrified creature, then tried what Kos assumed must have sounded like the best bet. Whatever Zunic's barked syllables meant, it didn't seem to calm the goblin, which looked like it was trying to force itself through the corner and out the other side. Kos had never seen any creature, goblin or human, so completely frightened.

"*Yuzir trakini halk halkak Krokt, wojek hrarkar vonk,*" Zunic said, tapping his badge.

The goblin screamed.

"*Ouzor vafiz halk kalark, Krokt kalark,*" the lieutenant tried.

The goblin screamed again, louder and higher-pitched. Kos put a hand over one ear and turned away while Zunic continued to pepper the creature with introductions. Either the goblin didn't understand any of it or was so terrified it couldn't answer. Kos suspected the latter.

"This is getting us nowhere," Zunic finally admitted. The goblin whimpered, its eyes casting left and right—for an escape route, Kos

guessed—but there was no way out of the corner the goblin had chosen for a hiding place. The constable watched the goblin's eyes, watching for the moment when fear of the 'jeks would overcome fear of whatever had butchered its fellow Rakdos.

The goblin's eyes stopped casting about and widened into dinner plates when they locked onto something behind Kos's shoulder. The hairs on the constable's neck stood on end as he and Zunich turned to follow the creature's dead-eyed stare.

A dark shape moved against the wall behind them. Kos thought he caught a glimpse of a skeletal face. Soon the shape was a uniform dark gray again, the same color as the wall, but now that he knew where to look, the jittery outline of illusory magic was impossible to miss. This was no ghost. This was a solid, living individual.

The shape was the last straw for the panicked goblin. It leaped to its feet while the 'jeks were distracted by the shape, charged between them before either could stop the wailing creature, and with a final yell dived headfirst out the open window. The wet splat of impact followed shortly thereafter, silencing the suicidal goblin for good and robbing them of their second witness in less than five minutes.

Not that 'jeks needed a witness when the killer was standing right in front of them.

Zunich and Kos drew their weapons, and Kos took a single, cautious step toward the crouching, humpbacked shadow. The figure, misshapen and indistinct—a telltale sign of the spells favored by assassins and thieves—didn't wait for him but padded like a cat to an open window and stood, casting a black silhouette against the waning light of day streaming in from the west. The shape that had driven the goblin to take its own life might have been a slim male or a muscular female—it was impossible to tell from Kos's vantage point—and stood hunched beneath some kind of large deformity on its back. No, not a deformity. And not just one figure. The second, however, was stuffed into a bag and slung across the other's shoulder.

The shape raised a hand in a quick wave and flew straight upward out of view. Kos hadn't seen a grapple line, but there must have been one. Best to keep an open mind until someone tries to take your head, as the saying went.

"You think that was Palla?" Kos asked.

"I think one of them was," Zunich said. "The one in the bag. And she's *mine*. Put your stylus away, Constable, we've got real work to do. Tonight, we pull a double shift."

"Fine by me," Kos said. "I could use the extra pay."